

FAUX/REAL: THE BIOLOGY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate
School of Western Carolina University in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

By

Amanda Elizabeth Stephens

Director: Mr. Richard Tichich
Professor of Fine Arts
Fine and Performing Arts Department

Committee Members: Ms. Cathy Griffin, Fine Art
Mr. James Kevin Kirkpatrick

February 2013

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ABSTRACT

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Amanda E. Stephens, M.F.A.

Western Carolina University (May, 2013)

Director: Richard Tichich

Consciousness begins when an experience with the physical world initiates a brain-body perception and response feedback cycle as one acts, absorbs, reacts, processes and rationalizes information. French phenomenological philosopher Merleau-Ponty wrote, “The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them.”(Merleau-Ponty) Merleau-Ponty speaks of a biological bodily experience. My thesis exhibit investigates this idea of the biology of consciousness through an installation environment that enfolds the viewer. The environment employs magnifying devices to encourage a closer look in order to echo the idea of the whole and the outward-inward feedback of perception and to assert the importance of first-hand experience with the world.

Inside the gallery space, the viewer confronts an 8’x8’ plastic covered green house in the middle of the gallery. Projections from the top of the greenhouse structure onto three walls reveal three different perspectives from inside the structure. The first projection displays a wide-angle perspective from inside the structure. The second focuses on a fish tank of plants and vegetables. The third projection, from a camera

hidden in the vegetation, exposes the eye of the viewer looking into one of the magnifying glasses. Upon entering the greenhouse the viewer meets an array of vegetables in different stages of life, growing out of jars and aquariums, each lit by its own grow light. Many of the vegetable terrariums have magnifying devices to encourage a closer look.

By entering the space and finding encouragement to investigate the parts more intimately, the audience senses an echo of the experience of the perpetual outward-inward manner of human perception. The experience with very real living plants in contrast to the fake grass ("Astro-turf") stimulates an awareness of human biology as inextricable from the cycle of human consciousness. In his book, *Out of Our Heads Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness*, Alva Noë, a professor at the Graduate Center, CUNY, states:

"The brain is not the thing inside of you that makes you conscious because, in fact, there is no thing inside of you that makes you conscious. It would then turn out that contemporary neuroscience has been in the thrall of a false dichotomy, as if the only alternative to the idea that the thing inside you thinks and feels is immaterial and supernatural is the idea that the thing inside you that thinks and feels is a bit of your body: we've been thinking about consciousness the wrong way, as something that happens in us, like digestion, when we should think about it as something we do, as a kind of willed, living activity."

Informed by artists like Mel Chin, whose installation "Revival Fields" addresses ecological and sustainable issues, Faux/Real also involves sustainable implications. However, this exhibit differs in its focus on biology as it pertains to consciousness.

INTRODUCTION:

This FAUX/REAL installation, fueled by a surge for equilibrium of idea, form and audience engagement, materialized while investigating why I found bodily engagement so important to my work. Contemplating and investigating a more bodily engaged experience for the spectator, I use materials rich with tactility, in reference to the real and the hyperreal.Upon entering the gallery one confronts an 8' x 8' x 8' arbor covered in plastic and illuminated from the inside (see fig.1). Foot wide plastic panels rustle with the movement of air, revealing glimpses of lights, plants and a path withinThis structure acts as a life-sustaining greenhouse large enough for four or five people to enter and explore to discover metal grow lights hanging from two outer sides of the greenhouse ceiling suspended over clear glass jars and aquariums filled with layered gravel, sand and soil (see fig.2). These lights nourish and illuminate living broccoli, peas, wheat grass, cabbage, potatoes, garlic and nasturtiums. The transparency of the containers allows access to the layers necessary to cultivate a living plant, the roots, the hidden life of the plant.



Fig. 1 Martha Mcleod, Photograph, *Installation Detail, Exterior*, Cullowhee, NC, 2013



Fig. 2 Martha Mcleod, Photograph, *Installation Detail Interior*, Cullowhee, NC, 2013

The arrangement of the plant filled aquariums and jars mimic the rows and perspective of a garden. The grow lights mimic the sun. The "Astro-turf" carpet mimics grass. Scattered among these plants, 2" magnifying glasses invite the spectator in for closer investigation to discover another layer; the veins of the plant pulsating with life invisible to most (see fig.3).

