

# To Touch is To See: *Nanomandala* and *Coitus Reservatus*

## Grahame Weinbren

For contemporary practitioners and enlightened critics, the notion of *meaning* as conjured up by an artwork but distinct from it, a floating island of abstract concepts, is not useful. We are more interested in what a work evokes, in how it represents its subjects, and what it reveals about the artist's attitudes or presuppositions.

However, some works which can best be described as *hybrid*, in that their use of video is one element of a complex, compacted unit, make strides toward referring to larger issues. The most compelling aspect of these works is that their relationship to the issues in question is more visceral than intellectual, more perceptual than conceptual. We *feel* the embedded philosophical concepts, rather than arriving at them through processes of deduction. The works I will consider in this review evoke general ideas that are neither visual references nor allegories—one can say that they elicit notions in the viewer's mind like movies and music sometimes bring up goose bumps on the skin.

Laura Marks has written with infectious passion about the importance of non-optical perception for the analysis of artists' film and video.<sup>1</sup> In introducing the expression *haptic visuality* into the discourse she opens a whole new way of comprehending our responses to avant-garde moving image work. I will call on some of Marks' insights, but apply them in a slightly different direction, in this appreciation of two recent works: *Coitus Reservatus* by the artist duo *nicoykatiushka* and *Nanomandala* by *Victoria Vesna* (in collaboration with scientist James Gimzewski and Tibetan Buddhist monks from the Ghaden Lhopa Khangsten).

---

<sup>1</sup> Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* [Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000] and *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* [Minneapolis, Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 2002]

Marks' proposal is that the low resolution and optical vagueness of video is utilized by some artists as a means of encouraging the viewer to call on other senses, particularly the sense of touch, to respond adequately to the work. I suggest that a haptic response is also evoked by certain kinds of *temporal* structures of the image-stream—that some types of unfolding-in-time also stimulate responses which depend on sense organs other than the eyes and ears.

---

## I. *Nanomandala*

### Artists' Statement

*The arrangements of atoms bear some resemblance to the methods monks use to laboriously create sand images particle by particle. However, Eastern and Western cultures use these bottom-up building practices with very different perceptions and purposes. This installation incorporates a mandala (a cosmic diagram and ritualistic symbol of the universe, used in Hinduism and Buddhism, which can be translated from Sanskrit as "whole", "circle" or "zero") [. . .] Visitors watch as grains of sand are projected in evolving scale from the molecular structure of a single grain to the recognizable image of a pile of sand. From a bottom-up method of visual image building, a sand mandala slowly emerges.*

*The project entailed photographing the sand mandala in several stages. Using a crane, photographs of the nine foot mandala were taken at LACMA. Then, inside of a chemistry lab, microscopic images were taken of the sand grains. The images were then digitally stitched together to create extremely large high-resolution images of the mandala. Using After Effects, a movie zooming into the image was rendered. The whole process took well over two months, the rendering alone consisting of 600 gigabytes of data, 1 week of rendering time on 30 machines.*

{<http://users.design.ucla.edu/~djaiyo/html/nanomandala.html>  
(accessed August 2006)}

### ***NanoMandala In Time***

#### 1. Windblown Sahara

The image is circular, mostly midtone grays, no blacks, a few white highlights. A

desert on a distant planet, plains and gentle furrows in the soft dunes, perhaps blown sand forming undulations in the surface. A tempest that passed through long ago. Vast. Void. Outside time.

## 2. Placenta

Receding. We are getting further away. As the camera pulls back the sense of landscape dissolves. It could be a womb, an ultrasound image of a fetal sac.

## 3. Reptile

Receding. The image adopts the texture of snakeskin, uneven scales overlapping. Or perhaps scraps of a heavy textile laying haphazardly one on another,

## 4. Frozen wasteland

Still receding. The texture gets more precise and defined—it is a frozen surface now, as if a raucous ocean has been instantly iced, its wave formations preserved.

## 5. Boulders

An edge emerges on one side, with a softer section behind that edge. We are looking at the surface of a huge cobble-like object, irregularly shaped, smooth-edged. Other larger objects of the same type are gradually revealed around it. The edges of these new objects are definite and they seem to make slight shadows on one another, huge voids between them.

