

Introduction

real pictures

In 1996 the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp showed an installation by Alfredo Jaar called *real pictures* (Fig. 0.1). The installation consisted of a small round room with dark floors and walls. The room was sparsely lit and contained five columns of medium height, each of them made of four stacks of flat boxes covered with black linen. Texts were printed in white letters on the uppermost boxes of each column. Each text described a photograph, suggesting that it had been stored in that particular box. And each photograph supposedly depicted a scene in or around one of the refugee camps in Rwanda: people waiting for food or medication, a priest who had fled from his village and who even in the camp was not safe, patients suffering from cholera or dysentery. For instance:

Ruzizi 2 Bridge
Bukavu, Zaire – Cyangugu, Rwanda Border
Sunday, August 28th, 1994

The Ruzizi 2 Bridge is one of two bridges across the Ruzizi River that separates Rwanda from Zaire on the Southwest border. At the peak of the violence, refugees fled Rwanda at the rate of 35,000 people per day. Now this bridge has been closed for six days, the banks of the river are swelling with people waiting to cross.

So, as a visitor to the installation, I found myself bending over towards a column to read a text while trying to imagine how the photograph inside would depict the scene described. Precisely because of this effort the scene became somehow more real than when it would have been seen in the usual way, as a newspaper photograph with a caption. Outside the room a text had been printed that narrated the history of the mass killings in Rwanda. It ended with a quotation from V. Altaio: 'Images have an advanced religion. They bury history.'

I was very moved by the installation and described it in an article about the staging of spectatorship in visual art (Van de Vall, 2001).¹ Of course,

the installation was impressive as a document and as a manifesto, but what made it so moving was far more difficult to describe than its explicit content. Not only did it compare photographic with textual representation, presenting the comparison in a very particular way that by itself evoked all kinds of associations – with gravestones and funeral parlours, for instance – but something else happened as well. As soon as I had entered the room, it seemed as if an invisible hand directed my posture, my movements and my behaviour. It was, for instance, impossible to walk through this room fast or to speak loudly. I felt required to shuffle from one column to the next, in an enveloping movement, then to bend over towards the text and to gaze attentively, and perhaps to whisper a remark to my companion if I had happened to have anyone with me. The whole arrangement called for a discreet, subdued and attentive response, for a kind of attitude proper for the experience and emotion I was supposed to feel. The installation formed a stage where I, as actor, was asked to enact the required experience. This aspect of the work, which I had called its *mise-en-scène* or staging, coloured all other references and gave its meaning a specific depth.

It is real, it is unreal

Many years later I was reminded of *real pictures* because it so perfectly answered a plea by Bas Heijne, a Dutch journalist and critic who reflected on the media coverage of 9/11 (Heijne, 2004). Three years after 11th September 2001, Heijne had tried to evaluate the impact of the images of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers in the Dutch newspaper *NRC-Handelsblad*. In the three years that had passed since then, these images had become symbols. They designated not only the catastrophe itself, but also the shattering of our trust in the world, wrote Heijne, and something else as well: our inability to escape from the everlasting actuality of the media, which see reality only as imagery. In present-day media culture our relation with the world is marked by a peculiar mixture of proximity and distance which Heijne expressed in the words 'It is real, it is unreal'.

Heijne contrasted this media culture with the world before telecommunication, the eighteenth-century world of the stage-coach and the letter.² In a neighbouring country like Germany, news of the French Revolution arrived only after a week and through the medium of the written text. There were no direct images of the events. That meant that what happened had to be ordered symbolically before it could be communicated, and only after the event had taken place. Nowadays, the digital revolution has made it possible to witness faraway events such as 9/11 almost instantaneously, generating a sense of immediate involvement – an involvement that lasts very shortly, however, because the next day new events demand our attention. A fast

process of shock and habituation makes it very hard to deal with events that are really inconceivable, like the attacks of 9/11. The endless repetition of the first video images was followed by more and more additional video footage, leading, according to Heijne, to a flattening and deadening of the initial impact. Film director Michael Moore wisely abstained from showing the destruction of the Towers in his *Fahrenheit 9/11*: the incredulous and shocked faces of the bystanders expressed much more tellingly the import of what they saw. Moreover, the immediate visual presence of the events has hardly contributed to an understanding of what happened. We are still in utter confusion about the significance of the events, and the images are more of a hindrance than a help to our understanding. Heijne concluded his essay by expressing the hope that art might be able to bring the inconceivable back into the domain of human experience, by re-endowing the image with experiential and imaginative depth.

