THE ENGAGEMENT AESTHETIC

Experiencing New Media Art through Critique

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CHAPTER TWO

Engagement as subjective system in electronic art

Perception provides me with a 'field of presence' in the broad sense, extending in two dimensions: the here-there dimension and the past-present-future dimension. The second elucidates the first. I 'hold', I 'have' the distant object without any explicit positing of the spatial perspective (apparent size and shape) as I still 'have in hand' the immediate past without any distortion and without any interposed 'recollection'. If we want to talk about synthesis, it will be, as Husserl says, a 'transition-synthesis', which does not link disparate perspectives, but brings about the 'passage' from one to the other.[1]

– M. MERLEAU-PONTY

Of all the kinds of engagement that we can experience in the new art and literary work of electronic media, the first deals with a changed attitude about what images do for us. In electronic art, images are promoted from their conventional function as optical phenomena to devices for critiquing perception. I open with this complex epigram by Maurice Merleau-Ponty because his axiom,

and the essays in this book, together take the same point of departure. It states that, if there is more than a singular way of perceiving something, then, inevitably, perception becomes a kind of critique. And since electronic media are forms of perception, they contain the evidence and method of their own critique. Let us begin with Merleau-Ponty, who describes two kinds of seeing: spatial ("here-there") and temporal ("past-present-future"). Later, my argument will embrace several others.

The thesis that proposes a means for thinking about the kind of artistic work I'm describing here begins with this kind of "transcendental perception." It amounts to the conviction that there is a visual kind of experience, however fleeting, when three subsequent actions take place and become an aesthetic possibility, a kind of engagement that is extended and contemplative rather than immediate and conclusive. First, a moment emerges when *perception* no longer seems dependent on simple acts of *observing*; second, when perception begins to promote a sense or belief that feels like a seed of *understanding*, and third, when this idea or feeling that one has begun to understand something then itself becomes a reach back into the thing one is looking at as a kind of new perception, and this continual return is a basis for *contemplation*. But contemplation is a starting point in this book, not merely an aim. That potential is suggested in the quote above by the appearance of a personal verb: to *hold*, rather than to understand (this is not equivalent to *judging*). When artistic perception turns toward a kind of holding, the aesthetic in process moves from one of contemplation to one of complex engagement.

Contemplation has been the historically predominant goal of art. The term contemplation, which today seems antiquated and haughty, designates the activity of "thinking-about" prior to—and toward the development of—a *judgment*. By implication, the presumed greatness of a work of art or literature correlates with the length of this contemplative moment between observation and judgment. In great works like the *Mona Lisa*, judgment is almost indefinitely held back by contemplation. But in electronic art—at least the cases I'm probing here—this internal line from contemplation to judgment is made circular, oscillating, reflective, because the works I'm discussing (and there are many like these) are ones whose nature is always unstable; their structure becomes part of their content, and together this assembly fluctuates in

continual change. Since neither contemplation nor judgment, if we accept these terms, impart a sense of completion, they cannot individually portray a suitable statement or aesthetic of new media art. This art's circular rabbit-hole of structure-content melding and continual perception and holding is best understood as one of *engagement*. Engagement signifies a continual state, a relationship of progressive moments that persist without repeating.

And so, as contextualized by Merleau-Ponty in the opening thoughts above, there are two ways to take in Edmund Husserl's notion of a *transition-synthesis*—a passage from one perspective to another—as one variant of engagement. One way corresponds to transition-synthesis as a *concept*, an idea or notion "out there" like a geometric hypothesis; the other takes transition-synthesis as an *experience*, a moment when this principle becomes subjective and immediate to the observer. In the first case, a transition-synthesis is captured by the mechanism of language, it is articulated as a kind of universal observation that is external to the body, which is to say, it is *chronicled*; the second is by sensation, as something intimate, *felt*. A cinematic metaphor provides the analogy for framing the concept-experience spectrum visually in a work of art: in watching a film, the eye converges on psychological meaning around a very mechanical paradox—the whole emerges only through a series of momentary impressions, each overtaken by the next; a film's identity is constructed through an array of frames that lead to scenes. There is no single moment that encapsulates the entire meaning of a film. If the work is to bring the viewer into a here/there and before/after transition-synthesis, however, it cannot exclusively comprise a never-ending chain of sensations pouring from torrential change, since the viewer would not attain a stable perspective on the overall work. As change must oscillate with non-change, the term *synthesis* suggests transitions of *perspective* combining transformation with stasis, and as an opening example of the engagement aesthetic that transcends mere looking, the instrumental art of Andrew Neumann deploys two such transitions, specifically, of time, and of space.

