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ANATOMY OF OPTICS AND LIGHT – Nina Sellars

Anatomy of Optics and Light focuses on the role that light plays in the translation of flesh into image, by presenting light as an instigator rather than a passive illuminator of anatomical knowledge. Combining the technology of electric light with that of the elementary optics of the camera obscura, light not only transmits an image but it also becomes an image, illuminating sections of a nervous system that has been extended, conceptualised and translated into the diagrammatic language of electric circuit board design. It is a nervous system that is viewed and conceptualised through its medium of display.

Nina Sellars is an artist and PhD student in Drawing at the Faculty of Art & Design at Monash University, where she also lectures in Anatomical Drawing for the Medical and Art Faculties. She has trained and worked as a prosector (dissector of cadavers for medical display) and often collaborates with scientists and artists on cross-disciplinary projects. Her artwork uses drawing, photography and installation, and has been exhibited nationally and internationally. In 2008 Sellars was an invited speaker at the Science Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin, Coventry University, UK, and the Bellevue Arts Centre, USA. www.ninasellars.com

Dr Matthew Sellars, senior research fellow at the Laser Physics Centre, Research School of Physical Science and Engineering, Australian National University, assisted with the technical realisation of this project.

WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN DIGITAL – Joanna Zylinska

This project explores digitality as the intrinsic condition of photography, both in its past and present forms. Rather than focus on the aesthetic qualities of light, it invites the viewer to consider the formal role of light in the constitution of a pattern, the 'ON/OFF' of the information culture. The project assumes that computation also takes place outside what we conventionally think of as 'computers'. Indeed, it is through the differential effect of the presence and absence of any data – of pattern, electricity, light - that computation occurs in the wider world, engendering complexity and bringing about change. The ten images presented here show the digital flow and exchange of data in different media: house walls, furniture, human bodies. They capture the digital condition: the emergence of a pattern of 0s and 1s.

Dr Joanna Zylinska is a Reader in New Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. She is the author of three books: *Bioethics in the Age of New Media* (MIT Press, 2009), *The Ethics of Cultural Studies* (Continuum, 2005) and *On Spiders, Cyborgs and Being Scared: the Feminine and the Sublime* (Manchester University Press, 2001). She is also the editor of *The Cyborg Experiments: the Extensions of the Body in the Media Age* (Continuum, 2002) and co-editor of *Imaginary Neighbors: Mediating Polish-Jewish Relations after the Holocaust* (University of Nebraska Press, 2007). Zylinska combines her philosophical writings with photographic art practice. www.joannazylinska.net

Exhibition Curator: Nina Sellars

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Joanna Zylinska would like to thank David Bate, Gary Hall, Nina Sellars and Alexa Wright.

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Art & Design

SHIFTED GALLERY
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Level 1, 15 Albert Street, Richmond
Melbourne, Victoria Australia 3121
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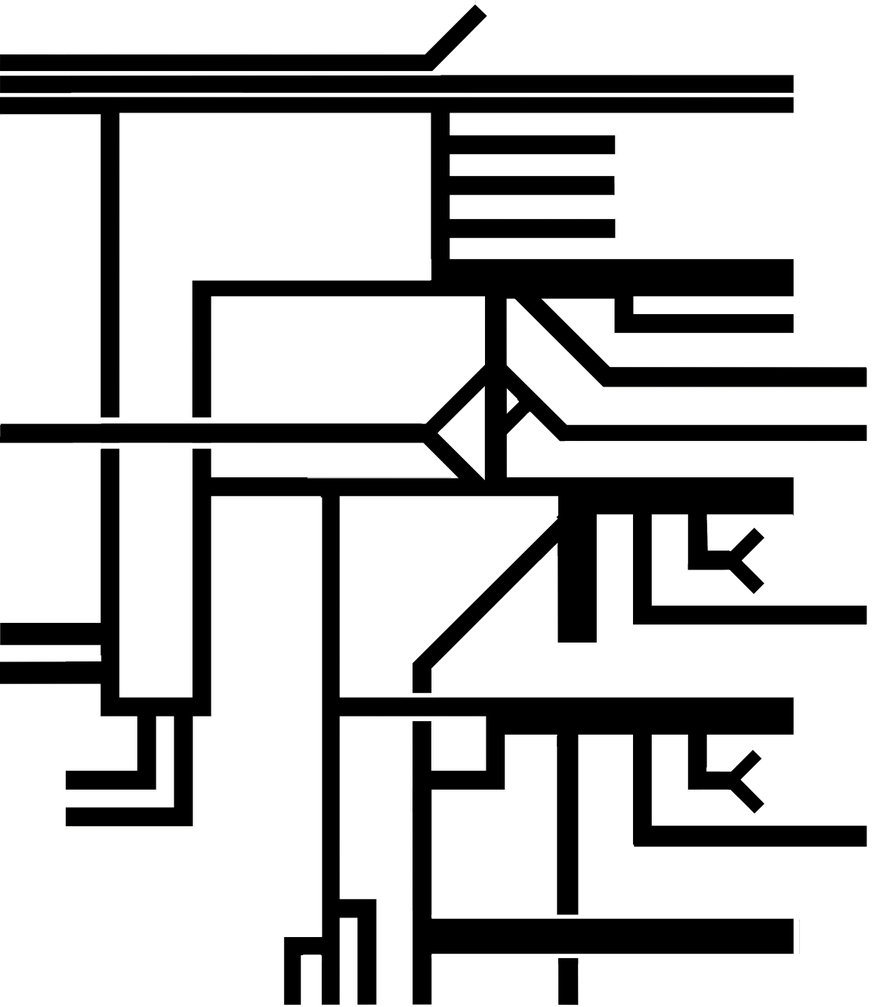
SOLID STATES/LIQUID OBJECTS

