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## **Learning to Look Again—Challenging Spectatorship in Cinematic Art Installations**

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# Learning to Look Again—Challenging Spectatorship in Cinematic Art Installations

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Watching movies may be a relaxing form of entertainment or an actually ground-breaking experience. To perform a kind of spectatorship that adequately responds to the moving images demands much more than just keeping one's eyes open. This article explores what is at stake when cinematic works are exhibited in the museum. It focuses on different strategies to apply when it comes to inciting the spectator:

by explaining artistic interpassivity, analogue virtuality, and preclusion of the gaze, as well as by introducing seductive deconstruction, this article offers several examples of how film installations can challenge the museum visitor and their ways of looking. The strategies are unfolded through analyses of three film installations by the Danish visual artist Jesper Just.

**Keywords:** artistic interpassivity, film installations, Jesper Just, performative spectatorship, seductive deconstruction

Video and film art has a long-standing critical relationship with the entertainment industry. This article aims at presenting and analyzing examples of how a contemporary artist articulates and deconstructs visual consumerism and mainstream imagery as they are practiced in traditional cinema. The overall goal is to suggest three versions of spectatorship that challenge cinematic voyeurism.<sup>1</sup> By combining cinema and museum space, hybrid versions of spectator performance and new ways of seeing emerge. Thus, by analyzing three recent film exhibitions by the Danish visual artist Jesper Just (b. 1974), with each relating differently to its audience, I want to point at a potentially liberating crisis in spectatorship and to an ongoing turn in the art of spectating. The artwork examples are *Interpassivities* (2017), *Servitudes* (2014), and *Seminarium* (2021), and they are accompanied by three main theoretical lenses: Slavoj Žižek's (1998) concept of interpassivity, Gilles Deleuze's (1966) Bergson-inspired understanding of virtuality, and a New Materialism-angle that suggests a change of point of view in a so far generally human-centered visual history. A driving concept for unfolding the related implications of spectator and spectacle is Judith Butler's (1999) idea of performativity, with the focus on how to negotiate spectator identity in constituting interrelation with performing and performative works of art.

## Performing Art

At first glance, Jesper Just is a video artist. Ever since the early days of his career, moving pictures have been an inevitable medium in his works. Nevertheless, whenever he prepares a new film installation, the space is an important aspect of the artistic production. The screen always involves its surroundings, transgressing two-dimensionality and upholding a dialogue with the site-specific significance of the exhibition space. This way, what seems to belong to the realm of cinematic representation spills into what is normally experienced as the realm of spatial presentation. This exchange between the physical setting and digital images is ongoing through Just's body of work, when technology evolves into sculpture and the moving pictures connect subtly with external elements. The exhibition space becomes a performative element rather than white walls containing art.

At the same time as deconstructing categories and oppositions concerning identities and gender, body and technology, center and margin, the works challenge art genres as they mix and stretch practices like sculpture, video, installation, and conceptual art. No genre predominates the others, for the techno-poetic aesthetics form the blurred genres into a seamless network. The technology used in the works does not only constitute a practical media solution for presenting artistic content, but it is an inherent part of the imagery, contributing to the placid beauty of the works. Thus, technology takes part in the agency performed by the artworks.

We are dealing here with works which, without belonging to performance art in any classic sense, occupy the realm of performativity and imply a performative identity in the spectator. So, what does it mean 'to perform'? According to Judith Butler's (1999) performativity theory, we all perform—not as part of an art performance, but as in acting with or against expectations embedded in the culture or the specific situation around us. This is old news in sex and gender studies, but it can be applied to multiple examples of humans modelling their behavior, movement patterns, and bodily expressions to fit and be acknowledgeable to the surroundings. So, obviously people going to the movies perform 'cinema audience,' sitting passively in their seats, eating candy during the trailers, and not commenting on or applauding the film.<sup>2</sup> Somewhat similarly, the museum visitor acts according to the implicit institutional framing of the art experience. There is no touching, but a lot of contemplating at a distance, without dwelling too long in front of one piece, but spending a suitable amount of time with each work of art. A strict oppositional relation is upheld between the performatively constituted museum visitor and the aesthetically consumed art.

We cannot expect objects, technology, and space to perform the way humans do, though. We have to observe them carefully in order to perceive that something is going on. No space is ever completely empty and deployed of meaning. Even a museum space, which is supposed to be almost neutral and able to welcome all kinds of art exhibitions, is

geographically fixed, built in a certain way, maybe placed somewhere with a history that creeps painfully—or joyfully—up the walls. Connotations stick to spaces, making them able to perform with or against their character, depending on how the presented work of art engages space. The void is an illusion.

With regard to video installations, site-specificity has to be re-thought. What is often thought of as digital representations on a flat screen can instead present themselves, not only as images of something, but as a presence of images. During my studies of Just's installations, it has become increasingly clear that exhibiting film can have a lot to do with transgressions and with how to form subtle dialogues between seemingly incommensurable elements of the installations: the imagery, the technology, the space, the screens, and, last but not least, the audience. In an attempt to disrupt the presupposed power relations and performative identities between the spectacle object and the consuming subject, I suggest a psychoanalytical and philosophical approach to cultural consuming.

### How to Occupy an Interpassive Position

When Žižek (1998) introduced the concept of interpassivity, he did so to ask the question: How do things act on behalf of humans? And what does the human subject do instead? When the psychically decentered subject is relieved of the superego's duty to enjoy, then the subject may no longer be the center of actions. Žižek's examples of what the subject then is free to do instead are discouraging, though. When the video recorder does the consuming of pop culture for subjects, they are free to work in the evenings. When the mourners are doing the weeping for them, they are free to go through the will of the deceased. Not much room is left for displaced joy.

Interpassivity is something more than the passive opposite of interactivity. It is the spectacle and the object of pleasure that reacts—not only substituting, but presupposing the emotional reactions of the subject. Thus, the subject escapes the culturally instituted injunctions which tell us how to react appropriately to a situation or, say, a work of art.

For Žižek (1998), the passive act of fascination is somewhat shameful. Just to gaze at something admirably is to submit to the power of the object, and this position in Žižek's version of psychoanalysis is supposed to be unbearable for the subject, almost destroying to their identity. To rescue their own subjectivity, the subject is forced into an interpassive relation to their overwhelmingly enjoyable surroundings. The false activity is a survival mechanism.

But what happens if you displace the phenomenon of interpassivity from a general self-preservation function to the art experience? I assert that the concept unfolds creatively through spectacular interrelations in Just's ballet performance *Interpassivities*.

### Applying the Concept of Interpassivity—Art Exhibit #1

The work *Interpassivities* (2017) is indispensable when discussing the concept and phenomenon of interpassivity as well as its influence on spectator involvement. Not only is the work named after Žižek's (1998) concept, but it also presents an in-vitro expanded interpretation of how the concept can be experienced through art. Audience immersion is at the center of the spectacle while, paradoxically, the spectator is displaced by the stage itself.

The work consists of three major elements affecting each other: ballet dancers on the floor, films on all four walls, and the space in which the floor is performing, making the audience move around. At the beginning of the film performance, the audience is assisted to the location via the back entrance and an elevator usually transporting props and staff. Spectators enter an empty space colored in a light grey. Dancers wearing training clothes blend with the audience, everybody seems to be waiting for something to happen, and then the dancers start warming up, leaning softly on spectators here and there, using them as ballet bars. Here the spectators are installed as props and inventory, and the spectacle turns to use them as support. What is usually expected of a spectator performing an appropriate version of spectatorship is here gently disturbed. The show immerses the spectator, turning the viewer into a doer—and eventually sheer material.

This tendency is amplified when a couple of workmen enter the scene and start rearranging the floor made of movable squares (Figure 1). When the spectacle actually removes the ground on which you are standing, you are forced to react. You realize that you are in the way of the artwork, that you had a personal space, and it is now invaded by the unfolding spectacle—not for your eyes only, but as an immanent imperative. The spectacle does not happen because the audience attends it as according to classic phenomenological reciprocity which takes the embodied consciousness of the viewer into account. This art moves the audience around physically, treating them as material, in line with the floor squares.



Figure 1. From the performance *Interpassivities* at the Royal Danish Theatre (image courtesy of Jesper Just).

During the show, different films are shown on the surrounding walls (Figure 2). Simultaneously, the dancers are performing choreographies which mirror or respond in some way to the moving pictures. This way, the focus is diffused between walls and floor and between representation and presentation. When the audience is forced to distribute their attention or choose a focus at the expense of the show's other elements, then every spectator becomes their own editor. They have to blend cinematographic and choreographic parts, experiencing different medias at the same time as moving around, in order to not be in the way of the still changing floor squares, which the workmen are carrying around and piling up according to a detailed chart, which they are frequently checking.

Thus, the work *Interpassivities* seems to act in two directions. Firstly, it encompasses the viewer, happening independently of the audience's gaze. Secondly, it engages the audience by forcing them to act, move, choose focus, and edit the narrative. How does this double drive match the Žižekian concept of interpassivity?

As said, interactivity and interpassivity rub against each other throughout the show. When the spectacle turns to the spectator to use and involve them as a bar or a piece of furniture, it tends to form a sort of sovereignty of the experience. As in Žižek's example where the comedy with canned laughter represents the correct response to its own scenario, *Interpassivities* closes in on itself. A prominent moment during the show is a scene which contains films on the walls portraying dancers lying around while electronically connected to a musical accompaniment, each tone corresponding to a dancer's muscle. Through wires providing micro electrical shocks from piano keys to muscles, the arms and legs are made to move. When the films are shown, a self-playing piano appears from under one of the floor squares, and a couple of present dancers gather around and watch it play. This is the spectacle enjoying itself, leaning back, taking a break. Through the show, this happens several times: the audience is blocked from adopting a performatively correct and expected position as viewer. They are left to an othered role as meta viewers, pushed around in considerations on what it means to be an audience and what exactly it is that they are witnessing.

The show starts out so subtly that it has no exact beginning. In the same way, it ends by fading out with no curtain fall. After the last dance sequence, the dancers open the sliding doors in one of the walls that is still showing a film. They leave the scene through the crackled moving pictures. In the meantime, the workmen, as if they were completing a large puzzle, are still moving about the last displaced floor squares. This makes it completely up to the audience to decide whether workmen are really a distinct part of the artwork or just staff managing props. If you compare how the audience responses differ during the show period, it becomes obvious that a kind of group negotiation is taking place. Some of the nights, the spectators choose to leave in the company of the dancers, and sometimes they stay until all the squares are put back in place and the floor has returned to its

original state. Occasionally, they leave in silence, but quite a few times they stay to applaud when there is nobody but themselves left in the performance room. No performer returns for the ovation, and nobody seems to listen to the applause. In other words, another classic element of doing correct spectatorship is taken away from the participating audience. With no addressee, the ovation is bypassed.

The film and ballet performance *Interpassivities* thus presents several examples of the spectacle enjoying itself and excluding the significance of the present spectators. Following the Žižekian concept of interpassivity, we can then ask: What surplus is produced for the audience to administer when they are no longer expected to follow certain standards pertaining to perceiving an artwork? When the super ego is elsewhere engaged because the right kind of enjoying the show is already taking place, an alternative position is formed. If we refuse to settle for the practical or useful replacement examples which Žižek himself offers and instead widen the perspective to capture other kinds of engagement, then we might be able to paint a more polarized picture of what it can mean to be a spectator or, more precisely, to perform spectatorship.



Figure 2. From the performance *Interpassivities* at the Royal Danish Theatre (image courtesy of Jesper Just).

### Seductive Deconstruction as a Cinematic Strategy<sup>3</sup>

A night at the movies is seldom a very bodily experience. In exchange for a fixed point of view with no scope, the viewer gets full visual access to and perceptual domination over the screen. The narrative that unfolds is equally presented for everyone. This way of presenting visual storytelling for a crowded unity of moviegoers implies demands. The viewer is expected

to follow the narrative with undivided concentration. If you leave momentarily during the show, you may lose track of what is going on. This rewarding behavior of passive viewing is traditionally paralleled by a certain length of narrative as well as a recognizable plot structure, visual aesthetics where the form does not dominate over the storyline, and a cast where desire and identification are clearly delegated. An early Jesper Just trademark was to relocate this cinematic formula to the art sphere. Especially his works from the 2000s are ripe with Hollywood aesthetics and present themselves as drafts or excerpts of a greater drama, one which we can only imagine.

The initiation of the viewer's culturally embedded imagination is one way that the short art films by Just work with and against cinematic expectations. We as audience get almost what we expect, but not quite. Somewhere along the line of the gorgeously produced films by Just, the plot takes a turn leaving the spectator faced with their own presuppositions. Whatever normative notions the spectator expected to be confirmed through the film are projected back at them. What does one do with these spare presupposed lines, endings, or gender roles? Watching an abandoned underground garage sets certain thriller connotations in motion;<sup>4</sup> witnessing a sweaty trucker sneak into a container makes the viewer expect certain actions and definitely not that he bursts out singing;<sup>5</sup> introducing a strip club setting is normally not followed by an ambiguously tender wrestling between two men.<sup>6</sup> When normative expectations become homeless, they also become palpable. Deconstruction works in the beholder as they are gently invited to expect what they see and not the other way around.

Framing and form are great deconstruction initiators. Appropriating a Hollywood aesthetics, refusing the sketchy expressions which are often expected from art film, adds to both the strength and fragility of an art film's significance: strength because the recognizable form may seduce the spectator to be open to impressions, and fragility because the shiny surface of the art films depends on the spectator's ability to listen carefully to the subtle signals of resistance inherent in the moving pictures. Relying on the museum institution for validation, the spectator is never in doubt that this glossy movie clip which may somewhat resemble a mainstream trailer is actually an artwork. This way, the institutional framing always oozes meaning into the art pieces, admitting ways of looking which are not facilitated in the cinema.

These other ways of looking can be explained by returning to the concept of interpassivity and the polarized picture of the spectator. When in the museum, spectators are freed of their static situation of being positioned in a velvet chair with their faces illuminated by the big cinema screen, they may evolve into another kind of viewer. Again, I want to return to some of Jesper Just's later film installations in nuancing which kinds of doing spectatorship are released when subjects engage with these art works.

In *Interpassivities* (2017), three or four walls are showing films at the same time. When they do, it is almost the same film which is projected. The point of view may be slightly different, the framing and zooming degrees vary, they may be chronologically out of sync, in one film a woman



may wander across the frame while the others remain without people. It is impossible to grasp every detail simultaneously. At the cinema, every spectator is passively facing the screen, interactively engaging with it, and visually dominating the pictures, so that the pictures are acting on behalf of the spectator. In mainstream movies, the targets of identification and desire are presupposed in the plot. The narrative takes the spectator by the hand, nudging them towards wanting to be the hero and desiring the heroine sidekick. Otherwise, the imaginative interaction would not work. Contrary to this scenario, to perceive *Interpassivities* or another film work by Just is a selective experience. No position of visual control exists, and every time the spectator may think they have worked out who to identify with or how to immerse themselves in the narrative, they are blocked from doing so. Seldom has a *Verfremdungseffekt*<sup>7</sup> been this seductively gentle. Most films by Just are accompanied by music with a cinematic touch to it—the music creates an atmosphere which draws the spectator in, never letting go of them. Thus, even when the spectator gets redirected in their presuppositions and barred from distributing identification and desire as usual, they are invited to stay emotionally and intellectually involved in the artwork. The films open room for the spectator to question their go-to reactions while at the same time embracing them.

This balanced approach of dragging in while blocking complete immersion I call *seductive deconstruction*. While at first glance affiliated with the phenomenon of *nudging*, this artistic style tries not to change the spectator's behavior, but to move their normative expectations that form their being in a visual world. Especially the film medium is suitable for doing this, as the medium itself connotes plot-driven entertainment engaging certain naturalized ways of linking looking, identification and desire. Exhibiting these linkages in a museum potentially reflects back at upcoming cinema nights with popcorn and candy in a velour seat: the spectator may have adopted a slightly altered mode of presupposing the narrative and distributing identifications. Or at least they have been momentarily aware that they were inhabiting these presuppositions.

The seductively deconstructed movie expectations are not the only means for different ways of looking. As mentioned above, Just's large art film installations<sup>8</sup> leave room for different ways of doing spectatorship, as they employ a fine balance of interactivity and interpassivity. Interactivity denotes situations when the scenario is acting on behalf of the spectator who is busy identifying with the actors on the screen while staying passive in their seat—contributing not necessarily with actual inputs, but with mental projections. Interpassivity, on the other hand, describes the mode where the scenario takes over the act of enjoying and experiencing itself, contemplating its own twists and turns. This is where alternative ways of looking at and perceiving an art film installation manifest themselves. When the spectator realizes that the scenario is not empirically dependent on them and that it is experienced and happening with or without them, they may stop thinking about what it all means. And when the show encompasses them as a prop or makes them

enter through the back door for staff only, it becomes obvious that they do not have to dominate the scenario visually or intellectually, and that they are not expected to figure everything out. This is when real immersion begins. Indulging in a work of art may partly be to sit back relieved of one's superego imperative to keep trying to 'get' the artwork and instead let it unfold.

Technically, this blocked indulging is facilitated in Just's film installations by the scattered aesthetics they present. The artworks turn their back on the viewer, they surround them, prevent them from over-viewing the whole scene, and expose their electronic inside of cables and wires in an over-sharing gesture. There is no escaping the eye of the action and at the same time no chance of supervising it all. Thus, the viewer keeps getting displaced and surrounded by the ever-decentered installations.

In later works by Just, the decentering of both art and the viewer is amplified by fragmented screens. Elements from the main LED-screens are spread on the floor, as if they had just randomly detached themselves from an original whole. As they lie around in the exhibition space like mega pixels, they keep showing their piece of the film. This way, the film stretches its representational space into an almost inconvenient presence in which the viewer has to move between and around physical film fragments to get a never complete overview of the moving images. In art installations like these, film as a traditional temporal medium is pushing itself into a spatial appearance. When representation melts into presentation, the categories of time and space become difficult to uphold. As Just's installations are spilling time into surrounding space and breaking up the film representation into moving fragments, the decentering proves more profound: it is not just about the viewer feeling a bit off at the back side of an LED-screen; it involves deconstructing basic categorial opposites like time and space, presentation and representation through a fusion of film and sculpture. The surrounding experience is at the same time a displaced one.

### **Early Optic Techniques and Virtuality in Contemporary Art**

Lately, it has become unclear whether a film installation by Just is under construction or slowly ruining. The works *Circuits* (2018) and *Corporéalités* (2020) reach into their surroundings by scattering bits and pieces around (Figure 3). They form an odd interdependency when they present high technology supported by a beam of steel, and it becomes unclear whether the beam is some leftover scaffolding or part of the restoration of a work which has returned to us from the future. The works thus offer an ambience of eerie timelessness and a short-cutting of chronology.

Another key element uniting Just's later works is the application of multiple circuits which imply a blurring of causality. The circuits forming connections between actors on the screen, and soundscapes and electrical and sculptural elements structure several of the later film installations and performances and thus interconnect the artworks. The networks of meaning

and visual elements reinforce each other and loop the installations into never initiated effect machines.

One inspirational field to which Just keeps returning is early optic machines. The eighteenth century displayed an educating conflation of entertainment and enlightenment that continued subtly with the nineteenth century's elaboration on the camera obscura technique,<sup>9</sup> the panorama,<sup>10</sup> the mareorama,<sup>11</sup> etc. (Barry 2004: 6-17). Especially the 'oramas' contributed to a democratization of visual entertainment, which disseminated contemporary knowledge about natural science using the latest mechanical and electrical equipment. The experimental and ground-breaking techniques that developed into the cinema of today still affect our visual regimes. By applying inspiration and traits from historical optic machines, Just's art films underscore the diachronic interrelations in ways of seeing as cultural products. What may be even more significant, they point at art's mixed status of entertainment, enlightenment, and science—a conflation which fits perfectly with the seductive deconstruction approach.



Figure 3. From the exhibition of *Corporéaliétés* at Gallery Perrotin, New York (image courtesy of Guillaume Zicarelli).

When the broken screens in a Just film installation bend forward as if to embrace their surroundings or their viewer, and when the moving images are projected on all four walls at once or fill the floor like a shattered videodrome,<sup>12</sup> they connote early days' 'oramas.' Thus, they work twofold: pointing to the beginning of entertaining optic techniques and reaching beyond traditional division of presentation and representation. This double sight challenges the spectator. They will have to apply multiple foci, let themselves be immersed, and lean back and let it just happen without them. That is a lot of demands. Especially the don't-try-too-hard part is testing, as it does not fit the performatively expected ways to do art spectatorship.

The double sight can also be perceived as a fusion. When the art works combine an outdated technique with a visionary deconstruction of the time/space realms through an overlap of presentation and representation, the installations come close to forming an analogue kind of virtual reality. The virtual reality techniques are multiple and encompass the foundation of a central perspective in order to paint supernatural spaces and the imaginative ability to temporarily accept the theatre stage as reality, while the latest software has proven useful in training flight simulation, in medical rehabilitation, and in space programs. As with every development in optic technologies, the ability to create other worlds or expand on what we know about the already existing ones has most prominently become popular in entertainment. The software that immerses its wearer or user has recently turned so accurate that it actually does fool the kinesthetic abilities of the human body. Thus, human spatial skills are applied in a situation which may not really require them.

This is not exactly the case in film installations by Just. Other kinds of virtuality are going on here. The most prominent example is the film ballet performance *Interpassivities* (2017), where the audience is pushed around on an ever-changing floor made of elements that resemble oversized pixels, as if the spectator were trapped in some real computer game. As the pixels are stacked in various heights, a topographic map is formed. Some of the mega pixels carry a loudspeaker. This way the soundscape follows the spatial developments, and the pixelated changes are sensorily trackable during the performance. The map is normally an abstraction of somewhere real, but here it is a real abstraction of a fictional place experiencing real fictional demographic movements as the audience keeps moving around the room. Real space and mapped space blend into a haptic virtuality carried out by a social imagination which is created and shared by the present audience.

The application of optic techniques from different periods of time creates an odd feeling of timelessness. There is an ambience in the later works by Just which indicates that they have returned to the spectator from a ruined future. Or the other way around: that they have been passed on from a visionary past. To engage in a kind of stretched now that also reaches into the exhibition space contributes to a conflation of latency and manifestation, of what actually is and what may be. This subtle mixing of realms works as an amplifier of the feeling of virtuality in the film installations.

In his book *Le Bergsonisme*, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1966) gives an interpreting analysis of timeliness in Henri Bergson's works. Bergson, whose philosophical foci include memory, duration, and past and present time, contributed to continental philosophy the concept of qualitative multiplicity. In his work *Matière et Mémoire*, Bergson (1896) writes that memories experienced in the consciousness are repeated with a difference in the heterogeneous space of the mind, which equals duration, that is, the prolongation of the past into the present. These thoughts on timeliness were explored by Deleuze, who applied them in his definition of virtuality. His elaborated definition is of relevance to the understanding of how an analogue

virtual feeling is produced through the experience of Just's film works and how it affects spectatorship. Deleuze explains the difference between what is by presence and what is by effect. The special quality of the virtual is never to be realized, but to be a fictitious reality actualized in the present just like a memory from the past. This is a productive iteration recalling something in ever-new forms and ways. With Deleuze, virtuality contains a creative process. What is of significance for the readings of Just's film installations is to come to terms with what the outcomes are when representations become prolongations into the realm of presentation and how the viewer is to perceive the analogue virtuality. The installations form a space of duration which draws in a heterogeneity of possible perceptions. When the viewer experiences films made sculpturally tangible in a time-space which mixes presentation and representation as well as applies and connotes early and contemporary optic techniques, they are required to stretch their visual and perceptive abilities. This is nothing like going to the movies on a Saturday night. And yet, as mentioned above, a subtle connection may be formed between the entertainment presented in a movie theatre and the multiplicity of time realms in a film installation by Just. That connection is to be created in the spectator when they are learning new ways to look.

## Ways of Looking—Art Exhibit #2

To look is a cultivated action. Not only is the viewer performing spectatorship through accustomed behavior in correspondence with location, other viewers present, and the physicality of exhibited art, but they are also adjusting their gaze. Like the invention of perspective in painting, which has influenced our way of enjoying prospects and reading three-dimensionality into images, we socio-culturally agree on certain ways of looking at movies. Technologies and visual media produced the movie spectator. When experiencing films in the museum space, we will have to learn more—not un-learn, but to use the skills consciously and in exaggerated ways.

The means to this 'exaggerated end' are the interpassive viewer positioning and the application of the virtual perception modus. The spectator immersed in time realms in the museum has to actively choose and edit their view while the spectacle goes on enjoying itself. They will have to apply various viewing angles and remember modes of acknowledging that imply their kinesthetics<sup>13</sup> and recollections of past optic experiences.

With a film installation by Just, the question is not so much 'What will the spectator see?' but more 'How will film and spectator perform in the exhibition space?' In Just's oeuvre, the installation *Servitudes* (2014), which was produced for the exhibition space Palais de Tokyo in Paris, is one of the most prominent examples of how to manage the audience. During the exhibition, the rather large location was intersected by ramps like the ones that facilitate entrance by wheelchairs (Figure 4). Here, the ramps were the only way for everybody to enter the exhibition. By forcefully casting the spectator

as in need of support, the installation turned itself into prolongations of the spectator bodies. At the same time, it staged the visual access to the films in ways which ambiguously balanced between aid and blockages—the ramps either helped the spectator overview the installation or prevented their full admittance to watch the films from an angle of their own choice. Unlike the movie theatre, which forms a spatial continuation of the central perspective, any exhibition space has the ability to create an alternative interrelationship with its audience. *Servitudes* subtly crooked the expected viewing positions and gently invited the spectator to make an effort to engage in the spectacle while simultaneously carrying and guiding their way around the exhibition. This kind of spectacle requires a bodily participation. It interferes with the spectator's kinesthetics and normative perspective while at the same time offering another perspective. As the films presented in *Servitudes* concern themselves with dis-/abledbodiedness and the concept of phantom limbs manifested at Ground Zero in New York City, where urban trauma is tentatively healed through the building of One World Trade Center, the intersecting ramps function as sculptural semantic prolongations of the films. This way, they mediate between the moving images and the viewer.

Insisting on the viewing body, its privileges, its abilities, and the crucial role it plays in the act of looking, *Servitudes* points at ways of looking in the plural. The viewer does not always have to be at the center of things and complete the perspective by occupying a certain position. Depending on the acute intersection of their body, cognitive experiences, visual memories, access to and engagement with the social imagination of their specific cultural sphere, they acknowledge the spatio-visual film installation in the situated way that the installation provides. Again, the spectacle is not just there because the audience is observing it. It is already acting, manipulating, performing, facilitating, and blocking the experience. The void is an illusion. The always willing and accessible spectacle is, too.



Figure 4. From the exhibition *Servitudes* at Charlottenborg (image courtesy of David Stjernholm).

### Flowing Images With no Addressee—Art Exhibit #3

The missing initiation of Just's installations reveals a dissolved opposition between passivity and action. The status of the acting subject is questioned through the intertwined circuits that imply non-hierarchical relations between elements like technology, human bodies, and nature. When the screen in *Corporealités* shows classically trained ballet bodies move, the movements are caused by an electronic muscle stimulation system often used in rehabilitation and not by human will. The represented bodies are connected, lightly touching each other, and each electrode on a muscle is wired to a tone on a hidden piano. The played music makes the muscles contract, thereby producing a micro-choreography. It is a rejection of the autonomous subject when the bodies are 'being danced' rather than dancing themselves. The initiating subject is suspended as the musical accompaniment moves the dancers' limbs like a puppeteer. The absent agency and initiation make for a blurry ambience of achronology and decentered subjectivity.

Experiencing cinematography at the museum often implies negotiating chronology. Whether the presented films are short or the length of a feature film, the viewer's first impulse may well be to want to watch from the start. The question is then, what 'start' means outside narratively plot-amplifying cinema. As mentioned, film is a time-based medium traditionally dependent on a forward movement. Film is expected to go somewhere. By looping the footage, a film artist is able to shortcut the presupposed narrative causality connected with moving images. Then, the move in moving images turns into something qualitatively different. The films become simmering pictures flowing around, turning inwards and no longer relying on the spectator for acknowledging their narrative. The spectator has to decide for themselves when to cut, knowing that the flowing images keep on.

The latest film installation by Jesper Just, *Seminarium* (2021), presents several LED-screens, each bending towards a plant cutting placed in a glass of nutritious water. Here, the flowing images portraying human bodies in loops form shields that communicate with and care for the plants (Figure 5). The bodies that move slowly on film are flickering purple light onto the by-standing plants; in fact, the LED-screens themselves are hacked so that they provide the plants with grow-light. This way, the plant cuttings are fully dependent on the installation for nutrition and on the flowing images in particular for their contribution to uphold photosynthesis. This biological interplay with organic surroundings supplies the films with yet another feature besides the visual, sculptural, and time-disrupting ones. Here, they reach out in an alliance that completely suspends the spectator. The invisible product of the screens in this installation is what constitutes the foundation of the artwork. What goes on in the image flow, where combined body parts perform micro choreographies, is a visual parallel to the grow-light, rather than being the work's main focus. The elusiveness of the light, which together with time is the ontological quality of film, turns out to be the most practically useful and hands-on part of the installation, while the represented images—

usually what the spectator perceives as the film *per se*—is cast as visually supportive aesthetics.

This game changer in the cinematographic field twists the spectator's position. From being an eye-witnessing part of an ambiguously inviting visual spectacle they find themselves turned into a body witness of a process that does not happen in front of their eyes, but in the air that they breathe. The traditional visually dominant recognition of moving images on a cinema screen is replaced by a cognitive trust (the spectator believes that grow light is produced by the screens) and an acknowledgment of the causal proof (the spectator sees that the plant in front of the screen is alive, so they 'know' that the grow light is working). The museum here functions as an institutional guarantee that what you do not see is what you actually get. It is an atypical experience when the screens do not primarily address the audience, and when they work beyond the visual scope. The spectator still looks at the screens and their flowing images, knowing that not all art is for them.

The age of the anthropocene is the geological present time when human impact on earth and its ecosystem is momentous.<sup>14</sup> Everything around us shows human imprint. Significantly, recent academic theories present a reverse approach to human influence, as theoretic movements such as Object-Oriented Ontology and New Materialism<sup>15</sup> reject the privileged position of human beings over non-human existence. Reacting against the twentieth century's phenomenological idea that existence unfolds in relation to an embodied human mind,<sup>16</sup> the material turn expands agency and applies it to objects, fauna, plants, machines, and spaces. The development in artificial intelligence is but one aspect that very tangibly supports the theoretical materialism.

Object-oriented ideas are reflected in the described film installations by Just. Here, films, exhibition space, technology, and overall spectacle do not perform because an embodied spectator is attending. The displacement of the human gaze is profoundly exemplified in the flowing images of *Seminarium*, which appear oddly introvert. When even film is rejecting the human spectator as ontologically vital for the media, then how to occupy the role of spectator and how to perform spectatorship in the museum space?

In performative identity, there is always room for agency. It is possible to do something different that does not fit the expected model. Not through revolutions, but in a displaced iteration of actions and behaviors that differ only slightly from the ones that are culturally presupposed. The cinema-goer is supposed to stay passively seated in what is agreed to be the best angle for visually dominating the screen. The museum guest encountering an art film may at first try the same. But as the films—as discussed above—prolong themselves into their surroundings, turn into sculptures, and occupy themselves, the visitor will have to adjust to an experience of multiple foci, of being perceived or precluded by the spectacle, and of re-modelling their ideas about presence. Spectatorship may evolve into a heterogeneous identity connected with several non-central perspectives and a freedom that follows the acceptance of not being vital or even needed for the flowing images to keep wandering their plotless way.



This repositioning of the human perspective may reflect further on developments outside the realm of visual art. Human beings have long been superseded as the main validator and legitimizing factor of their material surroundings. The gaze may be the last advantage that we renounce, as in general, we connote the gaze with knowledge, and knowledge with power. The gaze as a theoretical concept originates from Jean-Paul Sartre (1943/2020), who, in *Being and Nothingness*, introduced a phenomenological and existential conception of the gaze as double-edged: the acknowledgement of another being possibly looking at you places you as an object in the surroundings of a thus reaffirmed subjectivity outside yourself. This chiasmic<sup>17</sup> structure is repeated in Michel Foucault's (1975/1995) *Discipline and Punish—The Birth of the Prison* in a much more dis-embodied way, when the possible on-looker turns into a disciplining institutional surveillance system internalized as self-observation in the subjected citizen. These interconnections imply that the gaze is always also a power relation and a negotiation of subjectivity. As such, the gaze simultaneously constitutes—in this case—the spectator and the spectacle, a link which supports the visual exchanges asserted here while at the same time proving inadequate: Where does the spectator go with their subject-constituting gaze if the spectacle does not need them?

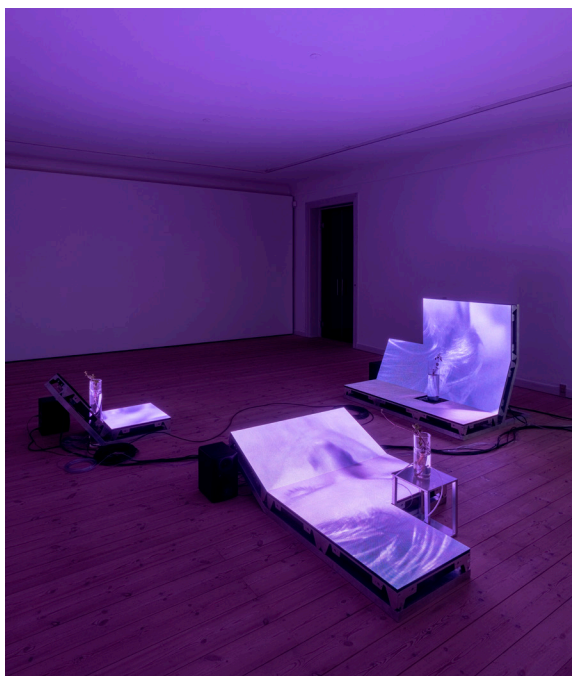


Figure 5. From the exhibition *Seminarium* at Gl. Holtegaard (image courtesy of David Stjernholm).