As rationale for the radical character of so much contemporary art, Husserl's transition-synthesis points to something especially evident in the kineticism of mechanized and digital works, that is to say, in works where a series of perceptual shifts occurs as the work undergoes change. I refer to this not just in a *physical*

sense, for Alexander Calder's dangling mobile fins could easily fall within crude ideas of *shift*. But Calder's is a kind of "static shift"—the content (the propeller-like components) of the work changes while the overall structure does not. The perceptual shift in Calder—stationary objects that become rotating ones—can be described as a before-after change that is limited to one of motion, not to ontology, and the change in question is optical, but not one concerning alteration in the nature, essence, or being of the work. It merely rotates, albeit interestingly. But more fundamentally, how does one characterize artworks that bear a different kind of ontological structure-as-content shift of the kind I discussed above? One indication, as I will explore next, is whether description of changes in a dynamic work requires *different language* to describe each such change.

That is, works that convey change but which do not convey a transition-synthesis are those whose *structure* and core *perspective* remains static, despite a succession of flow or imagery. In this case, movement is not essence; it is a characteristic of an essence, so movement by itself is not enough to comprise the essence of a work of art, and it is that essence that must be altered. Thus movement or change alone is not the essential part of any work, any more than the movement of a celluloid strip is essential to the film being projected on a screen—the strip's movement is necessary to the medium, but not essential to the content.

Many artists working in new media relate this type of unidirectional transition of flow to interactive works by expanding the painterly metaphor of a canvas sustaining color fields in dynamic behavior to objects in motion. It is a metaphor; the principal ingredient is a background onto which visual activity is apparently projected, variations of events on the backdrop being the basis of new media works. Some artists, like Neumann, work with ideas of transition-synthesis by converting an expanded structure into expanded perspective. Consider how the more linguistically conjectural work, *Text Rain*, projects onto a wall a downpour of letters and words—crucially, in fact, a poem—rather than mere colors and shapes in a repetitious flow.[2] In this work the canvas metaphor has grown beyond two dimensions, capturing and reflecting the body of the viewer standing before it. As the work rehearses a poem line by line, each letter of every word descends delicately until any of its projected boundaries collides with some part of the

FIGURE 1 *Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv,* Text Rain, *2000. Interactive Computer Installation, size variable, video projection. Detail.*

viewer's body, also projected into the same representative space of the work on the wall. But even so, fully integrating the viewer into such a flowing experience still does not produce the meaning-preserving circularity implied in Husserl's transition-synthesis. Work in constant motion, discarding old states for new ones, but not reinforcing a cohesive spirit with a structure that is indistinguishable from its content, lacks the fulcrum necessary to such a moment.

Transitions of Time

Of course, one would be tempted to reduce much of new media art to temporal flow, like film.[3] Indeed, works of agitation and flow do follow aesthetic patterns in their own right, but the archetypal notion of a *torrent*, though compelling aesthetically, is not a very complete metaphor for depicting the transition-synthesis: *structure*

as distinct from *content* remains unchanged. Interacting with surging forces always implies *departing* from some original state of things and setting toward another that has not yet developed. Moving from an existent now to a potential later, such experiences convey less a balance between motion and stasis than of persistent procession. The viewer, continually awash in new modes, hues, and layers, nonetheless fails to detect any actual cadence or completion. But a transition-synthesis, anchored on the stability of memory as the basis for one's impression of change, demands a point of reference. And since the absence of a temporal fix renders such awareness impossible, memory and perception are indefinable without reference to one another. Perception alone is not enough.

> Perception is never a mere contact of the mind with the object present; it is impregnated with memory-images which complete it as they interpret it.[4]

Bergson defines the dominant relationship between memory and perception, that momentary break between what *was* experienced and what is *being* experienced, as something temporal, linear, and metaphoric with cinematic projection, something whose principal meaning-making process concerns relative motion. Subjectively, as the capturing element of perception shifts, the recording sense of memory remains stationary, each fueling a kinetic contrast that forms both the original impression and all recollections of it. So, Bergson maps their consolidation in a two-dimensional way, representing memory along the horizontal axis, and perception along the vertical. Each impression thus captured from the event stream incorporates into something like a static collection, an archive of impressions, or a totality of recollections.

