The image of information in Malcolm Levy’s video-art:
the digital plane of immanence and the unfolding of an Other world

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In Laura U. Marks’ enfolding and unfolding aesthetics, the plane of immanence found by thinkers such as Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their exploration of relationships between the image and the universe, extends into information theory. Specifically, in terms of information-based art. Marks’ three ply model is composed of: image, information, and the infinite. Malcolm Levy’s video-art displays the interconnectivity of the elements in this model. Furthermore, it helps us perceive the notion of the infinite through the utilization of digital technology. In doing so, Levy reaches beyond the technological limitations of the digital camera in order to capture images naturally incapable of materializing. These images he calls “Other frames” and they result from a forced confrontation with the infinite. Basically, Levy enfolds the actual (image from the universe) into an information-based world of code (information) in order to display a manner of unfolding from the digital plane of immanence (infinite). At the same time, he produces a world that is actualized in sensory experience and the image returns to the universe by returning to the body. This new world we will call “Other world,” that of the artist’s making, providing an immediate effect on the viewer and supporting the deeper conceptual component of the artwork which is dependent on pre-existing knowledge of the artistic process.

Enfolding and unfolding aesthetics provide theoretical framework for Malcolm Levy’s artwork, in particular to Other frames. Since we can not perceivable the totality of the infinite; “screens” are required. The digital camera functions as an interface to the infinite. Following Bergson, Deleuze tells us “the infinite set of all images constitutes a kind of plane of

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1 In Enfoldment and Infinity, Marks proposes: “image is an interface to information, and information is an interface to the infinite.” Laura U. Marks, Enfoldment and Infinity (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 7.
immanence”. And Marks tells us that “(t)he plane of immanence is the infinite: it contains all that has existed, will exist, and has never or will never exist, in a virtual state.” So, the digital plane of immanence contains all past, present, and future existence in a digital state. Marks believes information based reality to be the product of lame infinity, and rightfully so—cyber space is infinitely lamer than outer space. In any case, Other frames prove that the digital camera has a digital plane of immanence that taps into the infinite when in the moment of malfunction the camera is forced to think for itself and produce an image in of itself. The digital camera is an open interface, a part of immanent infinity. If “media enfold the world that produced them,” then they should be able to unfold from infinity. In the act of enfoldment, information technology is able to reach into and beyond the perceptible world. Deleuze spoke of the movement-image in cinema in the same light calling it a ”new story capable of ‘drawing close to’ the perceived and the perceiver, the world and perception”.

Instead of using the cinematic model, Levy takes a new approach in his innovations with digital imagery. He uses the digital camera’s potentiality (as determined by the digital plane of immanence) to develop new images of actual events like a body of water or a busy intersection. In other words, Levy misuses the digital camera and forces it to function in a way that is unnatural to its own function, altering the actual event by tweaking the digital method of production. This is only possible because the digital image is an image of information, and therefore, quantitative in its design. The image flows in waves through cyber space before it reaches the surface at the level of human perception. For Levy’s Other frames, the process begins by filming in gestural motion, at specific speed and with specific focus. He then

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3 Marks, 5.
4 Marks, 20.
5 Deleuze, 57.
extensively slows the footage on a computer. From the footage, he constructs short videos and extracts photographic stills for print. Other frames are the image of information, as proven by their appearance as fragmented images of reality by digital means of production. To return to Marks’ model, these images don’t arise directly from the universe, rather from information (or digital technology), which in turn arises from the world. So Other frames are not directly found in the universe, but formed with technology that is dependent on the world.