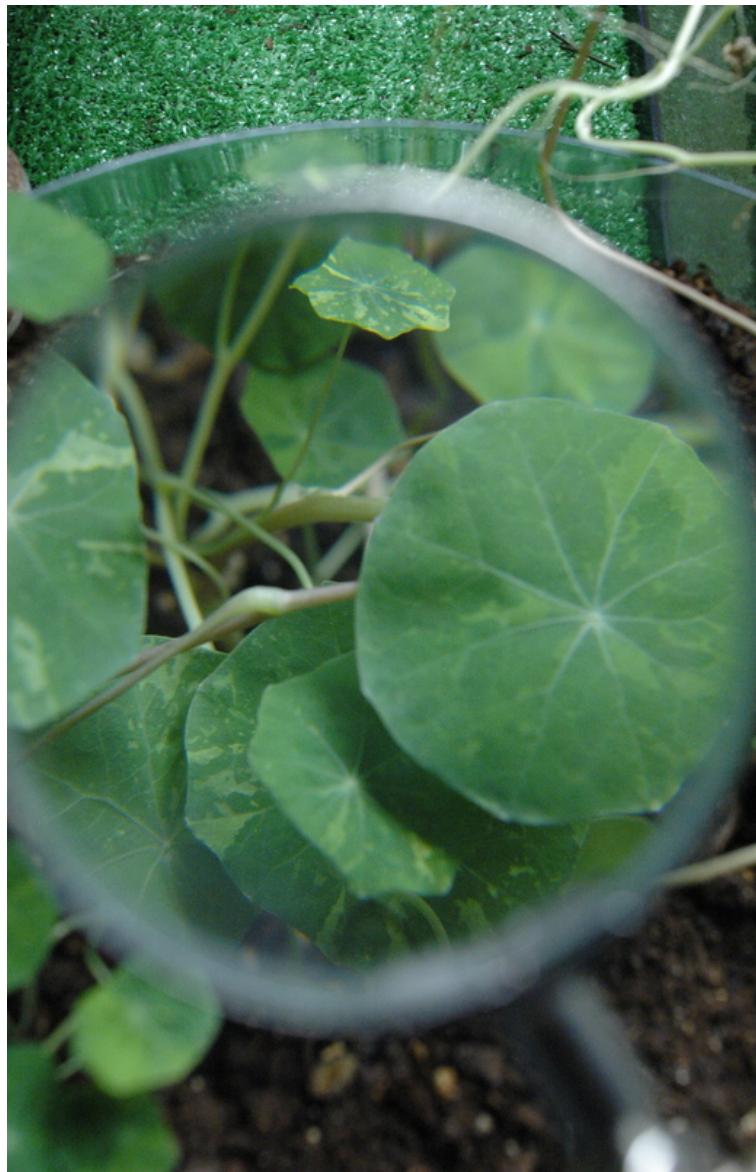


Fig. 3 Installation Detail Close Up

Finally, one discovers three small surveillance video cameras. The first camera, hidden in the vegetation, clues the viewer to the projections on the gallery walls outside of the greenhouse (see fig.4). Before exiting the greenhouse, the viewer encounters two more cameras adding to the dizzying projections on the gallery walls. The camera angels, upside down and twisted, mimic the real or biological happenings inside the greenhouse (see fig.5). The spectators then realize the installation watches the watching.



Fig. 4 Martha Mcleod, Photograph, *Installation Detail Interior Ground*, Cullowhee, NC, 2013

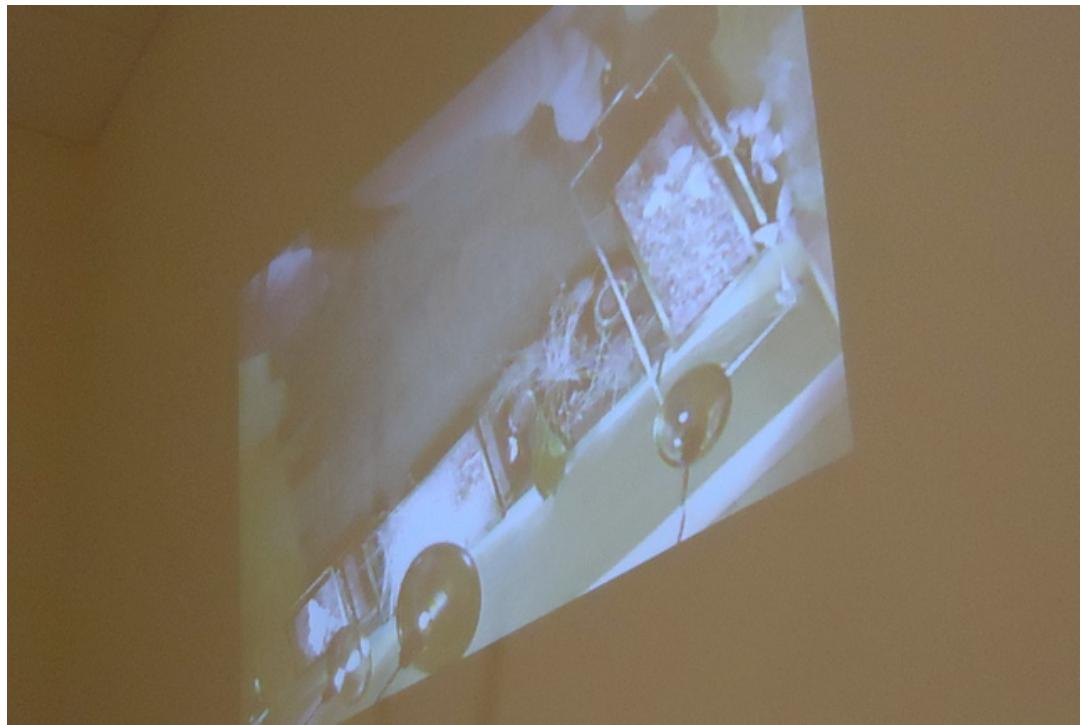


Fig. 5 Martha Mcleod, Photograph, Installation Exterior Walls Detail, Cullowhee, NC 2013

CHAPTER ONE: CONCEPTION

Imagining the moments in my life when I felt alive and engaged with the world, I realize they were moments of sensory and bodily engagement rich with the wonder of investigation and discovery. For the past few years I have considered the tactile, the sensory, the kinesthetic, as the instigators of play that heighten and focus consciousness. In pursuit of playful consciousness I design, assemble and exhibit installations that attempt to create playful moments for participants while drawing awareness to the first hand, cyclical and interrelated nature of reality in contrast to second hand experience (hyperreal).

The materials and concepts which attract me encourage physical interaction by the audience, referencing the real and the hyperreal (plants vs. astro turf, interior space vs. exterior projection, near-empty gallery space vs. confined wooden arbor) to communicate my concern with manifesting a bodily engaged experience for the spectator while drawing attention the primacy of a first-hand experience.

The idea to grow and employ plants began as a way to save money on food and have fresh organic, non-GMO (genetically modified organisms) vegetables. Having spent twenty years on and off, working and living on Jackson Farm, a sustainable farm owned by Tom and Jan Jackson, I have become accustomed to fresh vegetables right out of the garden. The western North Carolina mountains growing season is short compared to the year round growing season on Jackson Farm located in southeastern North Carolina, so I decided to see what I could grow indoors, inside my studio. I realized these plants not only provided evidence of life like the bones or insect specimens I employed in other

works of art; they were alive (see fig.6). Not only were they alive, they could act in direct contrast to the grass-mimicking astro-turf that has appeared in previous works and which represents an absurdity in the hyperreal: Plants/astro-turf, real/hyperreal, first-hand/second-hand, natural/artificial, living/dead.



