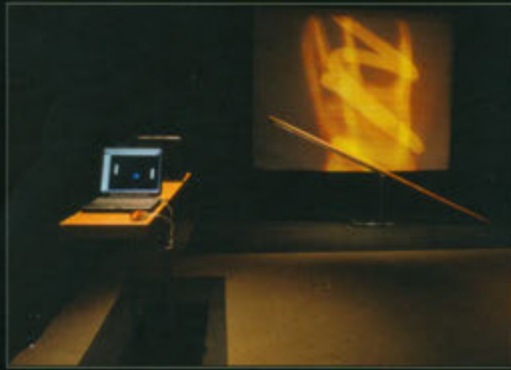


PROSTHETIC MEMORY

BODIES, BITS, & DEVICES BY CHRISTA ERICKSON



JANUARY 30 - FEBRUARY 24, 2007



Mnemonic Devices: Seesaw & Web Scavenger Hunt Game, 2000-7



Search, Video Tracking Installation, 2005-7



Learning Distance, Webcam Installation, 2001

TRACE, V. AND N. PRACTICES OF SUBJECTIFICATION IN THE ART OF CHRISTA ERICKSON

BY LISA DIEDRICH

trace, v.: literally, "to take one's course, make one's way; to proceed, pass, go, travel, tread"; "to follow the footprints or traces of." Figuratively, "to follow the course, development, or history of" and "to trace its origin or history; to go back in time, to date back." Also, "follow[ing] (with the eye or mind) the course or line of; to ascertain (the course or line of something)"; "to make out (worn or obscure writing); to discern, decipher"; "to discover evidence of the existence or occurrence of." Also, "to follow or make out with one's finger."

trace, n.: "the way or path which anything takes; course, road"; "the track made by a passage of any person or thing, whether beaten by feet or indicated in any other way"; "vestiges or marks remaining and indicating the former presence, existence, or action of something"; "a mark or impression left on the face, the mind, etc."

I begin with the multiple meanings of the word "trace" to suggest the interdisciplinarity of a particular concept, a concept that is demonstrated in all its complexity in Christa Erickson's work. "Trace" as verb and noun, as process and object, is presented here: a trace is a practice, something that one does, and it is an object, something that one might lose or find. Her work crosses multiple domains; she connects psychological traces with historical ones, poetic traces with digital ones, and economic traces with biomedical ones. When we make our way through Erickson's work, we discover tracing as a practice that moves from both the inside out and the outside in. She explores the sometimes solid, sometimes fleeting traces we leave of ourselves, and the many ways we are traced. Indeed, in Erickson's work, the multiple practices of memory and surveillance might be thought of as contemporary forms of what Foucault called "arts of existence" or "technologies of the self." And, like Foucault, Erickson is interested in tracing in and through her artwork a history of "practices of subjectivity"² – particularly postmodern ones, which utilize digital media technology, games, and everyday objects.

If we consider the show as a whole, tracing becomes a kind of methodology. Presented together, Erickson's work traces a genealogy of the postmodern subject, demonstrating in particular two modes of subjectification: memory and surveillance. We, the viewers, are interpellated into this work; we participate, willingly or not, in our subjectification in and by her art. Using digital, physical, and narrative devices, our bodily movements are traced and our stories of ourselves are remembered and recorded.

OUTSIDE IN: MEMORY

Conventionally, memory is thought of as the recollection of a past experience that one has had. We like to say that a memory is more authentic, closer to the "truth," the more accurately it recalls a past event. When we remember we become witnesses to the past, and we can be either good or bad witnesses depending on our ability to remember the details of a past event correctly. But, already, we can see the difficulties of ascertaining if a memory is "correct," because the details that make up our experiences of a particular event are infinite and changing from one moment to the next.

In a recent book about the transformation of the forms and practices of remembrance in postmodernity, Alison Landsberg begins with several questions:

To what extent do modern technologies of mass culture, such as film, with their ability to transport individuals through time and space, function as technologies of memory? In what ways do these technologies of mass culture challenge the distinction between individual and collective memory? How do these technologies introduce the 'experiential' as an important mode of knowledge acquisition? And finally, how might individuals be affected by memories of events through which they did not live?³

Landsberg suggests the term "prosthetic memory" for those memories that one is affected by but has not lived through. She considers the means by which we have prosthetic memories of world historical events, such as slavery and the Holocaust, events which most of us did not experience. Prosthetic memories, unlike "real" or "personal" memories, come from the outside in. However, if for Landsberg, memory is prosthetic when we come to "remember" or "experience" something we did not, in fact, live through, for Erickson, all memory is prosthetic, in the simple sense that memory comes into being through particular cultural templates and technological devices. Landsberg implies that there are some memories that a subject has that are not prosthetic. Erickson demonstrates, instead, that memory is always a form of subjectification, meaning that we come into being as subjects through *practices* of memory.⁴ Memories don't exist internally or externally to selves that have them; selves are made through memories.

Erickson's work makes this process of subjectification through memory-making visible. She does this through the projection of film footage and through audio recordings that look and sound like the past. The film and sound recordings in many of her installations, especially the *REplay Series*, *Mnemonic Devices*, but also in *Search*, *Orient*, and *Whirl*, have the texture of memory: they look and sound grainy, sometimes even warpy. They are nostalgic, but they also reveal that our nostalgia is often, well, warped. In the *REplay Series*, we might even say that Erickson queers nostalgia. We glimpse in Erickson's series on memory and forgetting precisely what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has defined as queer. For Sedgwick, as for Erickson, there is "something about *queer* [that] is inextinguishable," and we experience, in Erickson's work, Sedgwick's suggestion that queer is "a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, *troublant*." Queer is, according to Sedgwick, "relational, and strange."⁵ In our encounter with Erickson's art, memories come forth and connect us to her work, to the past, and to others, but they also disconnect us from ourselves. They make us feel strange to ourselves.

Erickson queers memory not simply by making us remember through images and sounds that recall, for the 21st century western viewer at least, childhood games, rhymes, and songs, but by revealing for us the mechanisms by which a memory of childhood might be triggered and not simply recalled, but made anew. We are encouraged to interact, to play along, with older, more physical childhood games, like blowing a pinwheel, hopscotching, or seesawing, and newer, less physical games that we play on computers, including a scavenger hunt on the web. The structure of the web game mimics the structure of the seesaw, but we seesaw in virtual rather than physical space. By seesawing, we trigger images projected on the wall, and our bodily movements control the speed of the projection of images. We are encouraged to alter our movements, and by doing so, we test reality, as a child might. The installation becomes a transitional space in which we might tinker with our ability to make images become visible in and disappear from the gallery space. This is heady stuff, suggesting the potent and enduring myth of autonomy and control. But it also reminds us that we are never really able to move and play freely. We are reminded of this simply by the artificiality of Erickson's play space; we know we are in a gallery not on a playground. Erickson's art makes play strange. We can't just play, as a child might, and this reminds us that we also can't remember what it once meant to play.

INSIDE OUT: SURVEILLANCE

In Erickson's work, playing suggests the possibility of transgression at the same time as it reminds us of the methods by which we are prevented from playing freely and made to conform. Just as her work reverses our understanding of memory as a practice that moves from the inside out to one that moves from the outside in, she also reverses our understanding of surveillance from a practice that moves from the outside in to one that moves from the inside out. Just as a memory is not something we have, but something that has us, the gaze is not only external to us, but becomes most effective when it is internalized by us. Surveillance as a mode of subjectification is demonstrated in several of the installations here, including *Search*, *Learning Distance*, *Dataskins*, *Debt Reducer*, and *Dis-ease*. Our movements are literally and figuratively traced throughout the show.