This was exactly what *real pictures* had attempted to do with regard to the Rwanda genocide. Jaar's installation questioned our attitude towards inconceivable and atrocious events like the massacres in Rwanda and about the way media coverage influences this attitude – not only through its content, but also through its form. As the press release accompanying one of Jaar's exhibitions made clear, it is not primarily photography as such, or even press photography as such, that the artist is questioning, but the way images circulate in present-day visual culture. We are overfed, each time with new images that somehow each time seem to show the same. Each image disappears as soon as it has appeared: the next page, the next item, the next day's newspaper bring a fresh supply of new ones. To quote the press release accompanying the exhibition: '*real pictures* is a cemetery of images – those pictured have been disappeared by the very fact that their faces are those in our newspapers today, but not tomorrow.'

True words, but it was not this moralizing statement that made the work convincing. The installation could have done without it. The crux of the work consisted in what it made one do. By withholding the pictures that it suggested were present in the boxes, it forced me to use my imagination and to visualize the scenes that the texts described. This effort, and the concomitant emotion, succeeded in bringing me closer to what had happened and to make me realize how little an ordinary newspaper photograph would have moved me. This already told me something about the usual relation of spectatorship and its non-involvement with the remote events that supposedly are brought nearer by the press, television and other media. But there was more. By giving the work the form it has, evoking associations with tombs and funeral parlours and, moreover, by arranging the room in such a way as to solicit a specific bodily comportment, Jaar had created a form through which some of the emotions the massacre evokes could effectively be felt. The work staged a kind of physical and affective

movement that resembles what we do when we mourn. And, strange as it may seem, this felt like a relief. It became possible to *think* about what happened, what it meant for the victims and the refugees gathering around Ruzizi 2 Bridge.

Palpating thought and vision

Hardly two months after Heijne's article, The Netherlands witnessed its own terrorist drama. In Amsterdam, on 2 November 2004, the same day that President Bush was re-elected, the film director Theo van Gogh was murdered by a Muslim extremist, most probably because he had directed the controversial film *Submission 1*. The script for this film had been written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a member of parliament who vehemently campaigned against the oppression of women in Islamic cultures. Immediately the country was aflame. There were attacks on mosques and Islamic schools. The government was accused of weakness in its tolerance of radical Islam, citizens with a Moroccan background were interviewed by news reporters about their opinions with regard to the killing, and everyone who had been critical of either the film or its maker – who happened to be rather foul-mouthed in the way he formulated his opinions – was accused of condoning his murder. Van Gogh's death was considered an attack on the freedom of speech committed in the name of religion. The adherents to this religion should be taught that they lived in a country that cherished open discussion and fearless critique, even if that critique hurt people's religious feelings. Integration had failed and should from now on be enforced the hard way.

The events demonstrated how quickly a potential conflict can escalate and how pivotal the role of the media in this escalation can be. Conflict was generated by the media and existed primarily in the media. Newspapers, but also the Internet and especially television, were very eager to voice the opinion of 'the street', a policy adopted after the meteoric rise and subsequent murder of the politician Pim Fortuyn, who was supposed to have expressed 'what everybody thinks but nobody dares to say aloud'. It was only after a month or so that more thoughtful comments and analyses appeared. Indeed, they said, the world is changing and Muslim terrorism is a most serious threat. But instead of being obsolete and 'soft', traditional Dutch values and attitudes such as tolerance, pacification and dialogue might be the starting point for a more fruitful approach, preventing the alienation and radicalization of minorities instead of furthering them, as the war-like policy of the self-proclaimed defenders of Western Enlightenment values might do. In a long article reflecting on the events, the same Bas Heijne criticized the hysteria that had seized the opinion-makers, and the historian Geert Mak even called them 'traders in fear'.

