

**Camberwell College of Arts
MA Visual Art: Fine Art (Digital)**

Research proposal version 1.0

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1. Working title:

The Spectral as a conceptual framework in artistic practice

2. Aims and objectives

Overall aim

To what extent can the concept of the spectral, as employed in the social sciences, media archaeology and the fine arts, be expanded and deployed as a conceptual framework in a research based artistic practice?

The project will initially research key historical themes that form a backdrop to the media archaeological strand of the project, including aspects of early German Romanticism and the role of the automaton. It will go on to review ideas of the spectral in the work of certain artists working in the early and mid-20th century and then focus in more detail on the practice of a number of exemplary contemporary artists working between the 1990's and today. A parallel companion study will survey novel investigative practices in the social sciences and other disciplines that may have relevance to spectrality and which could also be transposed into the fine art context. These findings will be summarised and brought together to form a potential spectral conceptual framework for the fine arts, to be revised and updated as the project progresses. These initial research findings will be explored for their relevance to my own practice via a series of studio investigations and case studies. After the initial phase of research and testing the project will engage in a series of mini-projects directed at exploring specific subjects and deploying the proposed spectral framework in an experimental way, supported by parallel research and writing. The project will culminate in a major project which will fully explore and use the spectral framework developed.

Objectives

- To survey briefly German Romanticism and the history of automata, the history of the Phantasmagoria, early cinema and media technologies to appreciate the historical background
- To research historical examples of artists and art movements and also the work of exemplary contemporary artists in order to identify key themes, methods and resources suitable for a spectral framework

- To research novel spectral methods and concepts employed in the social sciences and identify those suitable for transposition into a fine art context
- To formulate a conceptual framework based on the historical, contemporary and social sciences research surveys
- To understand the relevance and potential of the spectral framework to my own practice via a parallel programme of practical case studies in and out of the studio
- To undertake a series of research and studio mini-projects employing the spectral framework to serve as material for the major project
- To undertake parallel writing and publishing projects to develop these ideas further
- To undertake and present a major project utilising the spectral framework
- To establish to what extent the spectral framework has mobilised new projects within my practice and expanded the scope of my practice by introducing new concepts, methods and analytical tools

3. Context (Historical and theoretical, fine art)

Historical and theoretical context

The spectral has emerged in recent cultural theory as a conceptual metaphor that evokes a discourse or a system of producing knowledge (del Pilar Blanco, M., Peeren, E.(2014)). This *spectral turn* has found application in a wide variety of social sciences including cultural geography, philosophy, politics, trauma and post-colonial studies. At the same time there has been a growing interest within a fine art context in forms of artistic practice that are broadly historiographic in nature, addressing themes such as marginal histories, utopian communities and the legacy of colonialism through a variety of strategies. These strategies could include working with archives, found footage film, engaging in fieldwork and interviews, and re-enactments. Other artists have become interested in another form of spectrality by adopting a form of media archaeology and exploring the haunted quality (Sconce, J. (2000)) of obsolete technologies. In fact spectral themes in the history of media could be said to date back centuries, for example the role of the phantasmagoria in the history of the projected image (Kittler, 2009).

A set of complex relationships now exists between this historical background, the social sciences and related areas of fine art practice. Figure 1 is an attempt to outline some of these links in a simplified form, starting from the role of the

automaton in German Romanticism through to contemporary artists working today.