> If I represent by a cone SAB the totality of the recollections accumulated in my memory, the base AB, situated in the past, remains motionless, while the summit S, which indicates at all times my present, moves forward unceasingly, and unceasingly also touches the moving plane P of my actual representation of the universe.[5]

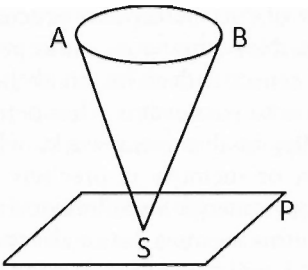

FIGURE 2

As perception and memory converge toward each other, a third process, meaning-making, begins to fill the juncture of the points. Between them, the depths of memory and the surface of perception define a space, outlined conically so as to emphasize its progressive nature, where primary observations evolve into full concepts. Drawing from the immediately acquired as well as from the previously established and memorized, initial perceptions oscillate between both poles, eventually resolving toward a final conceptual form congruent with, and incorporated into, what already dwells in memory.

> Let us refer once more to the diagram we traced above. At S is the present perception which I have of my body, that is to say, of a certain sensory-motor equilibrium. Over the surface of the base AB are spread, we may say, my recollections in their totality. Within the cone so determined the general idea oscillates continually between the summit S and the base AB. In S it would take the clearly defined form of a bodily attitude or of an uttered word; at AB it would wear the aspect, no less defined, of the thousand individual images into which its fragile unity would break up.[6]

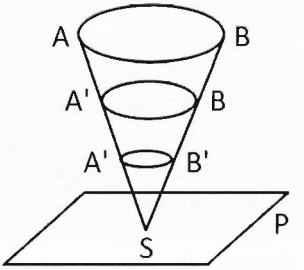

FIGURE 3

The first implication of this perceptual process is the heightened role that time plays. Not only does concept-formation through this memory model reflect a decisive break between present and past, where memory is to past events what perception is to present ones, but additionally, in this framework, what at any moment comprises perception or memory is precisely that: perception *or* memory. Both cannot emerge simultaneously. In the course of ordinary experience, this seems a rational assumption, what I see at first now is what I will remember later, recognition being the process linking one operation with the other. But the invisibility of this transition-synthesis is necessary to life experience so that one can assimilate and accommodate, that is, *learn*, seamlessly.[7] This instinctual invisibility underscores precisely what distinguishes the minimal, postminimal, and formal aspects of work in Neumann's perceptual sculptures from normal visual experience, where, in seamlessness, feedback and memory embrace so interdependently that it is unnatural to grasp any work in temporal seriality or linearity. In a visual work, things beheld come together gradually and with contemplation, but the sense of perception feeding memory or vice versa is not palpable. All that is felt is the sensation of *observing* and perhaps subsequently the *a-ha* that accompanies what is thought to be the *idea* of the work. There is a perceptual all-or-nothing that does not allow the privilege either of presentation or mechanism in beholding the work. In this perceptual mode of gradual familiarization, final judgment is what one keeps; all intermediate processing is opaque.

As an aesthetic framework, any such model that connects perception with memory will do so through the bridge of temporality. What comes first is absorbed purely through perception, where it is not yet memory, and then it passes into memory, where it is no longer perception. In Bergson's diagram, this temporal membrane is clear-cut: the isometrically laid-out plane represents a moving, shifting event stream with S as the point of subjectively focused individual awareness acquiring new information over time. And memory as a process is possible because perceptual input that occurs at one point in time is superseded by subsequent, different input at later moments, and displaced earlier impressions are retained. From the perspective of this model, one significant feature of minimalism is its atemporal and antisubjective nature. It denies the possibility of selective perception of its "subsequentness" by

forcing all reading of a work as something utterly without idiosyncrasy or irregularity. From a relentless sense of equivalence and symmetry, the same perceptual experience results, regardless of the angle or position of the observer, and impedes the possibility of encountering a work in a subjective, comparative, or relative-to-others way.

To experience the minimalist aesthetic is to experience separation. The unadorned symmetries of the box, minimalism's canonical geometry, bring the viewer all the intimacy of a numeric equation. The *subject* in this world is an option, and not one accommodated by the work. With its mute and featureless character, the possibility of *subjectivity*—the notion of a central and special position for the viewer—in minimalist art would remain out of reach, indefinitely suspended, were it not for Neumann's turn, a subjectivity-adding correction produced without altering the constants of minimalism (i.e., emphasis on formal qualities; the use of fabrication over evidence of the human hand; repeating, symmetric, or serial regularity of structure and placement). Neumann expands these constants by actually *embedding* subjectivity directly into the work while still employing a rather utilitarian minimalist vernacular. Rather than altering the formal circumstances that deny subjectivity, such as by *contamination*, that is, introducing symmetry-destroying

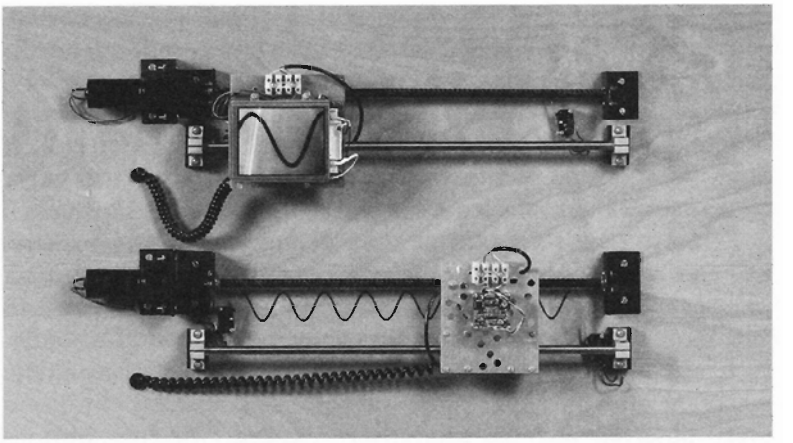

FIGURE 4 *Andrew Neumann*, Phase Cancellation with Sine Wave, *2005. Digital photo, LCD screens, solid-state video. 30" × 40" × 5".*

eccentricities that can make one observer's perception of the work different from another's, Neumann moves in the opposite direction, by a kind of *purification* and thus reinforcement of the perceptual experience, in this case, by repeating the act of depiction-observation *twice* in the same work. In a structural view, if a work of art exists to illustrate anything, it can be understood as comprising elements that reinforce the unique rhetoric underlying its chosen form and appearance. Interpretation is always selective. The requirement is about choice, a process that moves from a view of the presented elements that appear to support the function of the work as a visually constructed statement or question, and gradually converges upon emphatic particulars that substantiate an assumed and preferred meaning.

This is all attained through the self-referentiality of cameras trained on the work itself, and these cameras, akin to the subjective perceptual points in Bergson's diagram, are integrated into the work without implying which, directly presented or electronically viewable, is the "real" focal object. They are in relative motion over a plane on which are screwed, nailed, painted, or hung pure shapes such as sine waves or working tools such as Phillips screws. Thus, simultaneously visible to human observers are the material elements embedded onto a panel; the hovering camera-eyes of the work watching itself; and finally, the optic perception of these camera-eyes themselves reflecting the objects over which they are moving onto small active-matrix displays. The Bergsonian perceptual model is rendered in a manner that is entirely minimalist and also temporal, because the work conveys its own subjectivity, which, in addition to its panel elements, it reports openly and continuously. In this process, the work makes explicit in the fullest sense the transition-synthesis whose condition of formal inner coherence we found elusive in other art conveying visual transition.

I want to return to the tension between perception and memory, and a critique of how Neumann engages it. One cognitive instinct in our encounter with any artwork is a kind of a commitment to definition, to reaching some interpretation of the work. Of course, such interpretive notions are dependent on moments of recognition, where the objectively presented and perceived, which is obvious to every observer, and the subjectively recalled, which is obvious only to oneself, blend into reflection. What is observed always stands objectively before us; only *what is doing the looking* can be

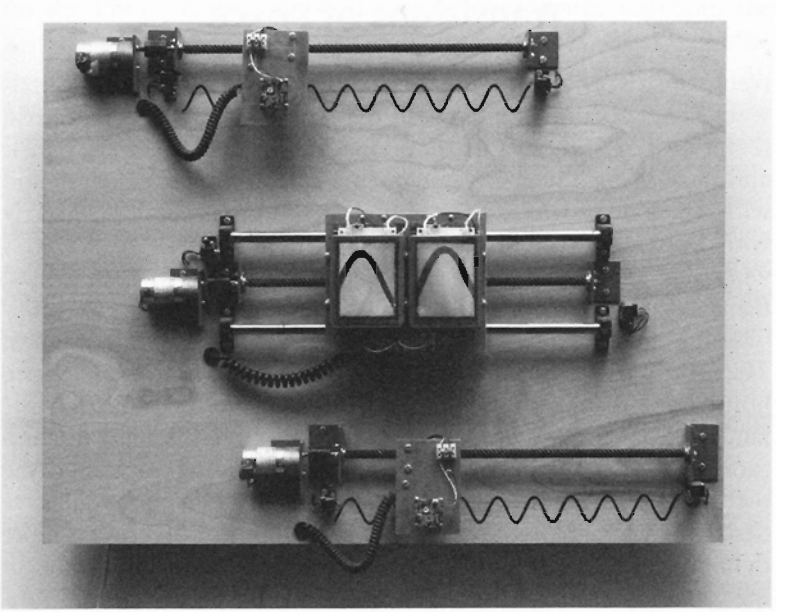

FIGURE 5 *Andrew Neumann,* Dual Asynchronous Sine Waves, *2001. Wood, video, motors. 24" × 32" × 8".*