In this heated atmosphere I realized what the book I had been working on for so long was really about. It tried to formulate a plea for a slow and tentative reflection precisely in times of uncertainty and fear and, more in particular, to figure out the possible contribution of visual art to this hesitant and 'groping' form of thinking. Unfortunately, English has no equivalent for the Dutch verb '*tasten*', which, like 'to grope', designates the searching movement of the hands when it is dark or when one misses the use of one's eyes, but also refers to the '*tastzin*', the sense of touch. '*Tastend denken*' then might describe a kind of thinking that is modelled upon the sense of touch as it is usually conceived: a thinking that has to make do without the overview accorded to sight, fragmentary and uncertain about its direction, but in close contact with what it thinks about and even assuming the form of what it holds.³ The best approximation to the Dutch '*tasten*' might be found in the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who uses an expression, '*palper du regard*' – 'palpating with our look' – that we might extend to thinking as well. We might be in need of such a palpating form of reflection. Western societies may have to rethink their cultural values in the context of new situations, not to give in to outside threats, but to be able to convince *all* their inhabitants of the importance of defending them. Instead of taking the hard line of hammering at so-called Enlightenment values against everything that reeks of religion, for instance, it might be wiser to ask anew what these values really mean and why they are so crucial for our societies. As another participant in this discussion has stated, perhaps they protect something more fundamental and vulnerable than can be captured in a slogan, like the legitimacy and the possibility of *uncertainty* and *doubt* (Pels, 2005).

As contemporary media culture is – not exclusively, but predominantly – visual, '*tastend denken*', 'palpating thought', may be – and should be – paralleled by '*tastend zien*', 'palpating vision', a vision that is equally slow, hesitant and uncertain and equally close and conforming to what it explores as touch can be. The ubiquity of images, many of them 'live' or 'real time', is what gave Bas Heijne the sense that what happened was both real and unreal. We seem to be immediately present at whatever happens on the other side of the world, watch it in surprise, shock, indignation or compassion, and yet we seem strangely removed from what we see, unable to digest its meaning in something like a reflected experience. Heijne contrasted this visual media presence with the more reflective textual culture of the eighteenth century in which news was disseminated by the written word and events had to be reflected upon before they were reported. To the extent that this contrast hinges on an opposition between (written) words and (photographic) images, I think that it is mistaken.⁴ Not only is there a lot of implicit signification in the conventions of photography, but images also differ immensely in the amount of reflective experience they allow. Michael Moore did not repeat the well-known images of the Twin Towers,

but he showed images nonetheless: other images that indirectly showed the enormity of what had happened. From the reports of the 2004 tsunami I remember one video shot that more than any other enabled something like an imaginative entrance to the disaster: the apparently peaceful scene of two children running to a sea line that was slowly retreating. What distinguishes these pictures from others is that they mobilize the empathy of the spectator as they require an imaginative 'filling in'. And that is also how they acquire their 'slowness': they entrench themselves in one's memory, because they ask for the spectator's active engagement.

Exploring digital visual culture

A basic thesis of this book is that if present-day media culture is less amenable to reflective, imaginative and experiential depth than earlier cultural epochs, this is not because it is more visual. Visual images may contain rather complex and layered meanings and much effort has already been devoted to learning to read them. Academic disciplines like Visual Culture are developing critical instruments to account for the representational content of imagery and its implicit 'politics'. My concern, however, is with another aspect of visibility. Rather than adding to the semiotic or narrative analyses of the representational content of visual images, I have undertaken an exploration of the experiential structures and dynamics of spectatorial engagement with these images. How do visual images in different media and styles involve the spectator in experiencing what they show, and what possibilities do they thereby offer for critical – ethical and/or political – reflection upon their content?

My interest in the phenomenology of spectatorship is of course highly motivated by the fact that, due to the introduction of new representation and communication technologies, contemporary visual culture is involved a process of profound change. Digital visual culture appeals to different capacities and responses of the spectator and allows different types of engagement from those of analogue visual culture. I will concentrate on two features that might be supposed to run counter to the cultural potential for critical reflection, namely immersion and interactivity. Digital imaging techniques are employed to create spectacular and overwhelming experiences; these annihilate the distance between spectators and representation that might give them the latitude for contemplative thought about what they see. Interactive participation might have a similar effect in a contrary way, as the spectators' own incessant activity of searching, linking and manipulating might keep them from being affected by what appears on the screen. I will argue that these features do not in themselves preclude reflection, but ask for a rethinking of what reflection requires and where to find it. Rather than celebrating or deploring the newness of the new media, I will foreground

their continuity with the old and figure out where to locate their potential for creating the experiential and imaginative depth that is a prerequisite for critical reflection.