## 6. Bluff

Particularly compelling: a precipice-edged object looming high in the frame. The first object we came to know is revealed as among the smaller of the precious rocks.

## 7. Dawn

Suddenly the screen is infused with light mauve, which deepens into a throaty rose as the pullback continues. Cerulean and navy blue patches, pale and dark, intrude at the edges of the frame. Our original object is a minor player now, surrounded by much larger entities of the same type and color, but it is still near the frame's center and distinguished by its layering and flat surfaces.

## 8. Definition

Slowly slowly a pattern, an image emerges, an anchor-like relief consisting of grains in the two shades of blue against a psychedelic salmon and candy pink background. The grains are formed into mounds, shadows modeling the protruding spheres and arcs. As the blue grains redefine themselves into a chevron-like pattern, an umber-orange patch intrudes on the right side. The orange grains echo the pattern of the blue chevron: two receding raised symbols on a bright pink field, now encircled by a lemon yellow frame. Our first grain is now, paradoxically, an element of the background.

## 9. Wheel

Alternating fields of lime green, scarlet, school bus yellow, and raw umber are outside the yellow frame. The grains that are the material basis of the image seem at first like dyed salt; but we realize they are colored sand, forming a wheel of green red yellow red brown red yellow red, like the spokes of a bicycle wheel, the pink chevron center its axis,

## 10. Flower

It's a petaled flower, not a wheel, a multicolored daisy, until at last it settles into the familiar Mandala shape composed of concentric circles each of a different hue, jam-packed with highly detailed, precise symbols and figures.

## 11. Plan View

The outermost circle is squared and the intricacies of an elaborated patterned landscape slowly emerge, each step back revealing increasingly labyrinthine detail, more than the eye can hold, and yet still more. Is it a plan view of a palace surrounded by luscious gardens? More and more precisely defined elements appear. A map of the perceptual world itself in all its splendor?

## 12. Reverse

Unexpectedly the movement of the camera changes direction and pushes in at about 20 times the speed, the same steps in dizzying reverse.

The transformation is gradual but magical. Though it has taken only a few minutes, it is difficult to believe that we are looking at the same substance. And are we? Surely our vision is arbitrary, accidental—with a different physics our eyes would be able to see at the level of the atomic, like Superman.

---

The first images of *Nanomandala* are of the molecular structure of a grain of sand. The instrument used is the *Scanning Tunneling Microscope*, which operates a level far beneath the optical. Its operation is described as follows:

*An extremely fine conducting probe is held close to the sample. Electrons tunnel between the surface and the stylus, producing an electrical signal. The stylus is extremely sharp, the tip being formed by one single atom. It slowly scans across the surface at a distance of only an atom's diameter. The stylus is raised and lowered in order to keep the*

*signal constant and maintain the distance. This enables it to follow even the smallest details of the surface it is scanning. Recording the vertical movement of the stylus makes it possible to study the structure of the surface atom by atom. A profile of the surface is created, and from that a computer-generated contour map of the surface is produced.*  
[[http://nobelprize.org/educational\\_games/physics/microscopes/scanning/index.html](http://nobelprize.org/educational_games/physics/microscopes/scanning/index.html) (accessed August 2006)]

Victoria Vesna suggests that the operation of the tunneling electron microscope is more analogous to touching than seeing, though its output is a (computer generated) visual image. The image is a record of a process, more than a picture of a location—it does not make sense to say that this is what a grain of sand “looks like” at a molecular level. The molecular is below the visual: the visual is not an appropriate descriptive category.

In *Nanomandala* the transformation from the conjectural, non-optical landscape of the molecular to the realm of the visual engages senses other than vision. When the barren atomic landscape is transformed into grains of sand, we *feel* the grittiness and rough texture, almost in our teeth. We understand with the eyes, not the mind, that we are seeing different aspects of the same substance as the image mutates from one state into another, in the continuous retraction of the camera and the consequent expansion of the field of view. This optical understanding produces a vertiginous feeling of tactility. It makes sense that at the molecular level the image is produced by a procedure analogous to touch, not sight: we experience the change from non-visual to visual on our skin. The initial absence of color (since there is no color without sight) and the abrupt infusion of color evokes a haptic response, accomplished, in this case, by *transformation* of image elements.