properly termed subjective. And this difference is the evidence that corroborates how a work possesses subjectivity, for in each work that self-observes there is the creation quite literally of a mediated replica which, because it observes itself, is not a replica of the work, but, instead, of the observer. And we might also note that in this dual subjectivity, the viewer's and the machine's, the forces driving recognition are twofold: mechanistic, borne in the work (as we see it moving, observing itself) and conceptual, borne in the viewer (as we struggle to define the focal object in the work).

> The recognition of a present object is effected by *movements* when it proceeds from the object, by *representations* when it issues from the subject.[8] (emphasis mine)

Transitions of Space

Neumann's work arranges out of a minimal set of recurring materials whose construction compares to the sparse but multi-perspectival sculpture that Anthony Caro developed during the 1960s. The panels and rails through which Neumann articulates a sense of depth and with which he provokes re-examination of images compare directly with the characteristic space-establishing planks and shafts of Caro's work just after he abandoned his figurative phase. In both artists, these elements project and reinforce the boundaries of the reconfigurable image; both alter the experience of perceptible motion. The strategy by which Neumann's statement claims this allusion, however, is distinct from that of Caro's. In the decade from the landmark 1962 up to the 1970s, Caro innovatively redefined sculptural projection by eliminating the plinth and placing the work in the real space of the viewer. But this is insufficient as a comprehensive description of Caro's strategy and its effect, because his effect is more than sculptural. It is innovatively perceptual, using the motion of the viewer around a sculptural object as an aesthetic operation for redefining the work itself. This happens simply: standing at each possible vantage point in relation to a Caro sculpture, one finds oneself before essentially a new work—no angle of view is similar to the previous one. With a minimal palette of steel planks, beams and rails, Caro achieves the improbable production of an experience of multiple works constrained as one physical object, the multiplicity of experiences emerges from changes in the observer's angle of view. In his panel works, however, Neumann establishes and maintains, by almost ironic contrast, the constant stability of formal qualities in a work. The irony is that such constancy is reinforced by two forms of observation, the viewer's role is technologically accompanied by artefactual self-observation in autonomous motion built into the work and entirely independent of the spectator's physical position. Caro's work is completely stationary, yet the spectator experiences a state of perceptual multiplicity. In Neumann's world, this strategy is inverted; the spectator need not move, as the work enacts a shift in perspective and impression through an oscillating series of state changes.

The preference for horizontal arrangement that is the typical orientation of both artists, Caro consistently placing his works

on the floor, Neumann's work consistently transposed onto the vertical plane of the wall but equally dispersed across a wider-than-tall landscape, operates centrally as ground to both artists, and in each case it is a ground whose chief contribution lies in its inconspicuousness. More than visual resemblance, however, is at play in the relationship between the work of Caro and Neumann. The production of changes in observer position demonstrates that the chief theme of that relationship is a progressive one, promoting *movement amidst stable objects* into a fully autonomous aesthetic operation. As with Neumann's roving eye, the rewards for the observer who moves and views the work from alternative angles are also evident in Caro. The reward of movement here is insinuated not only by the changing position of the observer, but also by the play of vectorial tension built into the work, which could be discussed separately.[9]

My point here is that the presence of sculptural objects is secondary to the idea of transition-synthesis, a progression of perspectives. The aesthetic emphasis for Caro and Neumann is less formal than conceptual. For each artist, the main perceptual grammar transcends the physical language of balustrades, sections, rails, meshes, or grids recruited and visually regulated for particular effect. It is, rather, a substrate, it is the power of the vector to signify and proclaim the fact of distance as a consequence of motion. This *here-there* antecedent to motion and perception is born in the viewer's quest for a point of reference. For each artist, the plane against which vectors project becomes the work's central statement around the same two-body problem, namely, that of locating the boundaries both of the work and of the viewer and then converging upon a signifying essence by the viewer's engagement with the work within a depth of field lying somewhere between both. The ballet of vectors that is *Hopscotch* (1962) is a geometric manifestation as far at the edge between motion and stasis as is possible to conceive symbolically. Likewise, the operation of spectatorship epitomized in *Early One Morning* (1962) evokes the process in comparison with Neumann's treatment of the same subject.

