

Assembly Now

By Sally Golding

3 - 27 September 2020



ASSEMBLY NOW

Optical sheeting (1550mm x 2000mm); 4 x LED DMX lights; 1 x Entec ethernet device; 2 x data projectors; sound composition; custom Max/MSP software patch; viewer reflection

Assembly Now is a newly commissioned participatory installation, inaugurating Metro Arts' Main Gallery at West Village, and transforming it into a light and sound reactive environment.

Developed as a collaboration between Sally Golding and electronic musician and creative technologist Spatial, *Assembly Now* uses the interface of the mirror to elaborate the psychology and technology of emergent algorithmic software, which functions as a contemporary screen filtering our emotions. *Assembly Now* plays with perception, interactivity, and unexpected encounters, including the viewer's own reflection captured and integrated within the artwork.

We live in an age of ubiquitous photography – selfie culture, and surveillance capitalism – facial recognition and eye tracking. Emotion analytics software used in neuro-marketing and image recognition is a blend of psychology and technology – capturing data on expression, to assume correlations in mood determined by machine learning.

Cultural references, including folklore and science fiction, provide a lens through which to view the impact of technological ingenuity such as dispersed screens and interactivity, which were first developed in early cinematic prototypes and are now manifest in networked culture. Emergent algorithmic software is the screen through which we filter our emotions and the narrative this creates is a mirror to understanding ourselves.

ASSEMBLY NOW ONLINE

The interactive online experience of *Assembly Now* will shortly be released during the exhibition run, and is a creative collaboration between Australian and UK artist-researchers Sally Golding, Spatial (Matt Spendlove) and Tim Cowlshaw.

This part of the project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

THE ARTISTS

Sally Golding: Sally Golding is an artist from Meanjin/Brisbane whose work considers participation and liveness in audiovisual art as a mechanism for shared experiences and dialogues within technological contexts. Golding's participatory installations are audiovisual compositions which spatialise the viewer's presence via reflection and image caption, questioning states of perception across new models of contemporary portraiture. Golding's live audiovisual performances are edgy and intense – unravelling in the style of a 'happening' to incorporate aspects of the performance space. Performances and exhibitions have included: Tate Britain, Serralves Museum (PT), Digital Culture Centre (MX), Whitstable Biennale (UK), CAM2 (ES), Sound of Stockholm, Abandon Normal Devices (UK), San Francisco Cinematheque, Melbourne International Film Festival, Australian Centre for the Moving Image; Institute of Modern Art (AU), Contemporary Art Tasmania, South London Gallery and Tromsø Center for Contemporary Art (NO). Golding received the Oram Award 2017 (New BBC Radiophonic Workshop/PRS for Music Foundation) for women innovating in sound and creative technologies, and was selected for the prestigious SHAPE Platform 2019 for innovative music and audiovisual art in Europe. sallygolding.com

Spatial: Spatial (Matt Spendlove) is an electronic musician, audiovisual artist, creative technologist and curator from London whose work pushes the dynamics of sound system culture incorporating low frequency vibration, hacked code, and optisonic experiments. Spatial combines a preoccupation with emergent behaviour, rule based repetition and chaotic systems with an ability to shape dubbed out, cracked and reductive sonics into audible geometric form. spatial.infrasonics.net

FRAGMENTS AND FLUX: Sally Golding and Kate Warren In Conversation

Sally Golding creates live works, installations and platforms that are responsive and open-ended. She engages with the political, social and psychological implications of audiovisual technologies, particularly in our age of networked, algorithmic and data-driven communication. While Golding has been investigating these concerns for many years, they seem particularly pertinent at the present moment. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, never before have we felt so constantly responsive and reactive to a highly unpredictable force, thrown into an open-ended flux where presuming the future seems wholly impossible. We are being fragmented from our social connections through lockdowns and social distancing – not to mention the dissonant effects of video-conferencing, where our minds and bodies feel out of joint with each other. In responding to Golding's *Assembly Now* project, this conversation reflects this overarching situation of fragment and flux. It is a fragmented dialogue of ideas and concepts, most of them too complex to pin down precisely, but all pressing strongly on our thinking today.

Sally Golding: I approach technology as a creative-critical toolkit from which to tease out ideas around experimental psychology, as well as more media specific concepts across both industrial and ubiquitous applications of image making and distribution. Light and sound are a method for exploring sensation and perception – designing spaces which trigger corporeal

and emotive reactions. Amplifying the sound of lighting – a camera flash or strobe light, changes the expectation of the device to create surprise and mixed feelings of fright and joy – similar to the experience of a dark carnival ride. The use of sound systems combined with expanded projection creates the sense of a 'happening' – an unfolding event which incorporates the space and the audience within an improvised, generative or unknown state of action and being. Over many years I have performed audiovisual work in a wide range of settings which has deeply informed my sense of 'liveness'. I'm interested in how participatory installation art models might function as an embodied means of experiencing technological systems as a means of critically understanding contemporary imaging within personal and public spaces. Mechanisms like pairing the sound of breathing with the illumination of lighting create a sense of uncanny bodies and disrupted reality, helping us to find a place to consider difficult concepts like the Self and Other.

Thinking through the gallery space as a 'block universe' of potential iterations of 'image forming materials' is like a creative tool by which to model the condensed histories of photographic ingenuity with emergent fields of image culture. Traditionally, 'image forming' would have meant the chemical alteration of silver particles, the fixing of coloured dyes, or the conversion of light via a sensor into pixels. In this creative interpretation of the ubiquitous image, dispersal of time and space is a way in which any iteration of image data might exist in intangible form.



In this sense, the internal processing and interpolation of information is a more relevant and important function than display or representation. Rather than fixing the image, flux states of optical reflection act as a form of contemporary portraiture and a means of understanding oneself, the act of looking, and the political construction of image systems.

Kate Warren: The idea of the gallery as a 'block universe' – of co-existing past, present and future – is an interesting proposition, and a useful conceptual framework that I think can be expanded in many ways. It also connects back to some of the most important and insightful understandings of photography. I'm reminded of Walter Benjamin, in his *Small History of Photography*, where he unpacks the complex temporal connections at play in all photographs: "the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for

the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now ... to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it". For Benjamin, technologies of photography have always been core facilitators between the Self and Other, included in the projected encounter with a future viewer. When you expand these ideas to installation and the audiovisual, the potential for those "sparks of contingency" get amplified even further, through the interconnectedness between technologies and bodily experiences of these spaces.

Of course, networked image culture today moves beyond these Modernist ideas of the image's effects, creating new paradoxes in the process. Not only new confluences of time and space, but also between visibility

and invisibility. Our world of ubiquitous photography creates an overarching feeling of hypervisibility, but that excess of images also draws attention to the invisible and concealed elements of photography today. The non-visual elements of contemporary photography – the metadata, the algorithms, the code – become as important as the image in communicating meaning. They activate new ideas of latency and becoming. Or, as Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis write, “considered computationally or algorithmically the image is never finalized, never achieves a state of finitude, operating in a constant state of deferral”. In your work, it seems you also transfer your interest in such ideas into the ways that you engage your audience, and the types of experiences that you try to create.

SG: I would agree that experience is the key concept here. I’m drawn to evaluate ideas which breach fields like psychology, physics and audiovisual technology to find points of implied narrative as a method for understanding complexity. While the ideas might initially emerge from factual elements and technical descriptions, I try to create human connection by twisting them into folkloric story threads. In my work I use generative sequencing as well as cutup techniques to wrap in text and spoken word, sound and light. In this sense, I question if generative computer patterns might hold meaning as ritual. Using light and sound within a mostly minimal gallery setting is an interesting way to compose these ideas to create an abstract narrative in space which leads the viewer to investigate the work in an explorative way. By nature of the technical

devices, the use of light and sound feels quite corporeal, connecting technology and the body through perception to set up the unexpected. Further, as we have frequently been willing to think of audiovisual processes as happening as if by ‘magic’ – early cinematic spectacle, hauntological scrambled signals, glitch and interrupted transmissions as ghostly artefacts, or as now, the concealment of image distribution and metadata in networked culture – there are embedded preconceptions in the viewer’s minds that I am aware of while making the work. Terminology and difficult concepts in audiovisual culture – describing how technical systems operate, or unpicking language too often commonly used interchangeably – is a kind of narrative tool in itself.

KW: It’s interesting to me how these questions and anxieties about media systems persist and repeat as new technologies emerge over time – especially technologies of vision, visualisation and documentation. But equally, the anxieties about such visual systems are also always entwined with these systems’ highly alluring, desirable and engaging qualities. As you rightly imply, many of the nineteenth-century technologies of vision incorporated frameworks of magic, illusion and trickery – phantasmagoria shows, Pepper’s ghosts, dioramas and panoramas. Although we shouldn’t presume that their viewers were unquestionably ‘duped’ by these tricks – rather these technologies and experiences reveal both the pleasures and risks of suspending one’s disbelief. Tony Oursler’s recent multi-modal *Imponderable* (2015-16) project is, I think, an interesting

example that explores such intersections between science and magic, new and old technologies, scepticism and belief – both historically and today.

Equally, some of the enduring examples from the history of video art and video installation were playing with similar ideas – by critiquing systems of visual surveillance and control, but also in the way they engaged their gallery viewers physically with their critiques. I'm thinking of works like Dan Graham's *Present Continuous Past(s)* (1974), Bruce Nauman's *Going Around the Corner Piece* (1970) and my personal favourite, Peter Campus's *Interface* (1972). These works play with surveillance, closed-circuit videos, feedback loops and delays – crucial elements of media systems that were at the time becoming increasingly socially and culturally ingrained. The Graham and Nauman works are playful in their disconcerting nature, being largely activated through viewers' movements. But Campus stops you in your tracks. It couples the viewer's image through both video projection and mirroring, doubling and splitting the self at the same time. It's such an arresting juxtaposition and in Campus's installation it does take on a somewhat ghostly and ethereal quality – were it not for the fact that the technological apparatus is visibly on display. In a way, in our present situation we are being forced to confront these disjunctions of seeing/being seen through our quickly engrained familiarity with Zoom and video conferencing. We are all being confronted with images of ourselves in situations where we usually wouldn't usually expect them. Your practice seems very timely

in this way, updating some of the lineages of audiovisual installations as networked, data-driven, and algorithmic systems are also becoming increasingly socially ingrained and normalised.

SG: In *Assembly Now* I wanted to consider the oversaturation of the term 'algorithmic gaze', and how easily as a society we assume and accept the widespread deployment of facial recognition, eye tracking, emotion analytics and sentiment analysis. In mixing Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of vision with technical interpretations of how algorithmic and historical imaging systems work, and also with how our own vision system works – there's a creative-critical way to play off short statements and to recompose them in generative, concrete-poetry-like texts to gain a different understanding and perspective. Compressing information in this way either clarifies or creates narrative fallacy though both results provide a level of complexity within these now seemingly reductive short structures. While, within art history, the gaze initially seems like a tired trope, however updated examples which interrogate the structures of technological systems might provide a different perspective of this new 'looking'. For example, eye tracking systems send out infrared light which then hits our pupils and is correlated by the system's camera, which is quite different to how our eyes and brain, as an optical system, receive and interpret incoming light. The expectation of looking – that our act of looking is always influenced by who or what looks at us – should be considered in how we use and relate to these technologies. In a playful and creative sense,

it is debatably the first time in history that the image actively looks back at us – initiating a new unfolding narrative.

KW: The psychology of looking, or of the 'gaze', has been deeply theorised over many decades, yet we are in a moment where any idea of a singular gaze is being highly fragmented. Naturally, there are still questions of power and control that must be considered, especially when large corporate conglomerates control the online platforms (and the data generated) upon which we are so heavily reliant. But, the lived experience of using something like Zoom is one where it is difficult to tell where the gaze lands. Eye contact is hard to confirm and the relative positions of people's images move around the screen, often leading to experiences that are disconcerting and ill-defined. How have you tried to play with and augment this element of our present-day interactions with the online element of *Assembly Now*?

SG: You touch on our overfamiliarity and reliance with online video conferencing culture, which we are now starting to understand under more of an ethnographic framework. The online experience of *Assembly Now* exists as a separate work which incorporates the image of the viewer, and under certain parameters, combines the viewer's image with that of another randomly paired viewer. The effect of seeing either yourself singularly, or yourself combined with another, is unsettlingly, and is a kind of commitment as a viewer to the work – you must be part of it in order to experience it. The work is a collaboration with two creative technologists who are

also both artist-researchers – Spatial (Matt Spendlove) and Tim Colishaw. The artwork was created by extending the code based around WebRTC – the video standard protocol, and to create, evaluate and extend the ideas of the work we did so from within the artwork online together, gaining our own sense and perception about what the effect of the experience meant. For example, it definitely feels confusing and surprising to find someone else is also inside the artwork, and that you can also talk to them directly once you are aware that both the camera and microphone are enabled. This integration of yourself as the viewer among a flickering array of image filtration and interjection of image effects and sound design, prompts the viewer to flow with being inside the narrative – an unresolved, open ended tension.

Kate Warren is a Lecturer in Art History and Curatorship at the Australian National University.

1. Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography", in *Philosophers on Art from Kant to the Postmodernists*, ed. Christopher Kul-Want (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 106.
2. Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis, "The Digital Image in Photographic Culture: Algorithmic Photography and the Crisis of Representation," in *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, ed. Martin Lister, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 29.

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Metro Arts and the artist acknowledge the Jagera and Turrbal peoples, as the custodians of this land, recognising their connection to land, waters and community. We honour the story-telling and art-making at the heart of First Nation's cultures, and the enrichment it gives to the lives of all Australians. Always was, Always will be.



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