
SHORT — CUT

JULIA VARELA. 3'31"

The image is of a darkened warehouse space where products are finished and wrapped. Outside it is night. In the middle of the image is a lit LED screen horizontal on a table. There is nothing displayed on it, a pure white emits from its gridded screen. The panel lies among huge boxes containing protective plastics. At the edge of the screen is a young woman. She looks towards the camera through her black thick-rimmed glasses. Her face and front are illuminated. She wears a green sport jacket. She places one of her hands on the screen and her other hand rests on her belly. The image was a throw-away. An emailed thumbnail for a simple sales purpose. An image emailed in order to create more images on that blank screen. At first glance, trivial. Yet, an accidental relationship had already started to form.

Julia Varela's work investigates the materiality of images in our age of digital technologies. Often assumed to be an immaterial object, the image needs a technological body to exist. Part of her research involves contact with retailers of state-of-the-art screens and display panels. Much of this production is based in the industrial heartland of China. Independent e-commerce retailer Sunny Zhu emailed the digital photograph – the first image of a human being during this sales exchange about large-format LED panel screens. For Varela, the presence of this human body created a short-circuit in the process. The technological body of the screen emits a

non-humanity, an absence of touch, a one-way communication. And yet, this photograph breaks through to a space behind the screen in which human touch aids the scenography of an alleged orchestrated shadow-theatre. The unexpected encounter of such a material revelation among the algorithmic renders of screen production and sale pose a mysterious narrative. The digital image creates our perception of reality and like a mirror that obscures its verso, we rarely see the human beings behind it. Our world exists insofar as it can inhabit the 2 dimensional confines of the cell phone screen, the television, or the computer, all of which emerge from this industrial heartland of China. The woman in the LED screen warehouse serves as an anchor for our own societal lack of communication.

An image is not an object, it needs support. Whereas traditional printed images need ink and paper, the digital image has a constant necessity of being selected, broadcast, and maintained. It requires an elaborate network in order to reproduce itself. *3'31"* manifests what was described by philosopher Emanuel Alloa: the image as a latent potentiality. He describes the empathic affect of these images – they are able to manipulate our form of understanding the material world.¹ The illuminated image broadcasts in order to deliver a message. Its physical structure is the medium, and as McLuhan's classic media theory slogan has it, "the medium is the message."² The image as a constant bombardment on our perception, is not only mentioned as a given in Alloa's introductory text,³ but places the viewer as a passive receptor to a violent barrage of information.

In the second century, Ptolemy wrote a theory of the refraction of light that echoed previous belief in the extramission *theory* – or the idea that sight was achieved by rays of fire shooting out from the eyes to make contact with the physical world.⁴ This belief held sway for the next thousand years, placing the viewer as the active collector of information that interacts physically with material. In our world of screens, the opposite is now known to be true. An extramission eye beam shoots out not from a human being, but from the backlit image: beaming us into its universe. Those who hold power are

1 Emanuel Alloa, „Reading Images: Rearticulating the Visible. Towards a Critique of Images“ lecture at the Virreina Centre de la Imatge, 15 – 16 March 2017. (<https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/lavirreina/en/activities/rearticulating-visible-towards-critique-images/63>)

2 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964. (<https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/mcluhan.mediummessage.pdf>)

3 Alloa: "It is almost a truism that the proliferation of images in the contemporary world is inversely proportional to our ability to say what they correspond to; and that our eyes, tired from the frantic stream of images, have lost their critical capacity."

4 Extramission theory was popularised by Galen, the medical authority quoted throughout the middle ages. (<https://web.stanford.edu/class/history13/earlysciencelab/body/eyespages/eye.html>)

the ones with the ability to broadcast and create these images. The latent violence of the image caresses the cheeks of the woman in the warehouse with a soft blue glowing light.

Varela's project aims to reconsider the authority of the image. The photograph and its apparent lack of power, triviality, and low-resolution, becomes a symbol of the power mechanism of the image. This photograph has been selected to undergo a transformation to achieve an alternate communication. As the artist noted, "*The material components of the image have been amplified and replicated seeking to near our physical condition*". In Varela's video piece titled *3'31"*, the image is seen as the basis for which a new communication emerges. An algorithmic bar passes from right to left, then from left to right reading and interpreting the image. The visual data stored in the photograph is translated as a strange and drone-like sound. The processing software obscures the image behind brilliant lights that shoot out aural pulses and tones.

The image passes through a unique synthesiser that converts images into sounds– it is shredded through a synth model designed in 1938 by Soviet engineer Yevgeny Murzin. The photo-optic algorithm converts images into waves to be interpreted as tones. His intention was to liberate music from human intervention, to make sound without musicians, and give agency to the image. In Varela's video light gains a material proximity experienced through the vibrations of the inner ear. The process creates an illusion transcending time and space into a philosophy, noted by the artist as cosmic existentialism, recalling the ambitions of avant-gardes before the revolution.

In the theatre play *Victory Over the Sun* (1913) the group Soyuz Molodyozhi proposed the amalgamation of literature, music, and image. Today, it is mainly recognized as the event at which Kazimir Malevich first created the *Black Square* – the "zero point of painting" – the destruction of the image.⁵ El Lissitzky's interpretation of the play was that the sun had been overcome by modern technology in which humanity was able to produce its own energy source. The image goes black, and the LED panel switches on.

The frequencies of Murzin's synthesizer emit an eerie and drone-like expression described in a YouTube comment as reminiscent of "those signals that scientists discovered near Saturn".⁶ The instrument was used to create most of the soundtrack to Andrej Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) – a film that discusses the incommunicability between humanity and a sentient alien planet. The stellar body of Solaris interacts with a group of scientists by materialising

5 Isobel Hunter "Zaum und Sun" https://www.pecina.cz/files/www.ce-review.org/99/3/ondisplay3_hunter.html

6 Coil – ANS 1 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nu2yp3PYdTQ&t=1787s>)

and embodying their inner thoughts and memories. This distortion of their reality eventually drives them over the abyss of sanity. The distortion of reality is that which connects back to media theory as embraced by Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) – whose motto resounds in an age of cell-phone-cyborgs: “the television screen has become the retina of the mind's eye.”⁷

The woman and her surroundings destined to be transmitted towards our retinal absorption has become dissolved into a frequency. By putting the image through the synthesizer, Varela attempts a radical form of communication with the individual behind the mirror of perception. She belongs to those invisible networks of labour that toil to create the infrastructures of images that forms our reality. The utopian dreams of the industrialised Soviet Union, which produced the birth of cinema, have today crumbled into the ruins of Chinese communism: the cramped tech-factories of the Shanghai industrial zone.

The purpose of the image's trajectory has been kidnapped – held hostage by an apparatus that manipulates and broadcasts. The transmission has hijacked the flow of information into a new logic. The self-perpetuating image (the woman selling screens through computer and phone screens) collapses by offering a peak into the networked fabric of the human beings in screen factories. The sound converts the raw data of the image into a new site for production rather than a visual product of digital code. The image mutates into sound and its waves reach out to vibrate the exposed part of the body closest to the brain: the screen hits the trembling organ of our inner ear.

Text written by **Àngels Miralda** in dialogue with **Julia Varela**

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7 David Cronenberg, *Videodrome*, 1983.



COLLABORATORS:

