

Designing the Surface

Our understanding of the way ideas and images interact with one another is central to our conception of the world and our place within it. However, these interactions are often taken for granted and we fail to grasp precisely how they affect meaning and alter our perception of reality. If we think of our perception of the world as a collage of images mediated by our understanding of how the disparate parts of that whole image relate to one another, then we might think of meaning as a surface that can be designed.

Consider, for example, the idea of a conversation, a formalized way of exchanging ideas that has a certain predetermined organizational structure embedded within itself. As we learn to communicate, we internalize this structure, and after a while, we cease to question its logic. Attention is no longer paid to how the format can affect both what we say and how we say it, and how it is understood by the listener.

This encoded logic is not a product of the language particular to that conversation, but rather the result of a series of gestures that are enacted by its participants. Body language, tone of voice and the inflections we give words and sentences all indicate how the

conversation should proceed. If we resist these gestural imperatives, the logic of the conversation is thrown into chaos.

So, gesture is a productive force in this context; it is separate to language, but provides the structural field in which language is able to operate. It also exists outside of the binary means/ends logic of linguistics. As such, artists may pay close attention to the operation of gesture within familiar situations—as Charlie Sofo does—to prompt us to reconsider how these processes are designed, what hidden priorities cause them to be designed in that way, and what possibilities are offered by resisting them.

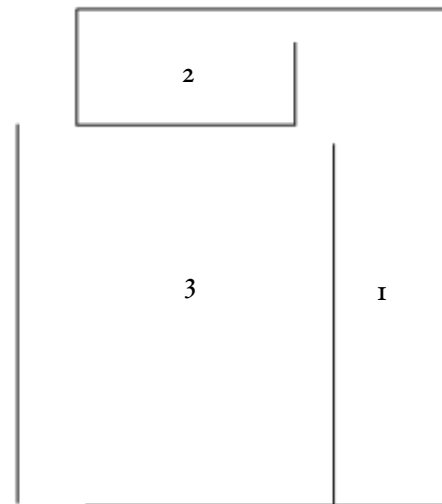
Cinema, too, may be seen as a designed surface. Its particular design organizes various audiovisual elements into a familiar structure so that the viewer is able to make sense of them. Typically, narrative is the dominant means of arranging these components; narrative logic becomes the way we bring order to what we are experiencing. There is a unique grammar of film, a series of cinematic gestures, which allows us to follow the action on-screen. Though it may seem instinctual, the surface of narrative cinema is highly artificial. Cuts between shots, the combination of

sound and image, subtitles—these are all elements of this grammar, and while they seem obvious to us after years of spectatorship, they are often based on arbitrary assumptions and patterns.

Sean Grattan explores the expectations that underpin mainstream cinema in his video *Carmen San Diego: Out Of Work And On The Run* (2011). At first glance, it resembles a clip from some mainstream Hollywood film, but as the conversation unfolds, it defies the conventions of this genre, subverting the design of such a film by appropriating the gestural vocabulary of cinema and reorganising it. What at first seems derived from a stable, familiar form is unsettled by Grattan's disruption of the anticipated logic. He describes the result as “an action movie [that] sounds like a lecture”, something sensible but at the same time highly suspicious.

Ed Atkins makes a bolder break with cinematic tradition, employing a variety of new digital techniques and effects to design an entirely new filmic ‘surface’, a hyperactive, synaesthetic reinterpretation of the conventional grammar of film. *Death Mask III* (2011) does away with narrative almost entirely, and goes so far as to disrupt the assumed links between successive images, and between image and sound. The result is akin to poetry—the fragmented audiovisual elements are visceral and

richly evocative. As with Grattan's video, the result is entirely unfamiliar but engaging, encouraging the viewer to question the codes beneath the surface of well-worn formats and to wonder what happens if you break them apart.



Arron Santry

1 Ed Atkins, *Death Mask III*, 2011.

Courtesy of the artist and Lux, London.

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² Sean Grattan, *Carmen San Diego: Out Of Work And On The Run*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

³ Charlie Sofo, *Highlander/Timewaster*, 2011