The focus of my book is on *art* as the cultural domain in which the possibilities of visual signification and spectatorial engagement are most fully and self-consciously explored.⁵ The choice of my examples and the direction of my analyses are motivated by my belief that art has a specific cultural potential and therefore a specific cultural mission. Works of art are capable of ‘rendering experience available’ (the words are Susanne Langer’s) by means of their formal arrangement of sensuous elements. Rather than representing and criticizing what is already there, they may articulate – that is, uncover and create – forgotten or as-yet unknown sensibilities and thereby reconfigure our experiential access to the world. It is by doing so that they contribute most to the tentative, involved and explorative kind of reflection that I have associated with a tactile, groping or ‘palpating’ visual access to the world.

The tenor of this book, then, is a cautious optimism, or at least a questioning of the univocal pessimism with which contemporary digital visual culture is so often described, especially by theorists who, like me, relate their work to the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. It is somewhat one-sided to claim, as Paul Crowther has done (in a book that in many other respects has been a source of inspiration for this one), that postmodern culture, being characterized by a ‘hyperreal implosion of the real and its simulacra’, only ‘brings about a narrowing of experiential possibilities’ (Crowther, 1993a, 12). On the one hand, Crowther sees ‘an increasing conformity of experience to models and stereotypes determined by technoscientific interests’; yet, on the other hand, ‘this technoscientific thrust brings about a profusion of such models and stereotypes – each rapidly receding into obsolescence as new forms are produced and reproduced. One might say, therefore, that postmodern experience hinges not just on conformity, but on manic conformity’ (*ibid.*, 13). Although there is much truth in those remarks, the picture Crowther sketches leaves out the *new* experiential structures and contents that digital visual culture has engendered. When in another book he defines art’s function in contemporary culture, there is a nostalgic streak: ‘The essence of art is nothing less than *the conservation of human experience itself*’ (Crowther, 1993b, 7). In this formulation art becomes a kind of reserve, a sanctuary for experiences discarded by postmodern culture, rather than a viable means of reflection on experiential transformation.

We can find a very lucid but equally pessimistic description of what this transformation might consist of in Vivian Sobchack’s essay ‘The Scene of the Screen’ (Sobchack, 2005, 135–62). Sobchack’s phenomenological analysis of the postmodern condition provides a theoretical basis for understanding the sense of confusion Heijne expressed in his phrase, ‘It is real, it is unreal’. Sobchack argues that successive technologies of representation and perception

(that is, photography, cinema and electronic media) have profoundly changed our sense of time and space, of subjective embodiment, and of our relations to the outside world, others and ourselves. These changes take place not only at the 'macrolevel' of cultural descriptions and interpretations, but also at the 'microlevel' of immediate bodily perception and expression.⁶ Along with our sense of existential presence, our sense of ethical responsibility has changed as well.

Compared with the photographic and cinematic cultures that preceded it, the postmodern culture of the electronic media forms an all-encompassing and all-pervading system of simulation, a 'metaworld'. This system engages its spectators and users in a kind of experiential structure that is phenomenologically 'so diffused that it seems to belong to *no-body*' (*ibid.*, 152), 'spatially decentered, weakly temporalized and quasi-disembodied (or diffusely embodied)'. The world of electronic media is diffused in terms of spatial experience: Sobchack writes:

The electronic is phenomenologically experienced not as a discrete, intentional, body-centered mediation and projection in space but rather as a simultaneous, dispersed, and insubstantial transmission across a network or web that is constituted spatially more as a materially flimsy latticework of nodal points than as the stable ground of embodied experience (*ibid.*, 154).

Living in a metaworld of representations and simulations, the spectator/user tends to be disconnected from what Sobchack calls 'the pull of ... moral and physical gravity' (*ibid.*). Likewise, the structure of temporal experience is being transformed into 'a homogeneous experience of discontinuity'. Whereas cinematic culture was conscious of a divergence between the linear continuity of objective time and the non-linear discontinuity of subjective time, in electronic culture objective time has become homologous with subjective time, as its structure has become non-linear as well, its constituting moments equivalent and reversible (*ibid.*, 156–7):

Unlike photographic or cinematic temporality, the primary value of electronic temporality is the discrete temporal bit of *instant present* – that (thanks to television, videotape, digital disc, and computer memory and software) can be selected, combined, and instantly replayed and rerun by the spectator/user to such a degree that the previously irreversible direction and stream of objective time seems not only overcome but recast as the creation of a *recursive temporal network*. ... On the other hand, temporality is also dispersed and finds resolution not in the intelligibility of narrative coherence or in the stream of interior consciousness that used to temporally 'co-here' as one's subjective identity but rather in a literal network of instants and instances that literally 'call' it into being (*ibid.*, 155–6).

The danger of such a diffused sense of existential presence, marked by a 'free-floating leveling of value' and a 'saturation with the present instant', is a 'lack of specific and explicit interest and grounded investment in the human

body and enworlded action' which, as Sobchack warns us, 'could cost us all a future' (*ibid.*, 159).

Such an insubstantial electronic presence can ignore AIDS, homelessness, hunger, torture, the bloody consequences of war and all the other ills the flesh is heir to outside the image and the datascape. It can ignore the lived body that not only once imagined its techno-logic but gave it substantial grounding, gravity, and value. It can ignore its own history. Indeed, devaluing the physically lived body and the concrete materiality of the world, the dominant cultural and techno-logic informing our contemporary electronic 'presence' suggests that – if we do not take great care – we are all in danger of becoming merely ghosts in the machine (*ibid.*, 162).

The dangers Sobchack points to are alarmingly recognizable. Yet I discern in her analysis of the electronic a suggestion of technological determinism, quite at odds with the rest of her work, which I would prefer to question. Although electronic and digital technologies pervade all aspects of our daily lives, digital visual culture is not a homogeneous whole. The same technologies that contribute to the postmodern condition Sobchack describes so probingly may be used to investigate, criticize and challenge this condition by – at least temporarily – reconfiguring it according to its own terms. This is why art is so important, perhaps even more important than ever. Precisely because our 'being in the world' is caught up in a process of profound transformation, with consequences for our social and moral engagement with the world we can at present hardly fathom, the significance of a cultural practice in which the structures and contents of our experiences are reflexively and reflectively explored can hardly be overestimated. Art can add something to philosophical reflection or political criticism: it can articulate experiences by means of experiences and make us aware of the basic features of our actual *Sitz im Leben*, our being situated in a thoroughly mediatised world.

The chapters

The first question this book will address is whether contemporary culture's reliance on (some would say obsession with) visual representation necessarily entails the continuous reproduction of a specific spectatorial disposition. Heijne's 'It is real, it is unreal' might be interpreted as the position of a spectator who is at once close to and removed from what she sees, as her television or computer screen gives her the idea of having an unimpeded view of a faraway world yet keeps her at a distance at the same time. This disposition has a history. Modern visuality, it is often supposed, is structured along the lines of two distinct but compatible cultural constructs: the pictorial technique of central linear perspective, and the philosophical conception of the Cartesian subject. The combination of these constructs would result in a particular modelling of spectatorship that is not very conducive to emotional

involvement in or ethical engagement with what is seen: the spectator becomes a disembodied 'point of view', seeing the world as if through a window, that is as a synoptic overview of an objectified space observed from a distance.

In the first chapter, Merleau-Ponty's remarks on linear perspective as a cultural fact that systematically orientates perception provide a starting point to ask whether and in what respect sight is indeed subject to historical mediation and to what extent the connection between linear perspective and Cartesian subjectivity is operative in modern visual culture. Against the accusation that modern visibility is objectifying and distancing, one could point to instances of painting as historically distant from one another as Rembrandt and Cézanne, which achieve quite the opposite and involve the spectator perceptually, affectively and in a certain way even ethically in what is depicted. The question is, however, whether such painterly styles express a 'natural', unmediated, or 'raw' perception, as Merleau-Ponty seems to suggest, or are also cultural constructs that mediate sight. In this chapter I will argue that the opposition between mediation and immediacy is a false one. Rather than pointing to an ahistorical naturalness, the immediacy suggested by the notion of raw perception indicates a still inarticulate potential for new articulations that is achieved through, rather than in spite of, mediating forms. Linear perspective as a paradigmatic form once had this same immediacy and may become as 'raw' again as ever when it operates in new contexts or in new varieties.

This is not to say, however, that as a 'paradigm' it is not conducive to a specific spectatorial stance. This is made clear by a comparison with a different way of structuring spectatorship. In the second chapter a more tactile conception of visibility is formulated in the context of a close examination of one of Rembrandt's self-portraits. Rembrandt's handling of paint in his depiction of the human skin solicits a fragmentary and at times unfocused, 'palpating' way of looking that comes close to how we look at faces in real life. The ethical dimension of this style of looking is discussed with the help of Levinas's concept of the face of the other and against Levinas's own distrust of visibility as a form of perceptual assimilation. Merleau-Ponty's account of the connections between vision and the chiasmic (reversible) structure of perception is set against Levinas's critique of his phenomenology in order to argue that, although palpating vision does not in itself imply an ethics, neither does it impede ethical involvement. On the contrary, the *mode* of our being appealed to by another is something we can see.

The first two chapters deal with that most traditional of visual arts, painting – an art, however, that like the novel, in spite of its declared obsolescence, stubbornly refuses to die. The third chapter leaps to the digital visual culture of the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century and investigates the critical import of visual art in a more concrete way. Art may intervene in contemporary visual culture by unsettling its representational

conventions and its institutionalized visual regimes. But it may do something more as well. In this chapter the notions of play, rhythm and aesthetic reflexivity are invoked to articulate this 'something more' in the case of Mona Hatoum's video installation *Corps étranger*, a work that uses endoscopic images of the interior of the body in a way that might be considered critical of a dominant, techno-scientific visual regime. Instead of merely opposing this regime by pointing to an impossible or 'beyond' signification, art may generate new experiences and thereby new meanings. It is in reflecting on the conditions, constituents and consequences of these emergent meanings that a philosophical aesthetics, and more in particular a phenomenological aesthetics, may position itself in relation to other intellectual approaches to art like the newly emerging field of Visual Culture.

The wish to substitute affective spectatorial engagement for contemplative distance might, however, overshoot its mark. What is a subtle and quiet exchange between spectator and spectacle in the case of painting may become outright manipulation in popular special-effect films like *Star Wars* or *The Matrix*. The question tackled in the fourth chapter is that of whether reflection requires distance and whether sensory immersion as such precludes reflection. Lyotard's notion of the tautegorical – a kind of chiasmic reversibility but now applied to thinking – is invoked to develop the idea of palpating reflection that starts from within the experience. Both reflection and perception have a dimension that is aesthetic and reflexive:⁷ consciously or subconsciously, one feels one's own thinking and perceiving as a dynamic movement with a particular rhythm. The basic prerequisite for reflection is not that one has to step outside an experience and ponder it from a distance, whether in time or in space; it is that, in experiencing the experience, one has the latitude to be aware of how it feels to have that experience. Rather than a terminology of being inside or outside, I prefer one based on the notion of play to designate the kind of freedom of mental and imaginative movement that is needed to orient thought when the right direction is uncertain. This argument is developed through an analysis and interpretation of a film that in many respects is as overwhelming and manipulative as *Star Wars* or *The Matrix*, but yet succeeds in doing something quite different: Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*.

As Janet Murray has noted, active participation may be a powerful means to immerse the spectator in what happens on the screen, for instance because the spatial quality of digital environments is created by the interactive process of navigating these spaces (Murray, 1997, 79–80; 110–112). In that respect the interactivity of computer mediated images is not opposed to immersion. One could say, however, that interacting with an interface appeals to a different disposition of the spectator (if spectator is still the word to use) than being taken along in a stream of images and sounds. If receptivity to otherness is a prerequisite for palpating reflection, one may suspect that the

