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Media that Need Media are the Luckiest Media in the World: Associations and Dependencies in the Recent Work of Jeremy Blake

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Improbable though it may seem in some respects, Jeremy Blake's videos are cropping up everywhere. After several years of increasing visibility on the gallery and museum circuitⁱ, these digital animations have recently surfaced outside of art institutions: cross-fades of blurs and blobs turned up last fall in Beck's stage performances as intermittent backdrops, while other sequences function as brief, foggy passages in the latest Paul Thomas Anderson film, *Punch Drunk Love*. Given viewers' apparent boredom with digital art in general and the tepid critical reaction to the major exhibitions that have showcased it at the Whitney and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (those shows ironically serving as *facto* retrospectives of a few of the modes they might otherwise have helped to legitimize), the current lionization of Blake within contemporary art circles and his segue into "outside" projects would seem, on first consideration, a bit behind the times. But while the failure of certain types of computer-based work stems from their refusal to address little else than their own technological potential, thus perpetuating a measure of ambivalence among a faction of viewers regarding the viability and perhaps the validity of new media projects, Blake's recent output has benefited from its bustling spot at the junction of several disciplines and its association with – and in some instances its dependency on – other media. Although on one level it is tempting to dismiss much of the work as non-static decoration, buoyed by its paraphrasing of space-age design and Modernist painting, it cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of its entertainment value or its assumed inheritance from these genres; instead, its propensity for contextual transition and its inherent ambiguity demonstrate the capacity for different disciplines to interface not only within a common environment, but also within a broader conceptual territory that includes an overlap in approaches to structure and a challenge to more traditional notion of materiality.

A lot has already been written about the obvious connection of Blake's animations to painting (including his regular use of the term in discussing them) and it would be fair to say that the relative ease with which they have been accepted by audiences owes a certain amount to both the familiarity of a few borrowed compositional devices, as well as the somewhat incongruent understanding that, as videos, they neither answer to the same historical demands nor engage in a corresponding self-reflection. In "The Silent Art,"ⁱⁱⁱ an analysis of various incarnations of the monochrome, Lucy Lippard noted an intolerance on the part of some viewers for canvasses that might be perceived as empty, suggesting that a common approach to painting involves an expectation that it present itself as immediately meaningful or substantive. It is exactly this kind

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of presumption from which Blake's recent animations appear to be exempt; when exhibited in a gallery or museum they seem to escape indictment as devoid of content based almost exclusively on a reading of them as responsive to painting in a very general way (Sarah Valdez's description of them as "mostly color-field abstractions"ⁱⁱⁱ and her characterization of Blake as "emulating [Modernism's] greatest hits...tak[ing] what pleases him and leav[ing] the rest behind" typify this assessment^{iv}). In the context of their participation in music performance and film, similar works are cut loose from the Modernist lineage summoned up by an institutional setting and are allowed to abdicate the responsibility of content to their environment, rendering them, if not empty, at least pliable. Their lack of autonomy within these constructs seems to be dissonant with a majority of painting; they function primarily as transitions and slip into otherwise blank spaces or moments in what could be considered larger systems. Once situated, they continue to elude a precise definition: in the Anderson film, arguably the most limiting framework in which they've appeared, the animated sequences consistently denote a hazy shift between different sets of circumstances, but adopt varying significance – in one instance, suggesting a change in location, in another passage of time, in yet another, confusion or uncertainty. As they absorb content from their surroundings, analysis and evaluation are suspended while the viewer waits to see what happens next, and paradoxically, these passages concurrently perform the deft feat of advancing over time without truly relating to narrative. Although Blake has mentioned that some of his videos unfold through the process of "telling [himself] a story"^v and he has chosen at times to influence the interpretation of them by installing them in conjunction with his storyboard drawings, his recent abstractions foreground the distinction between progression and plot. The shapes dissolve into and rebound off of one another, but an attempt to characterize these encounters as fundamentally anecdotal would come across as attenuated and arbitrary, as the collapsibility and evanescence of the forms compromise any reading of subject or true action. Due to their suspension from narrative, the composition imprecision produced by their mobility, and their ability to easily integrate with other elements, Blake's animations actually resist comparison to many modes of painting, but retain a strong correlation to those that are informed by environment and result from a similar formal syntax; they could probably be aligned most readily, despite the constraints imposed on them by their consistent rectilinear framing, with the work of Katharina Grosse, whose expansive airbrushed wall paintings, like Blake's videos, are the sum of variably transparent layers of color whose soft and amorphous nature frustrates any attempt to establish a sense of their volume or the depth of space they inhabit.

As is also the case in Grosse's work, many of the forms that constitute the animations are not only unbounded and undetermined, they are fluid, malleable, and non-Euclidian. The stainless modern interiors that were the focus of much of Blake's earlier work have been slowly losing ground to indistinct configurations, which, as they become increasingly ambiguous, seem to parallel transformations within other

disciplines influenced by technology; common among recent developments in product design and video games is an apparent abandonment of geometric structure, and new software has generated a similar reconsideration in habitable environments. Given Blake's continued examination of mutable form and the interest in organic shapes demonstrated by high-profile architects such as Greg Lynn and Gregg Pasquarelli, as well as a shared digital heritage, it is not surprising that some elements in Blake's animations bear a resemblance to designs currently being developed in the field of blob architecture. While Blake's sequences have capitalized on the potential for layering that has been built into certain computer applications, blobs have resulted from the nearly continuous updating of 3-D modeling software, which has provided the means to articulate seemingly loose, undulation structures; the program's capacity for rendering unique forms and for extracting new variations from existing specifications has exploded the conventions of environmental design and perspectival space – the grid is dented, stretched, and twisted as the projection of three dimensions is manipulated by either on-screen tools or various algorithms. That architects and artists like Blake have arrived at the implementation of – and, inherently, the concepts of – layering and modeling to describe non-geometric form (as opposed to the more concrete or literal methodologies of pencil and paper drafting, maquette construction, or painting), evidences a shift in the way shape and structure are imagined, and this change, as well as the very existence of purely non-material design, challenges traditional values within segments of each discipline. Blobs have literally and unapologetically inverted Le Corbusier's maxim "the exterior is the result of an interior" (causing an ongoing fuss in architectural circles regarding their validity and efficacy), and Blake's sequences respond in a similarly contrary fashion to two-dimensional pictorial conventions due to their lack of tangible physical presence and their duration over time. Both types of articulations are not only abstract in their inception (and, in some instances, in perpetuity – as there is a considerable lag in material technology, may blobs remain suspended in the virtual world), they are also transitory: just as a still from one of Blake's videos is a moment from an uninterrupted progression, so it often is with blobs; as some renderings are shaped by the algorithmic expression of forces and modifications, each is essentially momentary and individuated. The designs are selected permutations from within a larger strategy, and this method is a corollary to the manner in which the animations are assembled – as collections of selectively altered compositions linked in succession. This temporality is compounded by the ephemeral nature of the processes that support it; as tools continue to impact technique (as substantiated by Lynn's revelation: "At this point, I would have to say it is the software making the calls"^{vi}) the ideas and practices that are precipitated by them have the potential for endless revisions.

Just as the videos edge closer yet to architecture in terms of process and morphology, they at times utilize a type of pictorial ambiguity shared by cinema and photography. As a result of their non-static character (and probably equally significantly, as some of the work discussed here has been interwoven with live-action film),

their affinity with cinema is obvious, and the blurriness that defines certain sequences is comparable on a formal level to the device that, in the language of film, signifies a transition to a murky field in which vague concepts such as memory, love, vertigo, or stupor can be made manifest; additionally, in both narrative film and in Blake's videos, the mood or tenor of a blurred segment is informed by its context. Perhaps because there is a tendency to read blurriness as an effect of distance, obfuscation, or imagination, it generally seems to indicate sentiment or reminiscence (and undoubtedly the appeal of Blake's work is due in part to an air of nostalgia elicited almost automatically by this device), but the blur as an idiom in photography also relies heavily on inferences that can be made from vantage point and object. In Blake's abstract videos there is no subject, no internal perspective from which to determine that the view is unclear, nor is there ever an impression that there exists something that is being obscured, which serve to underscore a significant dissimilarity: that these sequences can be marked by an indistinctness of form, space, and perhaps sensations, but not perception. However, their compositional and temporal parameters are in some respects quite similar to those in photography; as it is understood that the elements in the videos are not truly active, but are instead the result of a technological process that makes them appear that way, it is nearly impossible to suppress an awareness of the environment within which they were produced. These forms and movements, unlike those in film, cannot convince us of their continued existence in a "blind field;"^{vii} although they do not share photography's inherent stasis and resolution nor its infrangible association with specific moments in time, the animations over the course of their duration are finite and repetitive, and are equally fixed in terms of their source and spatially delimited in their composition. The Shapes and colors *are* the field rather than agents within it and cannot be situated anywhere outside the arena in which they have been assembled (mirroring the conceptual foundation of much digital information, they are either *there* or *not there*); in this way they are oddly static in spite of their apparent mobility.

