

LAURI ASTALA

Small Spectacle

– a postscript for the exhibition



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My art has always dealt with notions of space, especially with the relation of spaces to images. Earlier I was fascinated with modelling of space – cartographic and cosmological models as abstractions of physical reality. However, the perspective of the *Small Spectacle* exhibition is rather based, physically and reflectively, on how we experience space. On one hand, the theme of the exhibition grew from a need to contemplate the concept of *image-semblance** of space. By this I mean the *image-like** characteristics of spatial experience in a phenomenological sense. On the other hand, the works deal with the issue of presence vs. absence, both as a spatial concern and as a question of confronting *the other*.

◀ On Cover: *Small Spectacle about Image-Semblance*

* Image-semblance / image-like. In this context, I understand images as entities for representing something that is not physically present. At the same time, images have the ability of bringing their referent mentally present. While an image can be thought of as “a window to an outside reality” (i.e. representation of something non-present), according to my point the phenomenon of indexicality is concerning *spaces* as well. In this case, space is considered in phenomenological terms; spatial experience is derived in a growing extent from *images*. Memories associated with space are no longer solely constructed through actual and physical presence but increasingly through memory devices, e.g. photographs and films – particularly from other sources than the first hand personal experience. While cartographic images and models serve intentionally as devices for outlining space, second-hand representational imagery “unintentionally” constructs the spatial memory, and in addition provides perspectives for spatial apprehension even before one’s own first-hand experience.

Spatial image-likeness is further enforced with quotidian technology such as cars and trains. The sensation of space experienced from a moving vehicle resembles the situation in a movie theatre where the physical space is psychologically displaced by an imaginary one. In a train or a car, the travelling spectator is not himself moving in the space. Instead, the movement and the perceived space are framed through a window and separated from the passenger’s immediate surroundings.

With the concept of *image-semblance* or the characteristics of *image-like* I want to underline the shift in the nature in apprehending space.

The exhibition is not aiming to create a spectacle connoting to something visually pompous or striking. Instead, it examines the notions of *scenic* and of *displacement*, and how they relate to spatial experience.

The etymology of the word “spectacle” relates to theatre play, a staged image of reality. The installations and video installations of *Small Spectacle* can be thought of as staged spaces (images), and in that sense when stepping inside the work the spectator is entering inside an image. These works are attempts to confuse the spectator’s spatial experience. They place him on the verge between image and actuality, and dissolve the border between space and image, present and absent. This creates a sensation of instability and uncertainty, a faltering sense of presence, or even hallucinatory feelings.

Furthermore, some of the installations literally shift the gaze from the artwork towards the spectator himself as he enters the “stage”. By mirroring his own image as part of the work and simultaneously superimposing his reflection with that of another person, the works baffle the sense of the spectator’s *self* – the border between *the self* and *the other* becomes perplexed.



Small Spectacle about Lightness



Small Spectacle about Encountering



Small Spectacle about Nearness

Small Spectacle about Encountering

While all the works in the exhibition have different perspectives on the above-mentioned aspects, Small Spectacle about Encountering incorporates many of the key themes of the exhibition.

A semitransparent mirror is located in the middle of the room. There is a chair placed on one side of the mirror and a wall with a video projection on the other side.

The video shows the same chair, with the same surrounding space. The spectator sits down on the chair and notices, while seated, that the reflection of his chair and its surroundings overlap and match perfectly with the video image. The impression is simultaneously two- and three-dimensional, and the sensation of space becomes strange, confused and delusive.

After a short while the spectator hears steps. From behind the chair emerge two walking figures passing the background view. First, it's hard to discern whether the figures belong to the video or to the real space. Then a man appears in the video and sits down on the chair, "opposite" the spectator. The man's figure, his body, his hands, his face, merges perfectly with the spectator's reflection. The features of this new hybrid figure are bewildering – the spectator recognises in them partly him/herself and partly a stranger. Identities melt when identification is hampered.

Small Spectacle about Encountering

Video installation. Computer-controlled one-channel video, sound, chair, semi-transparent mirror and projection surface, surrounding space.

Duration 9 minutes, 2005.



The sitting figure in the video starts to talk, and the spectator feels as if the sound was coming from inside his own head. The monologue depicts a person who is mentally completely absent: the narrator examines their relationship, unavoidable distance, and portrays his wonder of confronting (or the impossibility of confronting) this person. Through the narrative, the identities of both the narrator and the person he is referring to become questionable. It is a strong and psychologically thorough-going story, where internality and externality become intertwined. Towards its thickening end, the 9-minute monologue winds back to the words in the beginning of the story: “...I was there, not in order to see him, but so that he wouldn't see himself, so that it would be me he saw in the mirror, someone other than him – another, a stranger, nearby, gone, the shadow of the other shore, no one...” In some parts the story points at the spectator, but the ultimate question – whose story is this? – is intentionally left open. On one hand, it could be the spectator, and on the other, it could be the narrator himself, or somebody else.