possibility of intervening in the spectacle precludes reflection. Reflection means being open to what does not fit into one's expectations; interactivity enables one to continue pursuing these expectations nevertheless. When one gets bored or disappointed, one just moves on to another web page, or turns one's avatar around in search of another enemy to shoot. But rather than being in control of the course of, or creatively participating in the configuration of the media object at hand, one might be subjected to an agenda of commercial standardization and regulation of imaginative inner life. The 'filling in' required in reading a novel or watching a film is externalized and translated into a choice between so many prefigured options. Against this bleak view of interactivity it might be argued that the starting points for imaginative creativity may have been shifted and transformed. This chapter maintains that the interaction between spectator and spectacle might itself become an artistic material and be used in a way that solicits a playful and affective engagement with the computer and the interface as media. Several examples of interactive video and computer works illustrate how the receptivity Lyotard calls 'passibility' might be invoked by digital art. In particular, art may restore the dimension of the human in our dealings with media images, for instance by making us feel how 'image-bodies' on the screen involve 'here-bodies' like our own. Rather than definitely severing the virtual from the real and further de-realizing the image, digital imagery might refresh our capacities for aesthetic reflection and imaginative and experiential depth. It all depends on how it is used. This means, however, that one should break with the kind of ontological or *a priori* argumentation that characterizes so much theory of the new media: although through its inner logic a specific technology will favour some uses at the expense of others, there is no intrinsic necessity compelling enough to determine beforehand and in all respects how it will turn out in practice.⁸ Digital technologies are no exception, in spite of the mythic aura that still surrounds them.

In writing this, I am aware of the normative and *a priori* tenor of my own explorations. This book is a philosophical reflection on the *possible* role of visual art in digital visual culture, rather than a description or analysis of art's actual functioning. In a way it is a transcendental investigation in Kant's sense: it explores the conditions that should be met for critical reflection ('critical' in the ordinary sense of questioning existing realities) to be possible and visual art's potential to enhance these conditions. This investigation entails a thorough analysis of a small number of works of art that in my view exemplify this potential, but these examples are not meant to be representative of what is currently happening in art. They indicate what art *could* do: engaging us in experiences, especially at the level of our microprecognition, that help us to find new ways of understanding and grounding our experiential, social and moral involvement in a world of unreal realities and real unrealities.

Notes

1. The concept of staging might remind one of Michael Fried's famous article on 'Art and Objecthood', first published in 1967, in which the 'theatricality' of Minimalism is unfavourably compared with more complex and therefore 'autonomous' works like Anthony Caro's sculptures (Fried, 1998). Although the explicit engagement of the spectator that is professed in installation art is often traced back to Minimalism, with reference to Fried but without his negative appreciation (for example, Bishop, 2005, 53), my use of the concept of staging is precisely the opposite: the more complex or compelling a work's structure, the more effectively it stages the beholder's comportment.
2. In fact, Heijne quoted the German philosopher Rudiger Safranski, whom he had interviewed on an earlier occasion.
3. It is tempting to contrast the groping tactility of this slow and hesitant, uncertain thought with the apparent clarity and distinctness of vision, and the kind of distanced and determinate rationality associated with visual paradigms. But this would imply a kind of essentialism of the senses that I would rather avoid, because the contrast between vision and touch does injustice to both. Not only are there varieties of vision that resemble what we have described as touch, and which will be explored in this book. Vice versa, there are many culturally entrenched ways of touching that possess characteristics usually associated with vision, such as being objectifying or distancing, as the searching for weapons at airports testifies.
4. The same opposition was invoked in Jaar's installation, despite the press release.
5. Here I find myself in close agreement with Arnold Berleant's *Art and Engagement* (1991), which claims for art and aesthetics in general the same performative engagement I claim for the visual arts.
6. Here Sobchack uses Don Ihde's distinction between 'macroperception' and 'microperception'. See Ihde, 1990, 29.
7. I use 'reflexion', 'reflexivity' and 'reflexive' with an 'x' for all forms of awareness of a connection between and reversibility of what senses and what is sensed, feels and is felt, perceives and is perceived, thinks and is thought. I use the terms 'reflection', 'reflective' and 'reflectivity' with 'ct' for those forms of reflexive awareness where conceptual thought is involved.
8. This argument will be worked out more elaborately with the help of Verbeek (2005) in Chapter 5.