Fig. 6 Studio Germination

Initially I thought I would project a stop motion slide show of the life cycle of the plants. Upon completion of a half size version of the installation I realized the projection didn't make sense once I removed the plants depicted in the images from the germination location (my studio) and placed them in the installation space (see fig.7).



Fig. 7 Studio Installation Model

I chose to live stream and project the activity inside the green house onto the gallery walls outside, from the top of the greenhouse. Instantaneous projection echoes the inward/outward feedback cycle of bodily consciousness (Noë) and audience engagement. I attempt to create bodily-engaged installations that draw attention to first and second hand duality by assembling an environment that embodies both. I created a moment in

which the audience acts as both viewer and viewed, observer and observed, participant and object, integral and removed simultaneously, activating mind, body and perception.

CHAPTER TWO: GESTATION

The demands of germinating and growing plants determined my daily routine to care for them. This included assembling a germination greenhouse, amending the soil, filling the aquariums and jars with rock, sand and soil, daily watering, insect patrol and pruning (see fig.8).



Fig. 8 Studio Germination Station

All the seeds planted were non-genetically modified vegetables, grass and flowers (see fig.9). The inclusion of living edibles asserts the importance of their cultivation in the rise and cultivation of human consciousness. The reciprocity in nurturing vegetables for my consumption to nurture me pertains to the cycle of life. The greenhouse experience sharply reminded me of how much I find this reciprocity absent in my interaction with the screen of the computer or the screen of the TV or the screen of the theatre. This reciprocity inherent in nurturing the plants and my perceived absence of that in my screen experiences inspired my choice to project the living plants and people in the greenhouse onto the wall of the gallery.



Fig. 9 Germination Close-up

After considering, establishing and maintaining the plants in the studio and making a half size model of the installation to work out issues like the projections and scale, I installed the 8x8 foot carpet of "Astro-turf" in the middle of the gallery allowing adequate space to walk around the greenhouse and view the projections on the gallery walls. Then I assembled the green house cube (see fig.10).



Fig. 10 Gallery Installation in Progress

Next, I installed the grow lights on timers and mounted the cameras and projectors. The grow lights installed smoothly but the cameras did not. I discovered that I could not live stream through the cameras with the equipment I had, so I ended up replacing the video cameras with surveillance cameras, which would remain streaming without triggering energy saving shut off mechanisms. The surveillance cameras' twisted perspectives combined with the distorted image from the night vision feature, mimic the questionable nature of second hand information even better than the video cameras.

At this point I moved the plant filled aquariums and jars in from my studio, arranging them on the ground to mimic a garden perspective with optimal exposure to the grow lights (see fig.11).



Fig. 11 Gallery Installation

Cameras placed at awkward angles in two corners of the greenhouse and in one of the aquariums close to a magnifying glass could capture people looking into the magnifying glass and otherwise occupied with the installation. Attaching the plastic scrim to the exterior completed preparations to receive the audience.

CHAPTER THREE: BIRTH

By bodily engaging the audience with the installation I lure the viewer into a moment of body/mind awareness to become a completing part of the work of art. Inspired to observe and contemplate the material in the Faux/Real installation, the audience's consciousness begins when an experience with the physical world initiates a brain-body perception and response feedback cycle as the participant acts, absorbs, reacts, processes and rationalizes information (Noë) (see Fig.12 Video). French phenomenological philosopher Merleau-Ponty wrote, "The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects... (Merleau-Ponty and Baldwin 93)." Merleau-Ponty speaks of a biological experience. My thesis exhibit investigates this idea of bodily consciousness through an installation environment that enfolds the viewer. The environment employs magnifying devices to encourage a closer look in order to echo the idea of the whole and the outward-inward feedback of perception and to assert the importance of first-hand experience with the world. The installation is literally in, of, and around the viewer. At once, the art exists first hand in the real world, second hand on the walls of the gallery, and ultimately both in the physical (sensory) and intellectual (mental) awareness of the audience. In each passing moment, in each blink of the viewer's eye or flicker of a leaf, new experience and new art come into being.

