

BOULE

ART AND CULTURE AT THE

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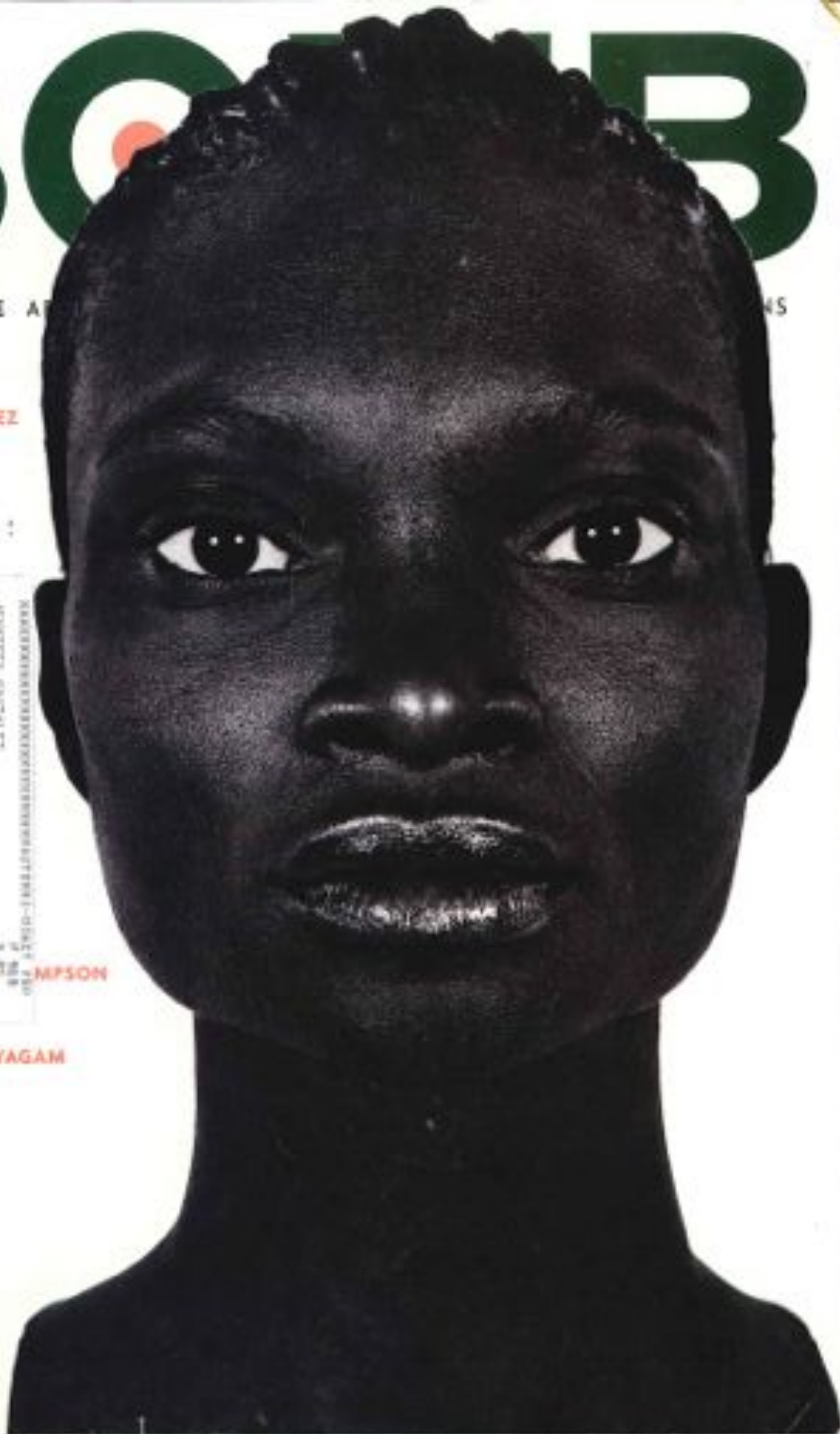
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WITH HIS CUTTING-edge Whitney Museum's first Shakespeare award in 2005, Paul Pfeiffer has received attention over the last few years for his provocative digital video productions. I first became interested in Pfeiffer's work when I saw John Turk, a mesmerizing image of a basketball floating in the center of the screen while the court, spectators and the bodies of the players were in epic motion in fixed scenes. As an evening loop, the work unites the ode's biblical connotations of eternal life, while the cropped and spliced NBA footage evokes references to the oldest religious spectacle of professional sports. Many of Pfeiffer's works use found footage and images from popular culture to explore the relations among race, religion, art and human thought. They also link questions of

Paul Pfeiffer

JENNIFER GONZÁLEZ

image-making across historical periods, from painting and theater to cinema and television, testing the audience to reflect on the conditions that delight or define both spectacle and resistance. One such work, *Paul Horowitz of the Apocalyptic*, consists of four photographs of Marilyn Monroe from which the iconic star's image has been digitally removed, leaving only a monochromatic background. A different kind of erasure is at play in *The Long Green*, in which the original whimsical bewilderment of Muhammad Ali's racist championship fight are digitally added so that the bodies of both boxers are removed from the ring, leaving only glared outlines to dance across the wires. Both works use digital editing to address the question of historical visibility or invisibility, emphasizing the power of image culture to consider the status of the "real" over the past or other human bodies in the present. Last fall I had asked if I would like to have a dialogue with him about our mutual interests in image production, digital media and race politics for both. The resulting conversation is less an interview than a conversation inspired by critical themes in Pfeiffer's work.

Jennifer González: Your work deals with both issues and the disappearance of iconic visual images by which we see these famous figures. Like Marilyn Monroe and Muhammad Ali. It is also about memory, loss and forgetting, raising the question of the afterimage of history and how that inevitably shapes the visual and consciousness of the present—in particular the

film spectacle. Historical film or footage becomes part of the mythology that defines what it means to exist now. For example, a US screen in the present even when the bodies are erased from the screen both in the films themselves and from the visual culture of the present, we carry with us the "afterimage" of history. We must therefore look into our memories again to learn that

we be filled with almost anything. Think of the ideal of love, it is given magazine advertisement or on an electronic billboard in Times Square, the word "love" can be juxtaposed with almost any image or product to make a compelling visual statement—because what you are really looking at when you are really affected by, is nothing more than the spectacle itself.



Paul Pfeiffer, *The Long Green*, 2005. Video, color, still image and digital video, 10:01. Courtesy of the artist and the Whitney Museum.

Because of the visual and racial structures constructed of race. Can you say more about these lines?

Paul Pfeiffer: The "afterimage of history" makes me think about how psychological we are about personal patterns. The present conditions we live in are repetitions, some of which go back to other very early traumatic moments.

JG: I was thinking about how historical events create an echo in the present moment when we return to them. Colonial events or figures (such as Monroe and Ali) that stand

with these events you are getting at the call on that imaginary history that is already represented as part of contemporary popular culture. It's connected to the dialogue between popular culture and what it produces—history as a reconstruction of the past. Pop culture erases history as well. I think of the spectacle as a kind of forgetting. With computers, history actually can be erased. The links of historical memory don't. The spectacle, what Guy Debord called the "relationship between people that is mediated by images" propagates itself by its own visual effect. It is empty, but it

is. Which digital images are most influential to you? And how does it connect to the image?

JG: Your work reflects on a collection set of psychological issues that have to do with the history of image production. The function that Marilyn Monroe or Muhammad Ali has in the present is as an element of our past. Well, certainly the Long Green places race the history of the market through the three fights of Muhammad Ali. These are very important fights at the beginning, middle and toward the end of Ali's career—*The same* (1966), *in* (1967), *and* (1968).



Two photos, one by the artist and one by the photographer, of the glowing red sphere, which is a basketball, set against a dark background.

series focuses on basketball in 1976 and 40 series focuses on basketball in 1976. What drew me to the image of these lights was really that history. These were some of the first sporting events broadcasted in television. The basketball league. At some point, we were one of the very first attempts at a live global broadcast and it happens to have originated in Africa. These three lights are still today as a brand set by NBA so they exist in the world already as a prepackaged statement.

Q: Tell me about the significance of the three locations: the U.S., Japan and the Philippines.

A: The first was interesting to be honest, the first light really came to me as a brand object. I happen to have grown up in the Philippines. In this day, when people hear about me, "Sam is famous" "famous in the Philippines" and "went to high school in a foreign institution," they tend to respond with "Wow, a perfect multicultural upbringing." But it makes sense to me in a very different way. These places mean a trajectory of cultural outputs. My parents were teachers who moved around with money from the Methodist Church, so it wasn't arbitrary that I ended up in these places. There certainly was a logic to it. And the logic had less to do with individual ideas than with the history of colonialism. I think that the selection of light sites is probably a very subtle thing.

Q: It seems to me that your choice of the lighting rig or subject matter also can't be arbitrary given that it's a condition of struggle that you are encountering regarding the location of colonialism.

A: Sure.

Q: In that sense I think about struggle when I see "The City of Dreadful Night" that about the history of being in a certain time-space. The nature of the subjects also allows me to meet other subjects.



Q: What time is the footage of All lights as a body attempting to operate in an intense perceptual condition bright lights, something smells popping basketball. The presence is intense. The lower is there, practically related with everything written on its body, everything depending on its body. It is being there, being inside the spectacle or inside the arena in the moment of perceptual condition. Is the archetypal level of current times. I am really fascinated by how athletes manage to function that way, partially because I know it's really about training all your faculties.

As a visual artist I am interested in the conditions of perception. Even though basketball is far from the laboratory conditions of the painter's studio. I think it's a very interesting model to study. It deals with participating situations. I remember a basketball game that was decided in one game scored in the last three seconds of the game. It was totally unexpected somebody passed the ball to the wrong guy, who then took a shot and missed. An interviewer came up to him afterward and said, "So what's going through your mind at this moment?" And the player said something like, "All I'm trying to do out there is take an and make my shot. Everything else is a distraction." I'm fascinated with how people do that.

Q: Your description makes me think about the power of the arena and people in the center of the spectacle. Your next figure of a basketball explicitly articulates that state as a flag as well, as the writer in spirit of the moment. The basketball player very effectively leading over a great shot, but when you realize how action and then it is a long, he looks like he is making a condition of joy. It makes me think about the Coliseum in Rome—all these big sports events as a condition of hegemony.

A: A special relationship exists between



black bodies and spectacle. It's almost as though the spectacle couldn't exist without them. Think of the colonial condition, from the first writer about the former child of the colony who goes to the metropolis and looks himself in the subway and for the first time feeling that he is outside himself, that he is watching himself. In some way, lights represent, he watches himself do it. The hegemony of alienation being outside and not centered in your own body is a very strange thing.

Q: It is part of a process of becoming self-aware as a subject who is an object for others. There does a beautiful job of using being the complexity of doing for power and the desire for acceptance that is formative for those who are placed in a exhibition position. A large part of the process of identification is filled into everyday life as well in a rather complex, psychic structure.

Q: Oxford writes about the proletarianization of the world, locates of the spectacle introduce the proletarianization, the one who is alienated from his or her labor in a similar way, colonial subjects are alienated but just that their labor has been their alienation of who they are, as something more than a spectacle for other people.

My own fact a 24-hour-a-day fashion show on cable television, there seems to be a fascination with simply watching people walk down the runway. The logic is identical with them, the same becomes a projection onto the scene of "small." Or, to take another example, we have multiple magazines that are devoted to pornography, or how you can also imagine going through your life in a porn film. It is almost there is an uneasy similarity between the colonial subject seeing himself from the perspective of the people around him and the same who stands in front of the camera and comes to exist only for the audience.

Q: Indeed, there seems to be no possible



Two photos, one by the artist and one by the photographer, of the glowing red sphere, which is a basketball, set against a dark background.

reparation of consciousness from the media environment people as it shapes our everyday lives. We think about identity in a political self-reliance of certain media forms, and there is an effort to keep between media spectacle and private spectacle. I think the more to your work is a number of ways.

Q: Yes, to me the spectacle is not simply visual, it's psychological. It combines what you can imagine as a possibility. Looking at the or video loop is like looking into a display or watching a work return again and again to the frame. A loop of anything can be endlessly fascinating.

Q: To me that the basketball has to do with temporality and the psychological condition of repetition. When forms of structural learning or education emphasize memorization, that is repetition. We must engage complex behavioral and psychological structures of mental skills through repetition. I don't mean rote or copying. I mean repeating something over and over and over again. There is a psychological component of learning that is very difficult. It is a form of conflict. It produces a familiar image or gesture that we count on returning. The other aspect is temporal, which is engaged by the reflexivity of the loop because I don't follow after temporal structures of our lives, but the detail.

Q: Well, basketball is a little loop as well. The same ball returning again, the next day.

Q: That's true.

Q: The loop you are talking about is something that happens quickly. The difference is one of scale or duration. You see the repetition happen before your eyes and as you are forced to deal with it as repetition.

Q: I would like to tie this discussion to the larger question of the historical conditions of human consciousness that are formed in relation to different media. It is possible in



Two photos, one by the artist and one by the photographer, of the glowing red sphere, which is a basketball, set against a dark background.

my that the film site, the television site and the digital site produce conflicting and interdependent consciousness effects, may work with questions about media's effects in consciousness or to even larger social formations, such as Detroit's version of the spectacle that do you address visual history in your work?

Q: I tend to imagine the connection between something as old as painting and something as new as a live broadcast of a basketball game. The way a basketball game is shot over a lot of painting. The game itself has been transformed by its filming for television. Certain boundary lines have been crossed to create more action near the goalposts, the camera is set up so



A photo of a basketball player in a white jersey on a court, with a crowd in the background.

they can be the shots, and so on.

Q: It makes me think of the form of the figure in painting, the massive detail, the body is someone's display of presence and grace. Historical archetypes of the human form are brought into a complex moment of conscious movement.

Q: An important marker between the two would be Luis Buñuel's film, in which the hopes of class consciousness and poverty provide the context for these perfect bodies. Sports videography seems a debt to these films as well.

Q: Yes, and these films also have a political



Two photos, one by the artist and one by the photographer, of the glowing red sphere, which is a basketball, set against a dark background.

or social discourse that underlies the construction of the idealized body.

Q: Is it arbitrary that the bodies defined in pop culture and image have seem to be very white or very ideal? I don't think so, but I think this has more to do with the kind of fantasy that particular bodies produce in today's pop culture. I've been researching the image of Bruce Lee. He interested me in the way that image of basketball is being related to his body is supposed to function in an environment that seems quite hostile. Bruce Lee did so much in a field that is only with stereotypes and offers such a small range for Asian artists. At the same time, he expressed a philosophy that runs counter to the nature of the image-oriented



A photo of a basketball player in a white jersey on a court, with a crowd in the background.

culture he was working in. Think of that that came a little bit deeper, when he is in the case of women and the image is reproduced and fragmented in both like such an interesting metaphor for the position he held in Hollywood.

Q: Yes, the context is clear.

Q: A beautiful, fighting representation of that.

Q: You speak the question of geography. The geography of your work seems to be clearly discussed despite the fact that a number of your pieces seem to take it up explicitly. This has also increased your interest in

Journalist Christopher Lasch, can you see more about that?

gg: It interested me that at the very beginning of Western architecture the body was the primary metaphor for a well-designed space and perfect proportions. And yet the social structures we inhabit today are so vastly different. I was interested in the body as because it presents a statement about the relation of individual bodies to the larger social and cosmic bodies. I wanted to reconfigure the whole body as something closer to the bodies we might have today. The other thing is how increasing the perceptual viewing point is in the image of the Vitruvian Man the body of the man covers the vanishing point. The strange double movement happens: just as it draws to the center, to the place where everything comes together and is unified, but the space is the vanishing point, which isn't there. How beautiful that when you look



THE BODY OF THE MAN (1994) by Peter Zumthor. (2) Zumthor and Peter Zumthor's studio. From *Architecture: A Living Space*, edited by the author.

after mediated through central points. The relation to mass media culture is that same that you are talking to other people, but always indirectly, through a third source.

gg: Media is not yet already in media culture as we are already embedded in language, there really is no unmediated communication. The question really is, what form of mediation is it and what does that mediation require you to exist when you experience it? A variety of answers are presented as new forms of mediation, but they don't necessarily take up a critical position against old media forms, except of a lightness that we seem to make progress, a partial sort of opportunism. This is the way most commodity culture presents new media forms as a set of opportunities to satisfy desires, but while the political currents, desires, feelings, and feelings for the space make an existing view on the world.



a very little view in the form of digital media which is when a lot of people are focusing their interest. What is new are rather the forms of attention that the digital medium requires. A friend of mine was talking recently about how web browsing produces a new kind of mental time—the time you spend waiting for the screen to load. I think attention to new media is about learning what to do with unexpected waiting, which is often frustrating. We want faster and faster communication, but it's more frustrating, but there are always more things, and I think it's that time temporarily always plays a role.

gg: Talking about downloading and waiting makes me think of what everybody says about the average time that a sport is held of an attack, which is very brief. As becomes a kind of endurance, in terms of your experience of it. In the case of art professionals it seems like a snap judgment [laughter]. Or the frustration people feel



into that and you are confronted with something that looks back at you.

gg: A gaze that becomes an effect on all. gg: Yes, in some of Heidegger's architectural readings the vanishing point is sketched right up. The same geometry that unifies the earth and the existence of you, the subject, can also imply that there is something else, something outside you, looking back.

gg: The viewer is often conceptualized as a unified subject able to stand in front of an image and make sense of it as a single viewer. Is the addresser different around at different historical moments? I guess that addresser into different collective forms. How do these views to into media production or reception?

gg: There is a shift between one person talking to another person and people talking to each

other. I think, the form of that communication may be quite different. And if you believe in it, do that to some degree the form is the content of the form? How does the digital medium offer a mediation that we haven't considered in detail yet? How does it shift the topics of identity that have been established in the past?

gg: I question what the differences are between traditional and digital mediums. I guess it's a question of the articulation of visual elements.

gg: It's difficult to do with forms of attention. Heidegger has a lot of different kinds of attention, some for waiting or for conversation; others for creative activity, will others for aesthetic creative desire, institutions, and so on. His various forms of attention that is different from that of someone. There

when they walk into an exhibition space and feel themselves in a movie theater. People say, "Oh, I don't have the patience to stop and watch." Video seems to require too much of the viewer, as opposed to painting. I'm writing on a piece now. Among other things, the design, that concern of an image of the world and the world, that is not there.

gg: Yes, it's really the time after a painting by Turner.

gg: Yes, in the context of making time, the two halves of the air are cropped together to make one whole sun. The horizon line, usually the point of visibility is, the horizon line, wonder down the frame, it will be projected on a screen that's about 12 by 18 feet. As for that line, a still image because the horizon line is swelling through the image very, very slowly, almost beyond the human eye's ability to perceive motion. You

really only see the movement in the details, as you move the camera's focus, no longer than a point, when you're in a place like that, the horizon very far off in the distance. You wouldn't be able to see it with your naked eye, but the camera catches it. The long half is 11 minutes long, the piece takes the viewer to sleep with it for 22 minutes.