For here Caro fashions an upright panel into an irrefutable backdrop, arranging rails as reference points and a higher central cross beam assembly whose horizontality is tracked by the observer's eye. Seen in functional retrospective, this cross element setup recalls the scan of Neumann's camera through first-person

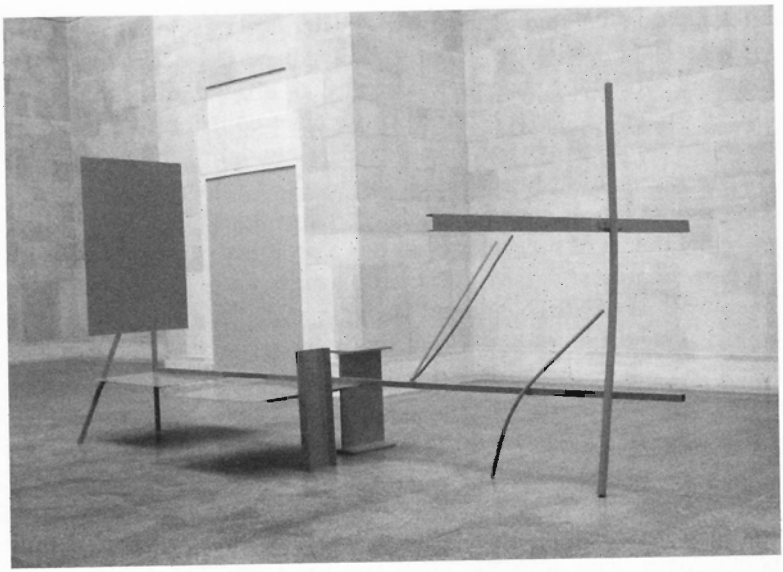

FIGURE 6 *Anthony Caro*, Early One Morning, *1962. Steel & aluminum, painted red, 114" × 244" × 143"/290 × 620 × 333cm. © Barford Sculptures Ltd. Photography: John Riddy.*

experience. In Caro's sculpture, all perspective is established by a shaft projecting from the rear panel to the T-cross beam almost 20 feet away. As visual rhetoric, all of these elements are canonical to Neumann's work, for instance, in *Industrial Fan Panel* (2002) which sets the scene with a similar backdrop, similarly providing a railing system and sense of depth, only in Neumann's case the latter works in reverse, for, rather than using distance as a telescopic element as Caro does, Neumann uses proximity microscopically in order to intimately magnify mounted images and objects. In this relationship, Caro can serve as the ultimate metaphorical reduction of Neumann, while Neumann transposes Caro's multipositional perspective to a more contemporary technological octave.

Openly nonfigurative works like *Early One Morning* preclude any sense of interpretive closure, and, less abstractly, also for perceptual resolution, that is, for arriving at safe assumptions as to the location from which to determine one's role as the ideal viewer. Such is the visual richness in Caro's sweeping stylistic vocabulary that one cannot justifiably summarize this work in a