Since Merleau-Ponty presented his idea of bodily consciousness, philosopher and social theorist, Jean Baudrillard (July 27,1929- March 6, 2007) introduced the concept of the "hyperreal". More recently philosopher and neuroscientist Alva Noë introduced the

idea of the “biology of consciousness”. These two major concepts, the bodily and biological nature of consciousness and the hyperreal, manifest visually and experientially in this installation. "We are not like the berry that can be easily plucked, but rather like the plant itself, rooted in the earth and enmeshed in the brambles (Noë p 69)."

Jean Baudrillard's *Simulation and Simulacra* introduces the concept of simulation and simulacra. Baudrillard first illuminates the coexistence of the false and the true inherent in simulation and explains how this duality ends up “submerging the principal of truth (Baudrillard 4)” or negating the truth. Developing the idea of simulacra through the analogy of the Iconoclasts who abolished simulacra or idols from the church, he exposes the problematic nature of simulacra as referential, never actually the reference (e.g. God) or possessing that to which it references (e.g. essence of God)(Baudrillard 5). Baudrillard demonstrates the procession of ideas of the image from image as reflection to the image as “pure simulacrum (Baudrillard 6)”. This transition, Baudrillard states, is the movement from signs that conceal something to signs that conceal that there is nothing and marks the turning point to an era of simulacra and simulation. Baudrillard presents Disneyland as a “model of all the entangled orders of simulacra (Baudrillard 12-13)” and explains the concept of hyperreality as a death of reality. As Disneyland presents itself as an imaginary world it simultaneously presents what lies outside of it as the “real” world. A real world consisting of layered simulation is not “real” but hyperreal.

Bodily consciousness, in contrast with simulacra, brings awareness to the primacy of the first hand experience over a second hand experience. In his book, *Out of Our Heads Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness*, Alva Noë, a professor at the Graduate Center, CUNY, states:

"To understand consciousness in humans and animals, we must look not inward, into the recesses of our insides; rather, we need to look to the ways in which each of us, as a whole animal, carries on the processes of living in and with and in response to the world around us. (Noë 7)."

Nostalgia for a more tactile and visceral interaction with the world reveals itself in the installation, a reaction to a world increasingly involved in a second-hand or media experience. The Installation acts as a device to transform a space into another world, a world of curiosity and altered perception, of exploration and investigation of things inextricable from our world and us. The viewer literally and figuratively merges with the art in a continuum of existence that begins with the smallest particle of reality in the soil or leaf cell (or, ultimately, the invisible dance of energy particles which makes these things "real" to the narrow field of human perception) then through the sensual perceptions of the participant into the intellectual reality created in the participant's brain and finally to the distant completely false reality of distorted electronic images projected high on the studio wall in a feedback loop as "real" as the artificial screech from a sound system's high pitched wail.

Allan Kaprow, (August 23,1927-April 5, 2006) painter, assemblist and vanguard of "installation" said, "If we bypass 'art' and take nature itself as a model or point of departure, we may be able to devise a different kind of art...out of the sensory stuff of ordinary life (Kaprow 12)." I employ the arch-typically fake grass, "Astro-turf", to embody the "hyperreal" upon which the viewer treads. The senses of hearing and smelling engage through the ambient sounds of footsteps, projectors and voices and smells of wood, earth and vegetation.

CONCLUSION:

The sustainable implications of Faux/Real are interconnected with my concerns with the biology of consciousness and bodily experience. The nature and rhythm of sustainable living, slower and more tactile than our hyperreal or present day "screen" paradigm clearly reflects in the nature of the installation art and its intent of bodily engagement. Alva Noë names the, " plasticity of bodily like childhood consciousness"(Noë 94). It is this "plasticity of [the] bodily" that I recreate via the act of installation for myself and for the audience in their experience with the installation.

In the visualization, the designing, the planning, the assembly and the problem solving, I am absorbed, focused and bodily engaged. The intended outcome of the installation is this bodily engagement and perhaps a moment of plastic, child-like consciousness for the audience.

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