Similarly with *Coitus Reservatus* the sense of tactility, of skin against skin, is produced by a juxtaposition between material bodies blocked and cropped by televisions and completed by video images on the televisions. What is it that locks our eyes to the video when there are beautiful live bodies to look at? It may be that the reduced visual qualities of video, combined with the fact that it is a source of light,

together demand a haptic response, and it is the pure pleasure in the tactile nature of this response that keeps us focused. We cannot get enough (literally)—so we keep looking for more. But the fraught danger, the tension of the performers, also draws us in. Will they fall? Do they make love like this? Can they hold this artificial pose? How are they communicating with each other in terms of timing, and simultaneously synching with the television images that they can't see? We have a sympathetic kinesthetic response, as we find our bodies identifying with theirs.

---

### *Coitus Reservatus act by act*

#### 1. Monitor and Artificial Trees

A TV on stage in front of three fake trees. Image on TV is a fairly ordinary park landscape with tree, a mild wind blowing.

#### 2. Hand trucks and Feet

Nico from left, Katiushka from right, wheel in matching monitors on folding hand trucks, On the monitors are images of walking feet, the same size as the feet of the two performers pushing the monitors.

#### 3. Colored Suits

Katiushka is wearing a bright chartreuse formal suit. Nico's suit is flesh-colored. Green and pink, the basic color scheme of architecture in India.

#### 4. Monitors before Trees

They place the monitors so that now three TVs form a line in front of three trees. Nico and Katiushka stand facing one another at the end of the monitor row.

#### 5. Congress in the Half Pressed Position

Now they lie down behind the monitors, but in front of the fake trees. Their two bodies combine into the first Kama Sutra position. Her left leg is raised and visible, her thigh at his waist, he supports himself over her, leaning on his elbows, his head twisted toward the audience. She holds him at the waist with one hand and at the shoulder with the other. He looks back, she up. No eye contact. The image of the two bodies stretches across the 3 televisions, which in fact partially obscure the actual bodies. They freeze—on the TVs and in real life.

#### 6. Real and Mediated in Synch

Now they switch positions, the monitors again roughly in sync with the real bodies behind them. Full eye contact this time. We know that it is not a closed circuit TV situation, that the on-stage bodies are not captured by camera and sent to the monitors in real time—for one thing on the monitors they are in natural surroundings, while on stage everything is artificial. For another there is a constant drift—sometimes the video image is ahead, sometimes behind. And lastly, the monitors block the place where the camera would have to be positioned.

#### 7. No Penetration

Now her right leg is up, and he is supporting himself with his hands. his knee against her buttocks. No meeting of the genitals, let alone penetration, is possible even if clothes were removed.

#### 8. Hand

In sitting position, her knee around his waist, both stare at his hand.

#### 9. Arm as Organ

Now both standing, she leaning back supported by his arm, her arm around his neck, other arm hanging down with stiff wrist and hand at end of arm. Our sex radar heightened, the hanging arm becomes a phallic stand-in—we are on the alert for symbols of sexuality in the poses.

#### 10. Fixed Support

She, supported on hands and feet, body raised; he clings to her, head in chest, almost as if she is holding him up. Caught in mid dive—frozen—he looks forward. Always the formality of the stiff hand positions: sometimes fingers outstretched, sometimes together.

#### 11. Foot / Shoulder / Hand / Mirror

Here's a good one—her left foot on his shoulder as he leans back, his one knee up, other one down. Her legs splayed. he looks up (ecstatic?)— her gaze is at his face, and her hand curled up on the other side of her face, like a hand mirror that she isn't looking into. On the TV monitors we see her arm, her waist, her thigh, the skirt having ridden up to expose her leotarded pelvis, his thighs, one up, one down the waist. The TV image crops both heads. The video monitors crop the bodies, while the images on the monitors complete them.

#### 12. Blowing

The wind ruffles his suit on video—the stage is, of course, windless. Now he stares into her open legs, their hands meeting on the air—no he stares into her eyes, her crotch open for his dismissal.

---

The program notes for the performance at DTW in New York describe Nico and Katiushka as recently married. We can't help imagining them actually fucking as we watch them in these poses that represent different positions for sexual intercourse. But 'represent' is an odd word to use, because, for one thing, they don't look like they are having sex. The poses are too formal and controlled, more like ballet than pornography. Katiushka trained as a dancer from the age of three, and to me it is as if one of the undercurrents of classical ballet—as sophisticated body show—is deconstructed and exposed.

Still, the piece evokes the tactile. The fact that the bodies are partially obscured by the monitors, but simultaneously completed by the images on the monitors, prompts a wish-fulfilling sensory response. So much stands in the way of body contact—the formality of the poses, the lack of acknowledged connection between the performers, the blockade by the monitors, the mediated image of parts of their bodies, that we practically wish touch into existence. We feel the body contact because the performers in so many ways refuse it. This evasion of sexual connection is reflected in the title of the work. *Coitus Reservatus*, refers to a Tantric sexual practice in which sexual contact is maintained for prolonged periods but ejaculation is avoided by an act of will. In its original form, the sex act is a form of spiritual practice, though it was advocated by gynecologist Alice Bunker Stockham during the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a form of birth control and to promote marital engagement.<sup>2</sup> So in these different ways, the performance presents images of sex by an evasion of its actual practice. The formality of Nico and Katiushka's performance connects the viewer to the spiritual aspect of the *Kama Sutra*, and indeed, to the more idealized aspects of sex itself.

In unpublished notes, Nico and Katiushka suggest that they want to make a statement about the recycling of ancient wisdom into contemporary consumerist culture, to critique our eagerness to embrace the surface of nonwestern religious philosophies, combined with our lack of interest in, or even our aversion to, the underlying ideologies. Yoga,

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice\\_Bunker\\_Stockham](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice_Bunker_Stockham) (accessed August 2006)

meditation, vegetarianism, etc., all eagerly adopted—as commodities—while the original spiritual components of these practices are ignored. Nico even has a personal story about an injury sustained in a Yoga class which treated the practice as physical conditioning and bodybuilding rather than spiritual exercise.

However there is far too much pleasure, sensuality, and plain old beauty in *nicoykatiushka's* performance for the larger question even to enter the viewer's mind. The critical aspect of their intentions is quite obscured by their humor. And this brings up the following question: how is meaning embedded in these works?

The cinematic image is a highly significant aspect of *Nanomandala* and *Coitus Reservatus*. Video, an audiovisual medium, is used not for its audiovisual qualities but more as a means of indicating what cannot be captured in picture or sound. At the same time there are highly visual aspects: the color (of sand, of costumes) set against the drab of the stage set in *Coitus Reservatus*, and the monochrome of the subatomic section of *Nanomandala*; the continuity between that which is beyond sight and that which is within its domain. The most prominent examples of these contrasts are in the moment when the *Nanomandala* image incorporates color, signaling a transition from the subatomic world of electrical charges visually represented to the realm of the visual; and in the way in *Coitus Reservatus* the actual bodies, on the low-color, artificial stage set, are obscured by the physical presence of the televisions but completed by the images set in a more 'natural' environment on the televisions.

Is the video in these pieces a picture or a window? Do we pay attention to qualities of the image or do we look through the screen to what it is depicting? In the subatomic parts of *Nanomandala* it is a visual representation of molecular space, like a map, and in *Coitus Reservatus* it is a stand-in for the diagrammatic image proposed in the *Kama Sutra*, thus closer to the source, but further from the interaction reenacted. N & K's images of the sex act are mediated through ancient (semi-religious) images—for the *Kama Sutra* is not a sex manual as much as a discussion of achieving grace through sexuality. However, since Burton's 19th century translation and introduction of the text to the West, we

have come to know the ancient text through its images of sex—i.e. an activity which is as connected with the sense of touch as with (more readily recordable) sight and sound. And this leads back to Laura Marks' discussion of artists' recalling the sense of touch by means of visual recording.

Video used not as an end in itself in these pieces, but the use of the medium becomes part of a larger experience, opening issues which extend far beyond questions of representation or narrative. Both pieces reach out beyond themselves—*Nanomandala* into a sense of the infinite, the insignificance of the individuated self compared to the voluminous space within a molecule of a grain of sand (precisely what the Buddhists refer to in their sand mandala practice); and *Coitus Interruptus*, in a bottom-up kind of way, looks at the universality of human relationships by offering us images inspired by the *Kama Sutra* and simultaneously denying those images to our eager eyes.