Upon entering the gallery space, we first encounter *Search*, an installation that captures, for a brief moment or longer, the viewer's wanderings. The viewer's movement, the path she beats across the gallery floor, triggers a video of a hand spinning a globe. In the old film footage, a finger languidly trails across the globe's surface, waiting to see where it will land when the globe stops as a result of the finger's pressure on the surface of the spinning globe. This is another childhood game, played to determine both destiny and desire. The point where the finger rests when the globe stops signals either the globe spinner's destiny – where she will end up – or her desire – where she dreams of going. In Erickson's installation, the viewer's wanderings also trigger words of longing and belonging on the wall. The words mark the globe, appearing and disappearing as vestiges of childhood dreams and desires.

Learning Distance links webcams on five continents to the gallery space in Stony Brook, New York. Live video from the webcams is streamed onto a hopscotch board on the floor of the gallery. Our patterns of movement – in the past via the memory of playing hopscotch and in the present via our willingness to follow along with the virtual game on the floor before us – are linked to less personal, more distant patterns of movement: a street in Italy, a freeway in Taiwan, an international airport, the Panama Canal zone, the area surrounding a temple in Osaka, Japan, etc. A webcam in the

gallery juxtaposes the activities in the gallery to all the other spaces further afield. Video of the space that surrounds us as we view the show is also projected, displaying visually the process of making distant spaces closer and proximate spaces more distant. This suggests both the promise and peril of digital technology: it brings us together even as it forces us apart.

Throughout the show, our bodies in space are traced, but we are also traced through the accumulation of information about us. This process is rendered visible in *Dataskins*, *Eternal Climb*, *Debt Reducer*, and *Dis-ease*, where images of bodies are written on with personal, economic, scientific, and medical data. We can, and are encouraged to, make our personal data and stories part of two larger stories presented here: stories of debt and disease. We are asked to contribute our own personal account of debt by text messaging our data to the *Debt Reducer* installation, which also includes a live data feed of the usually increasing National Debt of the United States.

We may also add a story or stories of illness to the multiple stories – scientific, medical, political, historical, personal – accumulated for and as *Dis-ease*, and presented in the form of an examination table complete with an ever-changing exquisite corpse that layers words, images, and sounds of bodies. The installation takes us inside the body: we see historical anatomical drawings, images from x-rays, MRIs, and other imaging technologies, and fragments of the ongoing human genome mapping project; and we hear sounds meant to give us a feeling of the body's internal rhythms. *Dis-ease* also moves out from the individual body and its parts to the multiple experiences of ill bodies in the world: in hospitals, clinics, and other medical spaces, but also in the streets demanding new treatments and in support groups where a group of individuals becomes a community of the ill.

From body to data to the world and back again, Christa Erickson's work demonstrates the traces of this "continuing moment, movement, motive" of subjectification.⁶ It makes visible mechanisms of the self, tracing the connections between "personal" memories and cultural histories, between identity politics and information technologies, between the stories we accumulate about ourselves and the data we are reduced to. You are asked to add another trace: a memory of childhood, a story of loss, a message of accumulated debt, a series of images on a gallery wall. You may not want to play along, but you will.

1 Oxford English Dictionary Online (<http://dictionary.oed.com/>).

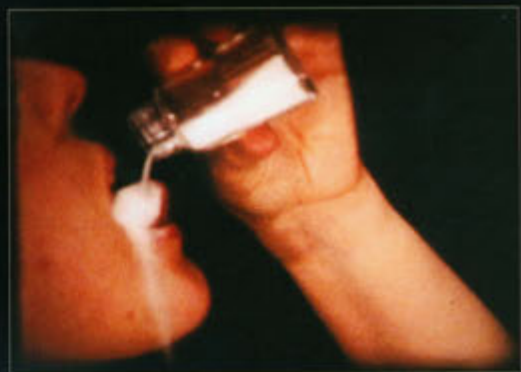
2 Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France, 1981-1982*. Trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 11.

3 Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 1.

4 In this regard, Erickson's work fits in well theoretically with the burgeoning field of "memory studies," a field which has emerged to a great extent through the study of traumatic memory. See, for example, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1991); Cathy Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996); Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (1997); and Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001). However, Erickson's emphasis is not particularly on traumatic, but everyday, practices of memory.