Only one spectator can view the work at a time. The narrated text is composed of quotations from Maurice Blanchot's book *The Last Man*.







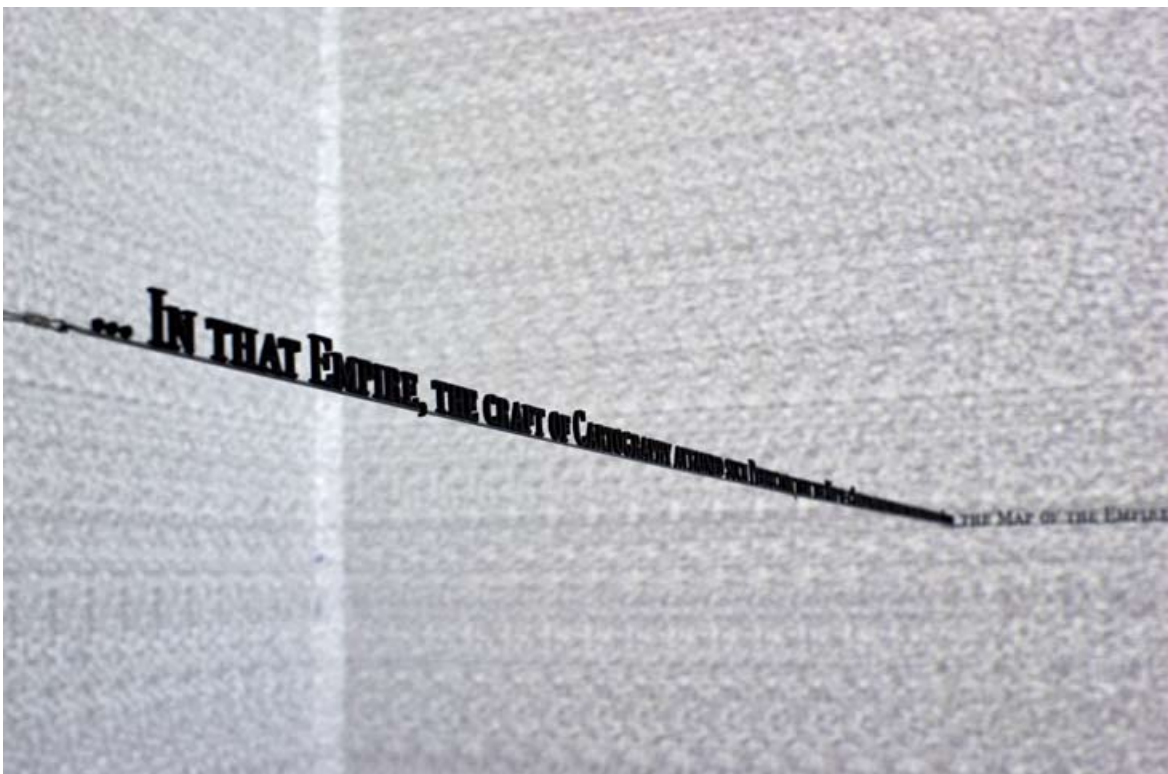
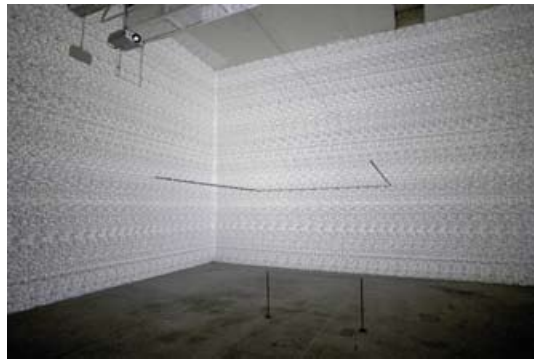
Small Spectacle about Image-Semblance