### An Interim Conclusion

Through discussing the presentations of three film installations by Jesper Just, I have shown the various ways which contemporary film art may apply

in order to engage, immerse, and displace the spectator. By employing seductive deconstruction, diverse degrees of virtuality, an interpassive position, facilitating blockages, and partial viewer preclusion, these cinematic art works contribute to gently pushing the museum visitor into alternative spectator identities. Thus, the museum may be a space to achieve new ways of looking at films in general, while simultaneously raising concerns about the status of the human gaze. Performing spectatorship stretches to include seeing, believing, as well as renouncing the perfect view and the ultimate meaning of the spectacle. The aim here has been to analyze and accept the artistic invitation to do so.

1. The psychoanalytic concept of voyeurism was originally introduced in film theory by e.g. Christian Metz (1977) in *The Imaginary Signifier—Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* and Laura Mulvey (1975) in her canonized essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.'
2. In this article, I focus on how art films can act as prolongations of, as well as critical oppositions to, traditional cinema, the mainstream entertainment industry, and the movie theatre as institution. This is not to underestimate the obvious influence which the history of video art has on contemporary art film. Considering Wolf Vostell's implementation of a TV set in what would be known as one of the earliest video installations in the late 1950s, Nam June Paik's sculptural screen performances, Andy Warhol's 'anti-films,' and Valie Export's critique of passive TV consumerism in the 1960s further developed by e.g. Gretchen Bender in her visually overloaded video walls in the 1980s all suggest that video and film art has concerned itself with the mainstream visual culture, building on and critiquing mass media imagery. I have found it productive to study and present a contemporary example of what critical application of visual culture looks like, thus implying the video art inheritance implicit in the works of Just.
3. I want to stress that cinematography is my main focus in this text, thus building on my previous writings on the subject (see Andersen 2021). This is not to state that the cinematic element has priority over architectural, theatrical, sculptural or musical features in the works by Just. For an introduction to space as theme and the interplay between physical space and imaginary geography in Just's oeuvre, see 'The Scale of Jesper Just's Imaginary Landscapes' by Giuliana Bruno (2021). Likewise, the influence and major subject of staged performance throughout Just's works are well covered by Irene Campolmi (2019) in 'Folding the Outside Inside—Performance in Jesper Just's Artistic Practice' (2005-2019), and by André Lepecki (2019) in 'Pulse in the Flesh' (2019). among others.
4. Jesper Just, *Something to love* (2005).
5. Jesper Just, *Bliss and heaven* (2005).

6. Jesper Just, *The sweetest embrace of all* (2004).
7. The estrangement effect, as coined by German playwright Bertolt Brecht in his 1936 essay *Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting*, describes ways to prevent the audience from complete immersion in and identification with a performance's characters and plot.
8. Using the term 'art film installation,' I aim at art works which combine video or film media with spatial, sculptural, and performance elements thus expanding the genres 'film,' 'sculpture,' and 'installation' with synergetic effects.
9. Camera obscura is a technique where a dark room has a small hole on one side or wall, through which light comes in, thereby projecting an upside-down picture of the immediate outside of the penetrated wall. It was originally invented in the 16th century and developed into the photographic camera in the 19th century.
10. The panorama was originally paintings on a cylindrical surface meant to be experienced from inside the cylinder and thus providing the viewer with a 360-degree view.
11. The mareorama applied two moving panoramas that, together with steam and a moving floor, would provide the audience with an experience of being on a ship and watching the shore line passing.
12. A videodrome consists of a cylindrical screen on which film is projected. The viewer is surrounded by moving pictures all around.
13. The bodily and sensory awareness of being positioned and moving in the spatial surroundings.
14. It remains disputable in scientific research whether the geological age of the Holocene (covering the past 11,700 years) actually equals the age of the Anthropocene, as human beings have been changing their surroundings through agriculture and other kinds of nature cultivation this whole time, but a more tightened definition of the era of severe human impact points at the atomic age around 1945 as a defining tipping point of measurable human influence on our global environment.
15. An example of this movement is the book *Vibrant Matter* by Jane Bennett (2010), where the author presents an acknowledgement of things and objects as major participants in cultural events, and suggests a concept of agency which is always a combination of human and non-human forces (Bennett 2010).
16. As suggested most prominently by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) in his *Phénoménologie de la perception*.
17. A reciprocally connecting rhetorical structure criss-crossing opposing perspectives.

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### Author's bio

Svala Vagnsdatter Andersen's research focus is primarily on sex, gender, and the body in visual culture. Over the past nine years, she has contributed as a curating consultant to several art exhibitions throughout the world. Having a background in visual culture studies, her research and other writings evolve around what meets the eye, the culturally visible/invisible, imaginative imagery, blindness, and exemplary works of film and visual arts. Her PhD dissertation from the Royal Danish Academy (2019) concerns the history of the fetish as a concept and phenomenon and investigates the role of the fetish in sexuality and aesthetics. Theoretically, she generally works within queer performativity studies, always aiming to corporealize the concepts into form and bodily representations through art works.

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