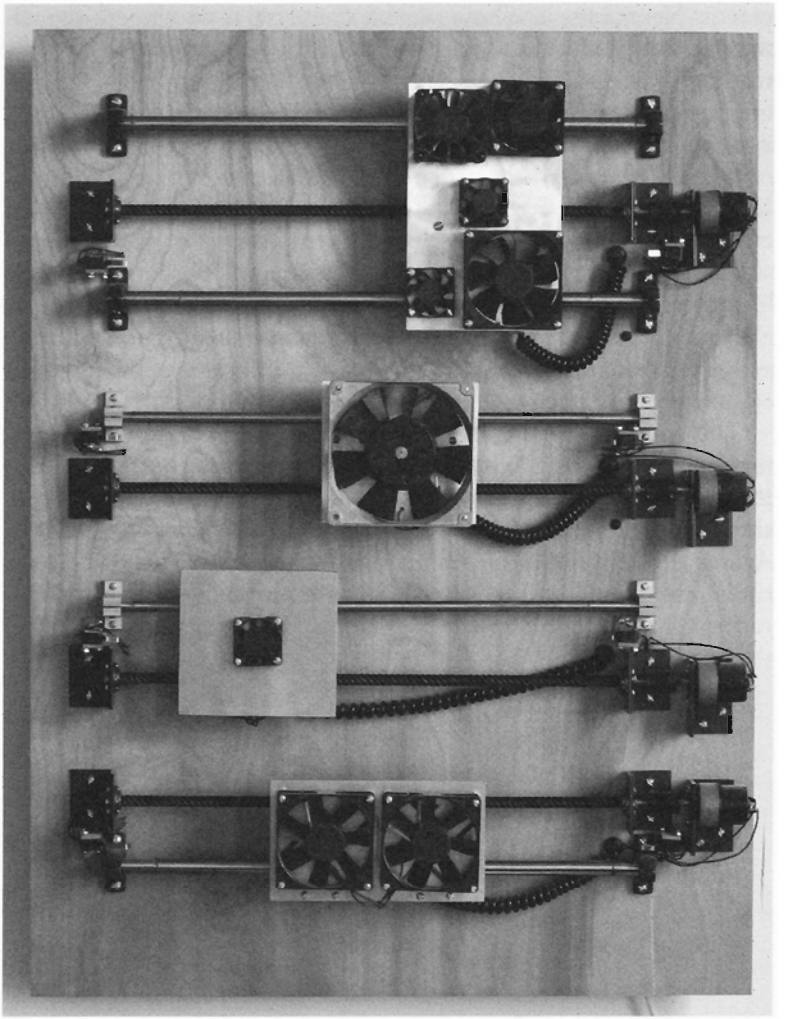

FIGURE 7 *Andrew Neumann,* Industrial Fan Panel, *2002. Plywood, LCD screens, video camera, misc. electronics. 32" × 48" × 6".*

single photograph. As mentioned earlier, here again, each viewer position, no matter how near the next, renders a distinct representation built from a new proportion between near elements and distant ones. Such transitions of space are adopted in an opposing

way in Neumann, in whose works, conversely, no camera repositioning can produce an image of retinal rail works that conveys a reading in opposition to any other. The spatial transitions happen internally as each successive vantage point is generated, recorded, and reported via the ubiquitous display panel, such is the coherence of his neo-minimalistic articulation. Reducing further, to utter functionalism, the comparison between the kind of panelization evident in both artists, we arrive at Caro's *Aroma* (1966), again, a simple latticed panel with rails, and Neumann's *Screw* (2005). Of less interest here is the contrast between backdrop and foreground elements in both works than the intensification of a pattern emblazoned in material form as a result of that contrast, and the rich emphasis of perspective pluralism from such minimal structuration.

This contrast suggests that a secondary strategy of focal reduction underlies these works. The visual rhetoric at play here is reducible to the one cogent statement that such simplicity of sculptural composition underscores *one* formal feature in each work. In Caro's *Aroma*, it is the trellis; in Neumann's *Screw*, it is the spiral. In both cases, the case for this objective is made through physical means, rather than through implicit suggestion, the method, for instance, that both choose to impart depth. And the simplification of material,

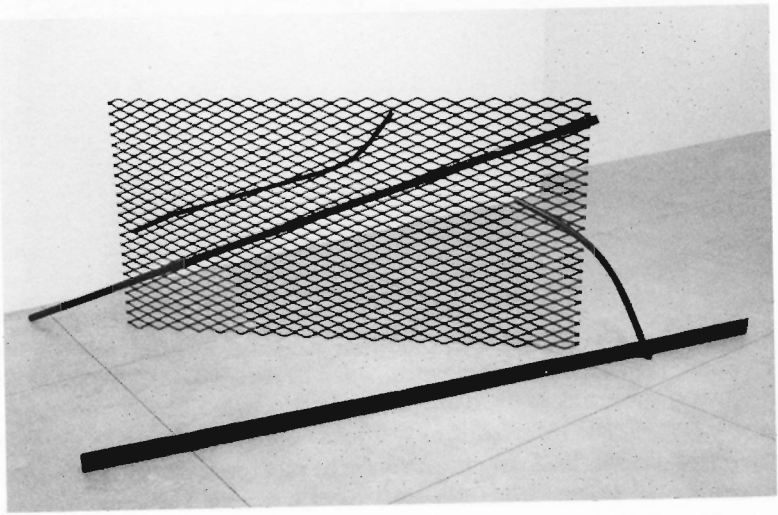

FIGURE 8 *Anthony Caro,* Aroma, *1966. Steel, polished and lacquered blue, 38" × 116" × 58". Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash.*

the sublimation of the supporting casts into almost extraneous elements, makes clear the importance of that coherence in the works, as if everything existed for the purpose of conveying the allure of a singular quality over what is supplied with secondary context.