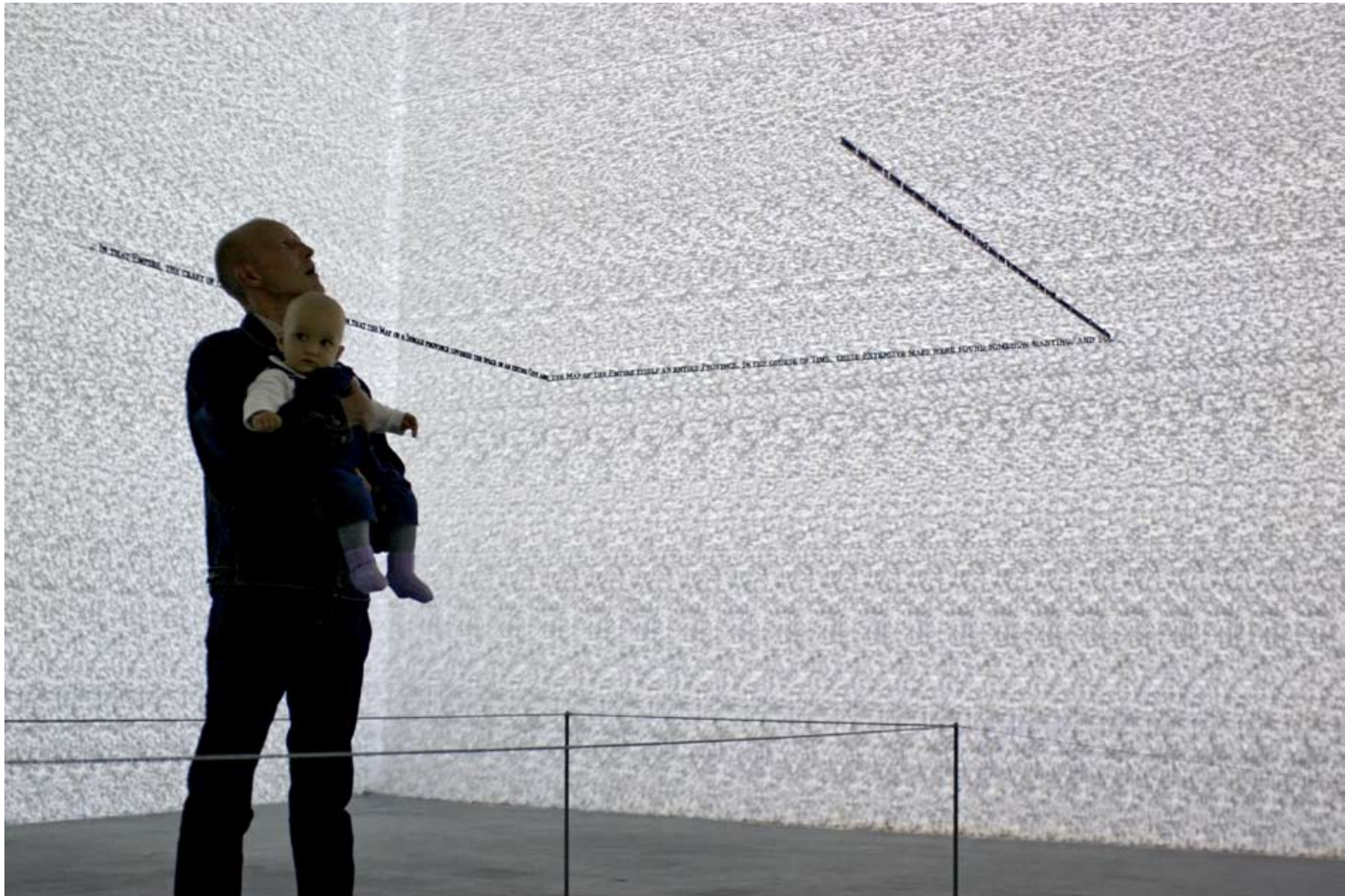
The work consists of a stereogram video animation projected on three walls of a cubical space and a text stretched on a steel wire in the middle of the space. While reading and focusing on the text, the spectator's eyes are adjusted perfectly matching the stereographic pattern on the video. The stereographic video creates a perceptual illusion that the walls are undulating. The spectator thus loses "the sense of space" and perceives the work as an unstable and hallucinatory room.

The text (quoted from Jorge Luis Borges) goes: "*... In that Empire, the craft of Cartography attained such Perfection that the Map of a Single province covered the space of an entire City, and the Map of the Empire itself an entire Province. In the course of Time, these Extensive maps were found somehow wanting, and so the College of Cartographers evolved a Map of the Empire that was of the same Scale as the Empire and that coincided with it point for point.*"

Small Spectacle about Image-Semblance

Video installation. Text stretched on a steel wire, stereogram video animation, 2005.





Small Spectacle about Nearness

A semi-transparent mirror hangs in the middle of a long space, and two chairs are mounted symmetrically on both sides of the mirror. A pendulum lamp swings just above the mirror thus alternating the view through the mirror from side to side. Because of the symmetry of the space and mounting of the chairs, the spectator perceives only the people on the view disappearing and reappearing. While seated symmetrically on both chairs, both spectators can perceive a short glimpse of a hybrid figure of themselves when the pendulum swings over the mirror.

Small Spectacle about Nearness

Installation. Semi-transparent mirror, two chairs, pendulum lamp, surrounding space, 2005.



Small Spectacle about Lightness

The work is a single channel video projected on a back wall of a corridor-like space. Video shows a room that is constantly changing its shape: images of different rooms are morphed non-linearly through each other. The slow movement creates a floating, amoebic and hallucinatory feeling of an unstable space. The video is a 5-minute loop.

Small Spectacle about Lightness

One-channel video projected on a space.
5-minute loop, Edition 3, 2005.