NINA SELLARS
JOANNA ZYLINSKA



Solid States / Liquid Objects – Melissa Miles

When Jacques Derrida described light as the founding metaphor of Western philosophy of metaphysics, he was referring only in part to the multitude of originary myths – biblical, scientific and philosophical – that posit light as the precondition of life, seeing and knowing.[1] The thing that so deeply captured Derrida's imagination was the unique role of light as a metaphor in shaping the condition of metaphysics according to a differential logic. From Plato to Descartes and beyond, the sun and its light have been figured as the source of opposition between the visible and the invisible, presence and absence, and appearance and disappearance. The light of the sun thereby comes to embody philosophical enlightenment, where all that falls beyond the logos lies in indeterminate darkness, waiting to be brought to the light.

The artists in this exhibition, Joanna Zylinska and Nina Sellars, are acutely conscious of the immense historical weight and limitations of this logic of light, and work to transcend these limits in different ways. Zylinska's work focuses on the differential character of light and media. In her photographic installation, the binary structures of photography, both old and new, are likened to the digital language of zeros and ones. The photographic negative and positive, and the light and dark tones of the print, are tangible manifestations of a much deeper binary system that is underpinned by the metaphysics of light. As light shines on an object from a place beyond its limits and is then absorbed by the photosensitive emulsion, it establishes a division between object and space, revelation and concealment, presence and absence, the photographed object and the viewing subject, and the representation and the real. Mirroring the translation of data in computation into a language of zeros and ones, this logic of light has locked photography within a differential binary system. Zylinska's notion of computation therefore precedes and extends well beyond the hardware of actual computers: *We Have Always Been Digital*.

The fugitive qualities of light ensure that these differential systems are in a constant state of flux – continually being mobilized and remediated in new ways. Light's transparency ensures that we can never see or know light in itself, and can only ever apprehend it as it interacts with the objects, vapours and discourses that constitute our worlds. Derrida describes this evasive movement as heliotropic, after the movement of the sunflower that continually turns towards the sun.[2] Like the heliotrope, the logic of light is always looking somewhere else, always on the run and always deferring to another as it simultaneously returns to itself. This heliotropic movement transforms matter into media in Zylinska's photographs. House walls, furniture, bodies and interior spaces mediate the play of shadow, light, appearance, disappearance, presence and retreat, and attest to the differential movement of light as a distinctly digital condition.

Whereas media and the digital are central to Zylinska's work, Sellars' installation shifts our attention to the relationships between light and the anatomical body. Since the Renaissance histories of depicting the body in art and anatomy have been deeply informed by an objective treatment of light in which there is a clear division between light and matter. As an external force, light is used to reveal matter, certify to presence and through the play of light and shade translate that presence into a two-dimensional image. In *Anatomy of Optics and Light*, Sellars invokes these traditions only to open up a much more multifaceted system of exchange. Five plinths, each supporting an 'inverse camera obscura', are arranged in a circular formation in the darkened gallery space. The camera obscura is a potent symbol of the translation of light into objective modes of philosophical and optical discourse. Luce Irigaray and Jonathan Crary argue that this device gives physical form to the relationship between the disembodied knowing observer and the knowable external world that has so deeply informed Western epistemology.[3] A radically different form of translation occurs through Sellars' 'inverse' camera obscuras. Instead of projecting an external scene onto the camera's interior wall, light is used to project an object (a small light bulb) onto the gallery wall. This light is at once the subject and transmitter of an image. As these bulbs are projected onto the gallery walls, they also illuminate a series of drawings of the human nervous system that have been represented through the visual language of electric circuit board design. The interaction of the light from the camera obscura and the abstracted anatomical drawings throws into relief the role of technologies, knowledge and representation in shaping the anatomical body.

Further translations and transformations take place when viewing Sellars' work. The installation space recalls an anatomy lecture theatre in which observers direct their gaze forwards, towards a cadaver in the centre of the room. To fully appreciate the interaction of light and technology in Sellars' installation, this arrangement must be reversed. As we stand in the centre of this installation in the place occupied traditionally by the cadaver and the anatomist, the viewing body takes the place of the body viewed, while the body to be viewed encircles the room.[4] Together, Sellars and Zylinska investigate some of the many ways in which light is reproduced in a series of complex, mutually constitutive relations with the body, space, technologies, knowledge and perception. By thinking through the contingencies of light, Sellars and Zylinska open up opportunities for more fluid states of being. Given the immense authority that has been attributed to light in the history of Western philosophy, and given the ways in which this metaphysics of light has delimited modes of thought and representation historically, the possibilities afforded by its moments of excess and slippage may be profound.

Dr Melissa Miles is a lecturer in the Department of Theory of Art and Design, Faculty of Art and Design, Monash University. She is the author of The Burning Mirror: Photography in an Ambivalent Light, published by Australian Scholarly Publishing.

[1] Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 27.
[2] Jacques Derrida, '*White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy*', trans. Alan Bass. Margins of Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 250-251.
[3] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1994), p.* 29; Luce Irigaray. *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 312.
[4] Nina Sellars, '*Anatomy of Optics and Light*', unpublished artist's statement, 2009.