gg: How is long as a viewer or viewer actively takes.

gg: Exactly, but nothing happens except on the level of the relational detail. It's really about the tension between the speed of movement and the scale shift, as well as the balance and the resolution of the image. Your immediate impression is of the square screen with the sun in it, but because it doesn't go anywhere your attention really shifts to the detail. That's the entry point.

gg: You are providing a space for a contemplative attention, which is different from the remembering practice from your quick digital video loop projects—which are also remembering. People will say, will look at that sun, though it's the same image coming back again and again and again, whether from the hope of seeing something change or simply the fascination with that repetition. I'm specifically thinking of *The Five Features for Time*, in which Tom Cruise is Billy Beane, repeatedly falls on the couch and plunges to the floor of the hotel of London in 1961. Carl & Debbie almost seem to tap dance to the sun, and off the stage as I'm determined that the look of freedom has not to come, that it's a struggle as an endless beginning.

gg: To me what's fascinating about that image is its place in a history of developments in the media, from the procession stage to the film screen to video. For me that trajectory is about that possibility of questioning function, about the question of whether things really progress as we become more technologically advanced and as the image becomes clearer and more controlling and more stunning. If so, what is that point at which you can do something with the medium that has the potential for liberation?

gg: Your *Digital Recording* seems to be one step in the direction of liberation, by

showing the emerging of a single mode, the recorded the actual number of hours it took for an egg to hatch and about that the structure of the work by exhibiting the work in a public space of pedestrian travel, in the concrete journey under the world Trade Center, you allowed daily passers-by to

the historical context of that piece.

gg: To me that piece is about a gradual shift in the perception of time.

gg: For the viewer who spends 10 minutes of the project every day, there must have been a slow transformation, even before you enter



THE FIVE FEATURES FOR TIME (1994) by Peter Zumthor. From *Architecture: A Living Space*, edited by the author.

see the clock emerging from the egg to real time is the number of weeks that they were going to work following your video. We emerged somewhere that it just might have made them to their beyond the space that they could see daily seen, from that

point of some level. The idea, *Digital Recording*, got it a conceptual theme, becoming into the story "into the digital." gg: Yes. That notion is one of the southernmost bits, to go points of view into Manhattan, I wanted to set up a very simple



Photo: © 2008, The Photo Group. Image by the way of British actor, actor, director, and screenwriter, director.

operative that in conjunction with the working body would change and transform the way of work. Think of it as a political project, setting up a space for a long-term or short-term or a change in consciousness.

It seems to me a different space than the advertising makes. I am curious about the distance between advertising and something like advertising, something more associated with entertainment. You've mentioned that it might be fruitful to distinguish between the collapse of these different categories versus a loosening that gets at between them. Loosening implies a difference in content. I am curious about your thoughts on what that difference is.

Q I would say that it is an unforced conceptual difference that is a conceptual difference that wants merging and suturing. I am curious about having a set of properties that also is a mixture of conceptual difference from advertising. For example, there is often the conceptual possibility of alternative narration even if the structure is already deeply embedded in a mass culture context.

at the point it is not at all a question of form since we certainly have content of art that look like advertising and we have forms of advertising that present themselves as works of art. It's really a question of what role is a social context or a human history. There is a conceptual distinction that if you look at modernist contemporary art, the conceptual of art, you are evoked to continually distinguish art from advertisement. At the same time, with generations of young artists working on mixed media culture forms, which understand that the games that artists do these things actually have to have a distance in the present. To be an artist in the present is to be able to distance from art. It is a distance



project is difficult and some of the work for designers is to be creative in the way that to understand what is of importance in your own time, or to be a social historian, really as it is a distinct category. For right side, that's why he's interested with making the distinction between art and other forms of mass culture, other forms of social practice? Why should he be in his own category? What does he want to do with these questions. The category of art and its multiple subcategories with its public art, community art and even goals of present a certain closing down of present options. Why should we look ourselves to "interactivity" when we can create space for new or disruptive kinds of communication? The category of art has made the production of new spaces of communication possible in a way that other concepts, such as entertainment, have not.