Materially, Neumann entrenches his works in the abiding use of industrial elements such as video displays, wires, and motors always overlaid on the natural surface of a smoothed and carefully chosen plywood panel. It would have been possible, reasonable, and in fact simpler to mount any of his sculptures on a metal alloy base and thereby coherently and fully extend the industrial character of the work. All contrasts pose questions and here, with robotics over pine paneling, we might logically ask, why this choice? Isn't wood out of place in a work made of forged energy-conducting materials?[10]

That wood should be the chosen platform for this highly synchronized gathering of electrokinetic components speaks to the importance of grounding the electronic aesthetic within an organic narrative, rather than vice versa. The aesthetic relevance of this organicity is obvious: it translates the idea or process under analysis

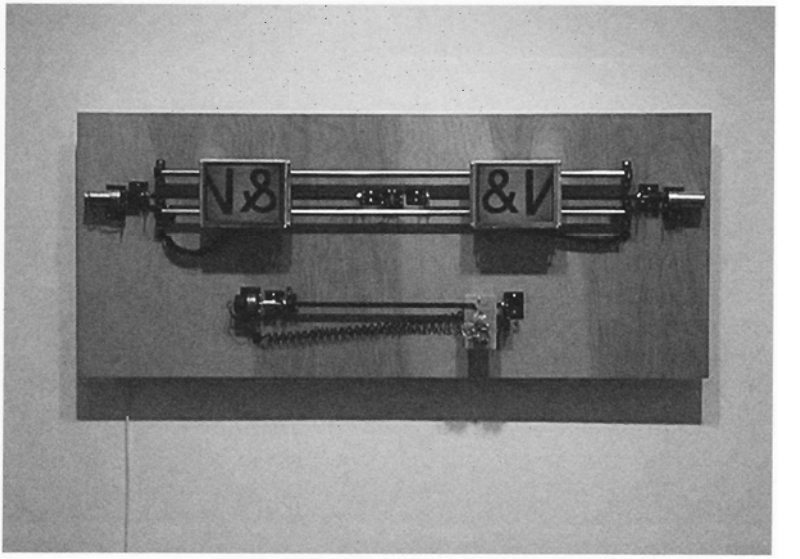

FIGURE 9 *Andrew Neumann,* Pan and Scan, *2002.*
Plywood, LCD screens, video camera, misc. electronics. 32" × 48" × 6".

from something that is abstract and decontextualized into a world where it is recast as a tangible form entirely on its own terms. So while each of Neumann's works addresses a rationalized or geometric abstraction (e.g. a phase cancellation with sine wave), its transposition into—and our subsequent understanding of it as—an autonomous aesthetic act is what is on offer. For only through this reassignment, this reification, can we see that something abstract like *pan and scan*, because it is presented in a work of the same name and illustrated in the act of panning and scanning itself, exists not merely as a cinematic technique but also as an independent object. The transfer from the universal to the particular, from the act to the thing, traverses a spectrum between two poles, it is a statement that can only be conveyed through oppositions. In Neumann's case this statement lies between the dynamic abstraction of a process and its static base in the concreteness of a natural material. However long the meditative span of our engagement with his work, it lies in conversation between these two worlds.

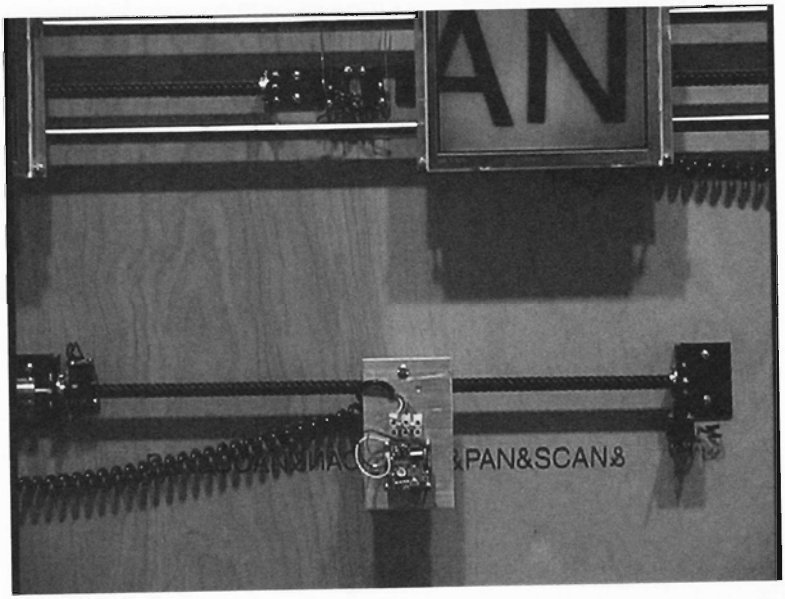

FIGURE 10 *Andrew Neumann,* Pan and Scan, *2002. Plywood, LCD screens, video camera, misc. electronics. 32" × 48" × 6". Detail.*