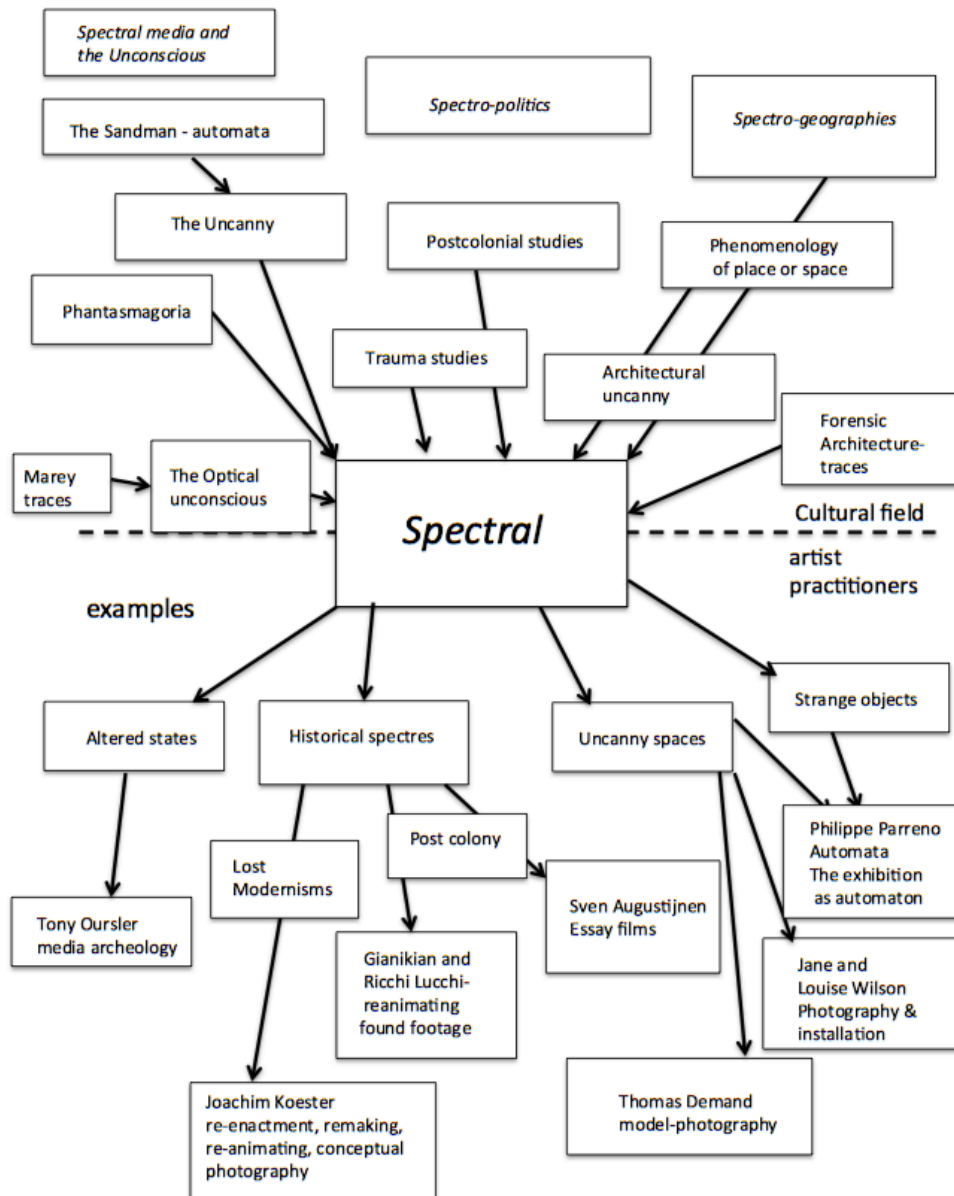


Figure 1. Cultural fields and artistic practices relevant to spectrality

The left side of the cultural field deals with aspects of the unconscious and the repressed, starting with *The Sandman* (Hoffmann, (2011) and related writings). The *Phantasmagoria* is concerned with the early history of optical projection (the magic lantern) and the relationship to early cinema while the optical unconscious refers to an early essay by Benjamin in the theory of photography. In a central position within the diagram, spectro-politics can be traced back to *Spectres of Marx* (Derrida, 1993) which deals philosophically and politically with the suppressed legacy of Marxism within a neoliberal framework announcing the

end of history. Post-colonial, trauma studies and hauntology all take inspiration in varying degrees from this publication. Finally on the right side of the diagram we have spectro-geographies, a loose grouping of more spatially orientated disciplines such as architecture, the phenomenology of place and cultural geography.

The above divisions reflect to some extent disciplinary boundaries and their limitations. The work of artist practitioners on the other hand knows no boundaries and in practice often involves a degree of merging of the spatial, political and psychological aspects of spectrality. The following are examples of artists whose work could be said to engage with the spectral from various perspectives.

Altered states

Tony Oursler explores the conjunctions between apparently opposed worlds of science and spiritualism to explore various kinds of occult and mystical phenomena in sculptural and immersive installations employing technologies that refer to magic lanterns, Victorian light shows and camera obscuras.

Uncanny spaces

Jane and Louise Wilson use film, photography and sculpture to create theatrical and atmospheric installations that investigate traumatic spaces and experiences from the Stasi headquarters in Berlin (*Stasi city*, 1997) to Chernobyl (*The toxic camera*, 2012).

Thomas Demand makes photographs of three-dimensional paper models that look like real images of rooms and other spaces from places and sites laden with social and political meanings. He exploits a kind of photographic uncanny where the apparent artifice and lightness of the model is balanced by the ominous or loaded thematic of the subject of the photograph itself.

Strange objects (and uncanny spaces)

Philippe Parreno often conceives of the whole exhibition space as a kind of automaton. For example in his 2013 exhibition *Anywhere, Anywhere Out Of The World* he transformed the monumental space of the Palais de Tokyo into a living constantly evolving organism using sound, image and performance to guide the visitor on a journey through the work. The exhibition was orchestrated along the lines of a dramatic composition where the spectral presence of objects, music, lights, and films guide the visitor's experience.

Historical spectres

Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi assemble and analyse found footage film, often working with material from the first decades of the 20th century. They employ a custom built optical printer to analyse this historical footage, often reframing, tinting and slowing down clips of films to re-animate and reinterpret the material (Lumley, R. (2011)).

Sven Augustijnen makes essay films in which he analyses cultural and historical places and events from a personal perspective, in a way that is at the same time both precise and ambiguous. In his film 'Spectres' he asks how a country or an individual can deal with a colonial past, specifically the history of the Belgian Congo (Augustijnen, S. (2011)).

Joachim Koester works in photography, video, and film that delves into a broad variety of historical subjects. He has explored the history of; failed utopian communities, American conceptual art, expeditions to the Arctic Circle and the North Pole, occultism and magic and the cultural history of hashish, opium, and mescaline. Koester has defined his practice as a form of 'ghost hunting'. (Magagnoli, P. (2011))

Loss and absence – Memorialisation (not in diagram)

Felix Gonzalez-Torres produced work that transforming the everyday into personal meditations on love and loss. For example "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) is an allegorical representation of the artist's partner who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1991. The installation comprises 175 pounds of candy, corresponding to the body weight of his partner.

4. Methodology

I have recently expanded my conception of my practice as methodology and this is illustrated below in fig 2.

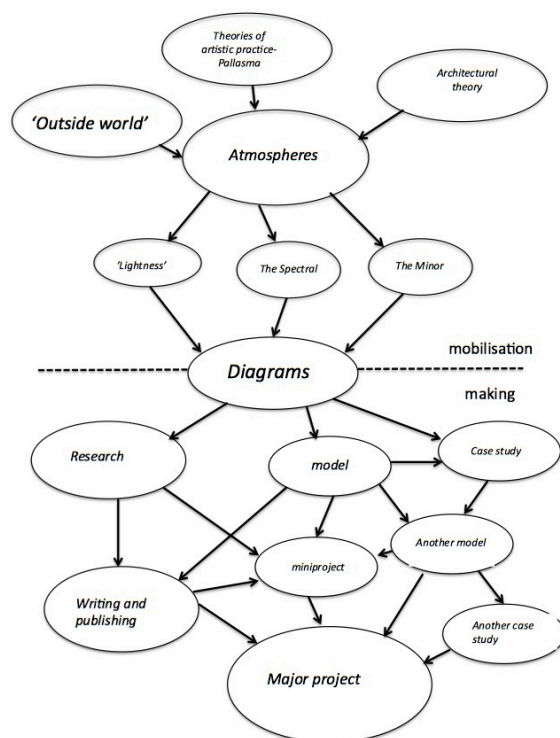


Figure 2. Methodological diagram of my art practice

My art practice is organised around the concept of the diagram which has developed as a result of previous concerns with architectural design processes based on the model, the diagram and their inter-relationship.

A diagram may perform two basic roles;

- organisation or systematisation
- the unfolding or projecting of possibilities

Diagrams have the potential to move between these roles, and this ambiguity can be seen as an inherent quality of the diagram. Figure 2 is a diagram directed towards organising and unfolding my practice as a whole, with a diagram at the centre; other elements such as models can also be conceived as diagrams, hence figure 2 is a form of nested diagram. The diagram is divided into two fields; Mobilisation and Making.

Mobilisation

The field of Mobilisation is concerned with achieving a balance between thinking and feeling in the early formative stages of a project or idea. It also establishes thematics within my practice and makes links with other fields outside the arts as a whole. Mobilisation is primarily attentive rather than active, and embodied in nature. The diagram of this field operates in both an organising and unfolding mode, reminding me of the need for certain kinds of space within my practice while also creating new dynamics.

Atmospheres is a key area within Mobilisation. *Atmospheres* describes a kind of mental/embodied space from which key themes are generated. It is based on a kind of virtual space, a place for a kind of unfocused thought or reverie within my artistic practice in which thought and affect are in balance. The virtual space might be modelled on a room or a space within a building as a mental guide; it is important that the space is internal but nothing more.

Having conceived of the need for *Atmospheres* I subsequently found a discourse around this idea within the architectural community, especially the work of Juhanni Pallasmaa (Pallasmaa, J. (2014), Pallasmaa, J. (2012)) who also has broader interests in cognitive and psychoanalytical approaches to artistic processes.

Themes are generated from within *Atmospheres*. Those illustrated in Figure 2 include the principle subject of this project – the Spectral- and also supporting themes such as Lightness as discussed in ‘Six Memos for the new Millennium’ (Calvino, I. (1988)) and the Minor as discussed in ‘Kafka; towards a minor literature’ (Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. (1986)). Other themes may be developed to support the main theme.

The *Diagram* element occupies a central position nested within the overall practice diagram. It exists in both Mobilisation and Making fields because it has two roles. It organises material and themes from the Mobilising field and relates them to key elements and activities in the Making field. Its function is both

organising (Mobilising field) and unfolding (Making field). Each specific theme would have a diagram which links that theme to specific elements in the Making field.

Making

The field of Making is concerned with all the more practical elements of my practice.

Research is conceived broadly and will include work in primary and secondary literature, archives, fieldwork of various sorts and interviews. The blog will be used as a content management system (CMS) for the research, backed up by local storage on computer and separate hard drives.

Writing takes a number of forms;

The Blog – a day to day notebook and CMS.

Reports – a more formal gathering of material and arguments relating to or deriving from research. Essential where some kind of summary, a position or a decision is required. These will be ‘published’ i.e. edited and given a final form.

Free writing – any written material that is self standing and not directly connected with research. Could be published as a pdf or printed with visual material. Could also form material for projects going forward.

Model is defined as any diagram that describes the process or procedure of making a piece of artwork. The artwork may be based on an actual physical model but the conceptual basis will always be governed by a diagram. The model places an emphasis on the role of the medium as a mode that is always ‘inbetween’. For example, the use of processes of recording and reproduction as an integral aspect of a generative system. The model diagram also emphasises the production of artwork as an open, generative system. In this way the model can create unexpected avenues of exploration via pre-established processes or procedures. The model can also exploit and develop the relationship between the digital and the analog, and the role of the digital in facilitating new processes of transposition, mapping and transformation.

Case studies focus on investigating and developing new processes, materials or software. These activities will be open ended and will include a variety of sculptural processes including moulding and casting in resin and plaster, printmaking, 3D printing, digital photography and video. Some case studies may be theoretical or comparative, exploring work by artists that have elements I wish to develop.

Mini-projects take material from case studies, research and writing to develop an aspect of a theme. The smaller scale of the work, while focused, allows for a

higher degree of experimentation. At the same time it has a clear endpoint and an opportunity for evaluation. A failure could be as interesting as a success.

The *Major project* is supported by an interlocking series of activities as illustrated in figure 2, including research, writing, case studies and mini-projects. The format of the major project is still to be determined but it is likely to involve a combination of site or studio photography, video production, printmaking, sculpture, drawing, sound and installation.

The following list and notes are a free-association on the theme of the spectral but gives an indication of the possible routes within the spectral that will be explored in the project.

- Spectral projections and speculations – that which persists from the past has a predictive power.
- 'Fictions of the Real' - documentary and fiction.
- Spectral disruptions – a surprise....that which returns. Hauntology.
- Spectral processes – re-animating, re-enacting, re-making – the play of chance, games and seances which leads to states of mind – the artist as medium. The archive - more re-animation and remaking.
- Spectral algorithms – blending and combining, emergent systems.
- Spectral transpositions – Dracula and reverse colonisation, the reverse takeover as a metaphor.
- Spectral geographies and writing – W.G. Sebald. The phenomenology of place - spectral parallel worlds, even.
- Spectral media and the medium as a mediator between the living and the dead – invocations. The spectral is a route to the marginal, a crack in the infrastructure.
- Marey's trace may be related to the optical unconscious. What is the relationship to the forensic trace? Palimpsest and trace – Layering and sedimentation.
- Uncanny automata – objects that speak (are reanimated) and the relationship to animism. Animism, postcolonial studies and a revised view of science.

5. Outcomes

I expect to produce some work reflecting on the spectral framework as part of my conclusions for the project. This may take the form of an essay, a collection of materials, an audio file or a set of graphics. I will determine the format(s) depending on my findings.

I see all the artwork produced in the project as a part of a broad outcome which will include;

- Case studies and miniprojects – from diagrams, drawings to video works and sound recordings.

- Formally published material - by 'published' I mean any paper based text and visuals for which I have produced a final edit.
- The blog – an unedited, informally published resource
- The major project and presentation

Material in my practice tends to be recirculated between media and the hierarchies are blurred, so all of the above will be of value going forward and have importance as outcomes.

6. Workplan

	Term 1	Term1	Bk	Term 2	Term 2	Bk	Term 3	Term 3	Bk	Term4	Term5	Term6
1	XXX	XXXXX										
2		X	XX	XX	X	XX		XX		X	X	
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5				XX	XXX		XXXX	XXXX		X		
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11												
12					X	XXX			X			
13			X	XX		XX		XX				
14							XX	XX	XXX			
15										XXXX	XXXX	XXX

1. A research survey of the work of a selection of contemporary artists, identifying key themes, methodologies and resources suitable for a spectral framework. Write a brief summary.
2. Studio case studies - investigating and developing new processes, materials or software.
3. A literature survey of 20th century art, especially Surrealism, in relation to the spectral. Write a brief summary.
4. A brief survey of early German Romanticism and Gothic literature, the history of the Phantasmagoria and early cinema, early media technologies. Write a brief summary.
5. Mini-projects – working on material from case studies, research and writing. Could be studio/ field work.
6. A research survey of novel spectral methodologies and concepts employed in the social sciences, in particular those suitable for transposition into a fine art context. Write a brief summary.
7. A literature survey relating to Art as a thinking process. Write a brief summary.
8. Research relating to Pallasmaa's writing on atmospheres and creative process. Write a brief summary.
9. A literature survey and more focused reading on anthropology and animism.
10. Research into the concept of trace – Marey, writing, inscription and sound.
11. Focused reading in alternative theories in the philosophy of science and technology - Stengers. Latour.
12. Initial formulation of a spectral framework based on the historical, contemporary and social sciences research surveys.
13. General writing projects.
14. Research for major project.
15. Major project

7. Bibliography

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