5 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), xii.

6 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, xii.



REplay Series: Salteater, Video Sculpture, 2002



REplay Series: Rewind, Interactive Video, 2002



REplay Series: Femme, Video Sculpture, 2005-6

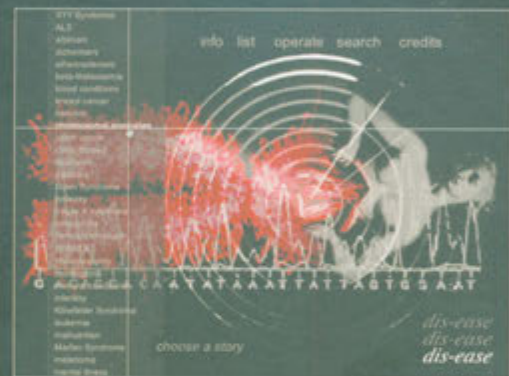
I am fascinated by the stories we tell ourselves about our bodies and the technologies that increasingly mediate our experience of them. We use imaging technologies like photography, film, and video to help us remember. We leave traces in countless databases. Communications technologies extend our voices, eyes, hands, and "presence" geographically and in real time. Biotechnologies peer into us and raise a host of important cultural questions. Various technologies of "convenience" help us organize our lives, often disciplining our bodies to their configurations and leaving us tangled in the wires of their power needs. My work looks to reveal aspects of such contemporary experience with combinations of video, objects, electronics, and computer controls. I think of many of the objects/interfaces as "cinematic devices."

At first glance, my installations often resemble familiar spaces and objects. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that they have been skewed in specific ways. Much of my work, particularly those pieces incorporating scratchy analog imagery, makes use of video loops to explore my interest in the social, technological, and psychological mechanisms of memory and experience. Tactile objects and materials are often juxtaposed against ephemeral video projections or informational screens. In many cases, the interface between such disparate elements requires the viewer to engage her or his own body as the performer or operator of the piece. I see this moment of discovery as an opportunity for viewers to rediscover their physical body in an increasingly disembodied culture. Other times, I let the information control the interface, making data more tangible and relating it to a sense of physicality. For a while, I revisited childhood devices and games to explore a moment in our culture wherein we have used communications technologies to relearn patterns of social interaction.

Christa Erickson
<http://christaerickson.net>



Dataskins, Interactive Installation, 2000-5



Dis-ease (screen shot), 2003-present



Debt Reducer, Cell Phone Interactive Installation, 2007



Dis-ease, Animated Database, 2003-present

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

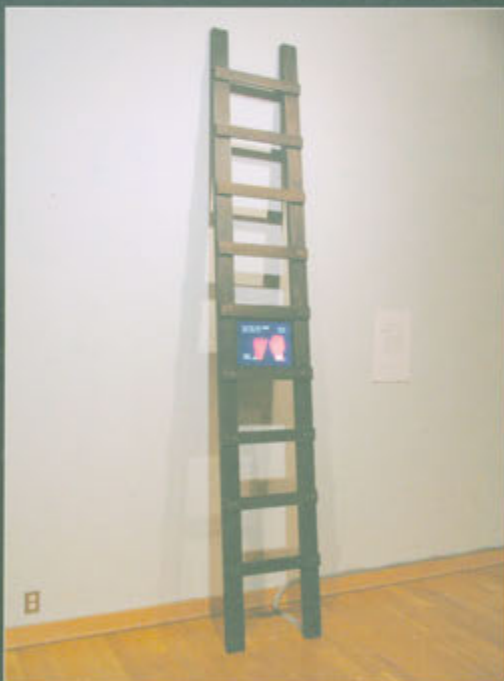
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Rhonda Cooper
Gallery Director



Eternal Climb, Stock Market Driven Installation, 2004-5

Cover Images top: Search, 2005-7 center: Mnemonic Devices - Seesaw, 2000-7 bottom: Dis-ease, 2003 - present