Lastly, to consider the position of the videos in relationship to other disciplines without at least briefly addressing their link to popular music wouldn't seem appropriate, in light of not only their recent association with Beck's performances, but also due to their collaboration of sorts with Jon Brion's soundtrack in the Anderson film and Blake's decision to title one of his gallery installations after a song by the long-defunct Memphis band Big Star (Mod Lang, likely chosen in part for its allusion to "modern language"). The fashionable integration of musical references with visual art has over the past several years forged a few interesting and unexpected connections and has also given rise to a good measure of annoying posturing, but Blake's videos are exempt from too detailed an examination in this area as their relationship with music could be characterized more accurately as co-existence than actual involvement. Unlike some contemporary work that attempts to challenge the boundaries of pop music and art, and diverging as well from the history of synchronized tonal-chromatic experiments such as those by Alexander Laszlo and Oscar Fischinger, they

have appeared in the company of music as separate components of unequal significance (either greater or lesser, as determined by the setting and its focus). It bears mentioning though that the choices extent impacted the reading of the animations, especially their relationship to technology; given the source of the composition and their similarity to some types of anodyne entertainment media, it would follow that they might end up alongside their digital cognates in other musical genres, but instead their alignment with musicians like Brion and Big Star's Alex Chilton has resulted in a rather unusual juxtaposition of the hi-tech and the relatively low-fi. This helps to establish a kinship with fallibility and imperfection, which might anticipate a wider acceptance and variable use of digital art forms, including their incorporation into projects that seek to address concerns at a far remove from technology.

Additionally, this serves as a point with which to underscore the elasticity of Blake's work and the latitude that it is allowed. Although at times evasive in regard to content, its indeterminacy, is potential for the reception of meaning from circumstances or associations might be its most compelling attribute. In an environment that necessitates an ongoing evaluation of the manners in which modes of cultural production depend on and communicated with one another, it seems less influenced by any perceived historical trajectory than by the horizontal intermingling of a range of ideas and developments. Appearing at first to be ballasted only by a resemblance to decades-old art and design idioms, it shares with other disciplines unconventional approaches to may be grounded in viewers' growing comfort with the erosion of media specificity: Ultimately, a general analysis of Blake's digital animations reveals that perhaps their greatest asset is their ability to remain mutable in position as well as in form. Comparisons to color-field painting just might be optional.

ⁱ Blake came to broad attention in 2000 as a result of his participation in the Whitney biennial and the *Greater New York* exhibition at PS1. His work has since been included in exhibitions such as *010101: Art in Technological Times* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *BitStreams* at the Whitney, and the 2002 Whitney Biennial, and has been featured in solo shows at Feigen Contemporary, Works On Paper, Inc., and the Blaffer Gallery at the University of Houston, among others.

ⁱⁱ Lucy Lippard, "The Silent Art," *Art in America* 55, no.1 (January-February 1967): 58-63.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sarah Valdez, "Attack of the Abstract," *Art in America* 90, no.3 (March 2002): 102.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p.104.

^v Quoted in Reena Jana, "Jeremy Blake; Politics and Fashion in Buccinan," *Flash Art International* 34, no. 218 (May/June 2001): 118.

^{vi} Ned Cramer and Anne Guiney, "The Computer School: In Only Six years, Columbia University's Grand Experiment in Digital Design Has Launched a Movement," *Architecture* 89, no. 9 (September 2000): 99

^{vii} Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1918), 57.