With digital technology, Levy has the ability to alter matter and movement and fold the image in on itself. This a manner of enfoldment or a phenomenon described by Marks in the following way: “Images and information come into the world and roll back into the infinite in a ceaseless flow of unfolding and enfolding”. Other frames are always in a state of flux, always in the process of figuration. To the eye, they appear as abstract figures; they never take form. They maintain their transience in movement: figures move on the screen and fall off the screen and back into infinity. Colour and light are the differentiating factors in the image and they are naturally occurring in the universe when the images are recorded. In The Movement-Image, Deleuze says “the plane of immanence is entirely made up of Light”. What he means is that light is diffused on the whole plane of immanence and the movement-image is not defined (in actuality) but rather illuminated by the light (in virtuality). And so if the image does not actualize, it is because the light is never stopped, still the illuminated image remains in itself. Whether or not digital imaging like Levy’s Other frames can capture a flicker of virtual light is not the point. Rather, it is the possibility that Levy’s art shows us the internal light of the digital universe where Other frames are caught between the actual and the virtual on a digital plane of existence. They block the light emanating from the digital plane of immanence.

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6 Marks, 7.
7 Deleuze, 60.
As images of information, Other frames are inherently reflexive in the fact that the digital image is made up of pixels, tiny enfolded units of information. In his essay, “The Force of Pixels,” Troy Rhoades says that virtual forces in relation to the dynamic form of a topological figure create a “becoming-image,” a time/energy object. Do Other frames constitute his “becoming-image”? Well, he believes digital has little access to virtuality due to its quantitative structure which is essentially coded actuality, or fake reality. He says, “(t)he analog video signal is the physical process that creates visibility and the digital video image is a simulation of an analog video image” and that “(a) virtual process of becoming is not a digital process of numeric codification”

Therefore, according to Rhoades, digital imaging has no claim to true perception, actual or virtual. Brian Massumi feels just as strongly on the matter believing “(n)othing is more destructive for thinking and imaging of the virtual than equating it with the digital”. However, Rhoades eventually cuts the digital image some slack by acknowledging virtual forces occurring through the metamorphosis of pixels which have the ability to transform the time/energy object. As a part of the digital universe, the potential for movement in every pixel accounts for a digital plane of immanence. In this way, Levy’s Other frames can be seen as a window to the digital universe, as it were lame infinity.

Digital technologies reconstruct perception opening a gateway to an otherworldly experience. Natural human perception is selective; furthermore, it is restrictive. But the digital artist can experiment with imagery from the natural world arousing perception and consciousness by stimulating the visual gaze and affecting the body. In this way Levy’s Other frames create a

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9 Rhoades, 221.
world that is sensuously experienced by digital means. Ágnes Pethő looks at cinema and believes it seems to consciously position itself “in-between” media and arts. This level of “in-betweeness” exists in “intermedial” imaging where the spectator anticipates an unfolding, but can never grasp the totality of the image. This fits into the theoretical framework of the infinite. Levy’s Other frames are images in-between mediums (photography, video, painting) as well as, images in-between the actual and the infinite -- images of information. Seeing Other frames as intermedial images instead of simply digital images makes it easier to comprehend the multitude of force in the artwork. Furthermore, it is what allows the spectator to have an affective encounter.

Studies on intermediality in the cinema refer to instances of sensory experience and help articulate the action taking place in Other frames. Intermediality itself refers to the interconnectedness of modern media in reference to multiple modalities of experience.\textsuperscript{11} Pethő says that “intermediality in the cinema is not something one ‘deciphers,’ it is something one perceives or senses”.\textsuperscript{12} Her theories register in the Deleuzian sense of the “sensational,” described in his work on Francis Bacon. Pethő posits “while ‘reading’ intertextual relations engages our intellectual capacities, ‘reading’ intermedial relations requires, more than anything, an embodied spectator”.\textsuperscript{13} So, an affective analysis reveals a new frame in the digital camera from which to see the world.

After viewing a sequence from Levy’s Other frames archive, a colleague remarks on experiencing feelings of unease-- nausea. This is because they are abstracted images

\textsuperscript{12}Ágnes Pethő, \textit{Cinema and Intermediality: the passion for the inbetween} (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), 68.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., 69.
commanding haptic perception. As the digital image folds in on itself, an Other world (as opposed to the actual or digital) is actualized and sensuously experienced. When referring to mediality, Pethö explains how a medium is transparent when we do not perceive it as a medium but as a representation of the world. As it becomes more opaque through diverse techniques of reflexivity, “the less it resembles the world, and also the more it resembles the other arts and media”.\textsuperscript{14} The images of landscape in Other frames undergo digital abstraction appearing mosaic-like and becoming analogous to impressionistic painting. Pethö identifies “‘cinematic’ action painting” as “coloured spots or lights... enhanced by the pictorial quality of more or less blurred images”.\textsuperscript{15} This technique, which is evident in Levy’s Other Frames, opens a “gateway through which cinematic images within the boundaries of the transparent perceptual cinematic frame of the ‘real world’ get to be ‘reframed’ by other media”.\textsuperscript{16} She defines a method of enfoldment that reframes the digital image as painting. By creating the effect of paint splashed on a canvas, digital imagery becomes haptic imagery. This act opens up an enigmatic world, one that Laura U. Marks and Martine Beugnet have identified as being threatening. The spectator goes from observing a passive image from a safe distance to observing an image that draws closer and with a pulse. Other frames are abstract representations of an already fragmented world (the digital world). They communicate the pulse of busy city streets and the pulse of mother nature in the spirit of abstract expressionism. Whether they are screened as short videos or viewed as photographic stills, the blurred image remains and delivers the paradoxical effect of haptic imagery.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 96.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 97.
The painterly includes artistic style. And so creativity is the force responsible for building the Other world that gives rise to sensuous experience. In addition to the actual and the virtual (including the digital realm) there is the notion of the possible. Deleuze believes that art must also be thought of as the expression of possible worlds in its materiality. In the essay, “From Possible Worlds to Future Folds,” Simon O’Sullivan argues that art allows us access to other worlds. So, Other frames can also be seen as the unfolding of an enfolded other world- a possible world. O’Sullivan describes it in the following way: “Art is a possible world folded, by means of the artist’s style, in substance”. In this view, art exists outside of the actual and virtual and in the possible which allows it to make new folds in reality. He believes the essence of art is its “world-building” character and ability to offer us “a new image of thought (a new folding), one in which recognition (and resemblance) is less important than the encounter”. Possible worlds are grasped in an individual artwork and create an Other world. This world is then realized as it is sensuously experienced.

The artist’s hand (or style) becomes the interface to the Other world, and the artwork becomes a force in itself. O’Sullivan examines Gerhard Richter’s abstract paintings and through them enters possible worlds. Abstraction, by definition, implies freedom from representation. So abstract paintings are not representative of the actual world, but of some possible world. Possible worlds are not to be mistaken with the plane of immanence or the infinite set of all images because they are already in the process of actualization. Rather, they are contained in the process. We know they register with the senses, but how do they register in the mind? Deleuze’s treatment of abstraction in *The Fold* suggests, “[abstract] art is not a negation of form: it posits

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18 Ibid., 125.
19 Ibid.
form as folded, existing only as a ‘mental landscape’ in the soul or in the mind, in upper altitudes; hence it also includes immaterial folds. Material matter makes up the bottom, but folded forms are styles or manners”. It becomes the creative force that the spectator must unfold in the work of abstract art. In Other frames, information produces the image along with its painterly effect and the digital universe is responsible for the abstraction taking place. So, the digital universe is in fact an unseen but not immaterial force that contributes to the artistic enfoldment. With this, we return to Deleuze’s cinematic image as the production of a new image that opens up matter and the soul (in the spirit of Leibniz) to information-based worlds requiring new manners of unfolding. Information-based art like Levy’s Other frames create an Other world that allows matter to fold in on itself in new and exciting ways that bewilder the body and the mind.

Whether or not viewers can feel the virtual vicariously though the digital experience is left to debate. While I argue that Other frames offer viewers a glimpse of the digital plane of immanence, the most visual articulation of the grander notion of the infinite, the effect is only as strong as the viewer’s pre-existing knowledge of the artist’s process. What’s really happening in Other frames is the image of information escaping the digital universe and coming back to the Real, back to the body. This is how Malcolm Levy’s information-based art is sensuously experienced despite the many folds between the image and the spectator. And it is in this sensuous exchange that a new manner of unfolding is able to take place -- that which the artist has enfolded into an Other world.

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Bibliography