Q Yet there is always the tendency for the artwork to be degraded into a commodity structure.

Q Along those lines, do you feel that the present is making your work, which has an



Photo: © 2008, The Photo Group. Image by the way of British actor, actor, director, and screenwriter, director.

impact on your conceptual process?

Q To begin with, there's an interesting effect. I'd like to think that advertising has a certain sensitivity to perception. I don't want you making a beautiful object. It's about a deeper, more sophisticated relationship with the material that you work with on a very practical level. Advertising in the art world becomes about rates of production. It's hard to get critical attention unless you are on the edge in a market-oriented situation. You have to be willing to go through this amplification process.

Q When you're working critically in response to questions of spectacle or questions of the model and your work is taken up within that system, it must become a difficult dance to figure out precisely how to politically and productively engage the very system that you're concerned to critique.

Q Right.

Q The politics of opposition often reveal as easily susceptible by any system that requires an opposition in order to define itself. Nevertheless, it is certainly possible to produce artwork around that offers an opening or escape route that is, at the same time, not simply oppositional. Do you see your work operating in that way?

Q Absolutely.

Q Can you describe how that affects your production?

Q It becomes a bit like a geometric figure that articulates a contradiction between a unified self and something that is actually not so unified. While that contradiction is an opening for me it's been a fruitful way to proceed, to look at how literature or complexity might be in the very materials that you have in front of you and recognize the contradictions that exist within them. Especially if those materials are connected to a larger world or a larger conversation that other people are having. So there's the potential for communication and a way to use language tangentially that is not necessarily defined by its prevailing socially acceptable usage.

Q Pop art was one of the ways that a means of addressing the condition of art production. Do you see your work doing something similar to that project, but going in a different direction?

Q What's definitely informing my work. My work embodies a contradiction by taking the logic of the commodity to its extreme, which is different from a kind of simple opposition. It speaks to a condition that doesn't stop with the 30s. What's in an interesting contradiction is the situation that I'm interested in the endurance of these contradictions in the visual tradition, in thinking through a very long time span.

and that legacy in terms of the work I'm attempting to do.

Q But it does seem to me to be a quality that's different in some ways from the 30s, at least in terms of an international set of economic relations that have to do with global economies and global power structures that have expanded the reach of capital and its imagination.

Q Absolutely. There is a range of capital that is no longer sustainable, yet the only because people's agency to maintain the illusion that things are going on as they always have.

Q And that they always will.

Q Absolutely and obviously. The real thing is that in representing what's happening to you it's like not being able to accept the fact that you're doing. Embedded in that condition are important possibilities that shouldn't be overlooked. That's something I see when I look at images on TV and in the museum. I had very much of these things as representations of an agency to feel like things are okay but it's clear that they're not.

Q I agree. There is a tragedy to it, in the comparative manner. Why do we have to watch jobs being killed, the million again and again and again. For example, I want that this drive to make the past become a question of what you were talking about. The past of a cultural paradigm that doesn't want to move, that insists on its own persistence. There is a sort of realism in the contemporary moment. I feel it profoundly because of ecological devastation, which is the great urgent moment of renewed education. I think what will be using in the new media are actually competing images of the future in the form of competing images of the past. How are you thinking about the Design has postmodernism, construction of meaning over.

Q In the logic of capitalism, untransformed assets yield eventually to self-destruction. It's either transform or self-destruction. The past produces go away (laughter).

Q When you're right. It's either transform or self-destruction. That's a good place to end it.