

*the felon wind...it carries with it a passenger...one that soaks through all flesh and matter...vertically dripping through time from generation to generation; horizontally seeping through all that we know and all that there is...all flesh and matter is reflective and porous...the passenger flows eternally, forever and ever*

John Espinosa's works explore ambiguity or the unknown, and the memetic circulation of their byproducts. They imagine the physical and psychological edges of uncertainty - its sensorial absorption, processing, and distortion. This often renders out with an earthy physicality haunted by inorganic and metaphysical anxieties.

Prevalent narratives include collective behavior and our compulsion to dissolve into pattern; euphoric states of clarity/delusion; slowed decay or aspirational immortality; and our impulse to worship and its artifacts. These themes are all often seen through the lens of his childhood experiences as a Jehovah's Witness raised amidst the fantastic landscapes of Central Florida, a context where the natural, the non-natural and the super-natural blurred.

John Espinosa (b. Bogota, Colombia 1966) received an MFA from Yale University's School of Art and a BFA from The New World School of the Arts in Miami.

His work has been featured in exhibitions at venues including The Renaissance Society, Chicago; Metro Pictures, NY; Marianne Boesky, NY; Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris; and Vilma Gold, London. He has had one-person exhibitions at Sandroni Rey Gallery, LA, Charest-Weinberg, Miami; Fredric Snitzer, Miami; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami.

Recent exhibitions include *Lux et Veritas* at the NSU Art Museum, Ft Lauderdale (2023); and *Light Play* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (2024).

The work can be found in numerous public and private collections including The New Museum of Contemporary Art (Altoids Collection), NY; The Whitney Museum of Contemporary Art (Francis Mulhall Library), NY; the Perez Art Museum, Miami; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami.

## Selected Texts on John Espinosa's work:

- 3      **Molecular Science** by Gean Moreno
- 10     **The Baths of Esalen** by Jason Kakoyannis
- 23     **Q&A on Remote Viewing** Gean Moreno and John Espinosa
- 25     **Suspension of Disbelief** by Carlos Suarez de Jesus
- 27     **Fantastic Adventures** by Gean Moreno

## Molecular Science

by Gean Moreno

*Published on the occasion of The Glass Delusion, an exhibition of new work by John Espinosa at Charest-Weinberg Gallery, Miami*

John Espinosa's work has always been about the way that information can "disjoint" the object that transmits it. There is always an excess in his sculptures, but not in the sense that we can't pin down their meaning and have to capitulate to a logic of deferral or to symbolic indeterminacy. It's, rather, that the information used precedes the object and continues moving after it. Like the comic book cells of Pop art, it's material already circulating in the world when Espinosa sets his sights on it and it won't be depleted by "entering" his objects. But unlike Pop art, however, the translating machine here never manages to turn appropriated material into self-contained aesthetic object. In fact, it's the turbulence of translation--the transference of data and the way it perturbs the object--more than any completed conversion, that is important to the work. Espinosa's claim that Dennis Oppenheim's *Two Stage Transfer Drawing (Advancing to a Future State)*, 1971, was an important early encounter should generate little surprise. One imagines the conspiracy films of the 1970s no less significant an influence.



*Dennis Oppenheim - Two Stage Transfer Drawing (Advancing to a Future State)*

In Espinosa's work, the sculpture that one bumps into is merely a vector in the much longer trajectory of the information presented. Granted, it's an eccentric vector, a vector that as an art object, enmeshed in a history of self-aware and complexly-structured cultural artifacts, calls attention to itself, harbors various secondary motives, underscores and intensifies the very process it is engaged in, and often by its very nature alters the data it routes. But an agent used to deliver information from one context to another nonetheless, the Espinosa "vector" takes on a kind of supplementary character in relation to the massive networks--those invisible materialities that increasingly structure our everyday worlds--in which the data it mines is enmeshed.

This may be a way to think about Espinosa's sculptural practice: It's about rerouting information and waiting to see how this rerouting "re-molecularizes" the object. Espinosa plugs into the massive networks in which data is moving and generates a detour in their flows by grafting an artificial vector (a sculpture) to them. But it's weirder than this, because the vector itself, in a significant even if not in a complete way, is made from the data it channels. The data becomes part of the "molecular" structure of the object and the actual molecules that make up the physical artifact have to accommodate this data as an essential and irreducible part of it--and not simply as a disconnected semiotic layer loosely pegged to matter. Consequently, the object is "molecularly" bound to the data it drew on.



*An Infinite Collapse*

When we learn, for instance, that the hollow core of *An Infinite Collapse* (2005) is filled with fifty gallons of hermetically sealed saltwater harvested from the Bermuda Triangle we see a doubling, like an image splitting and “de-laminating” from itself, suddenly crystallized: the sculpture is there as a physical body, but the sculpture is also in the wild currents of information regarding the Bermuda Triangle that come rushing in. Neither side has priority over the other. And to obviate the second, immaterial (but very real) dimension of the work is to shortchange its complexity and to refuse to see the exercise in adjusting sculptural production to a world traversed by endless networks, overflowing with information, and shaped by invisible forces.



*The Bermuda Triangle*

On the one hand, the object plugs and dissolves into the lore that has accrued around the Bermuda Triangle -- the anomalous phenomena registered in aircraft gages spinning wildly, the disappearance of Flight 19, the leftover technology of Atlantis, etc. It taps that entire network of perhaps spurious, but not because of this any less real, information and becomes an interface with it--a real endpoint of the network. It is now part of its contents. More than referencing or alluding to an object of myth, *An Infinite Collapse* fuses with the Bigness of the Bermuda Triangle.<sup>1</sup> Seamed to a massive virtual archive, forever submerged in its flows, what is this sculpture? Where does it end? Where do we locate it? Does it become, like the Bermuda Triangle, something that splits itself between a very specific location in physical space and a virtual collection of data? In a very real sense, *An Infinite Collapse* is somehow *not there*.

On the other hand, of course *An Infinite Collapse* is undeniably *there*. Its dimensions are precise; its weight can easily be determined; a soft kick when the gallery attendants aren't looking will confirm its materiality. It engages in that "calibrated relationship" between object, viewer and architecture that has busied American sculpture since it internalized the lessons of Barnett Newman. Even if coated with an image of deep space that takes us elsewhere, *An Infinite Collapse*'s flirtation with a recurrent minimalist gestalt while bending it just so, as if it's been distorted by an alien force or by the gravitational pull of a black hole, claims it as yield from the gene pool of that "something else" beyond sculpture that Donald Judd staked out in the mid-60s. One thinks, in particular, of how this object relates to Charles Ray's adherence to and challenge of minimalist forms in works like *Ink Box* (1986) and *Ink Line* (1987). (But one also thinks of the intertwining of data and form that is central to Ray's *Unpainted Sculpture* [1997] and more recent projects.) Like Ray's objects in general, *An Infinite Collapse* addresses the problem of scale. In taking on particular proportions, in addressing and ironically challenging formal protocols, in sitting in space in such a way as to participate in the triangular relationship of viewer-object-architecture, *An Infinite Collapse* manifests not only its undeniable *thereness* but its affiliation to a lineage of objects deeply concerned with their literal presence and behavior in physical space.



So, then, *An Infinite Collapse* splits in two--ontologically. A fault line opens up in it. It's surely in front of us. But then, it's also not *merely* that squat object that gravity anchors to the gallery floor, because it is swirling around us, transacting in our memory banks, digging into our (pop) cultural archives, taking up cheap real estate in

cyberspace, inserting itself into other heads that may care less for sculpture than for the paranormal. It's the data channeled and the channel the data flows through. It's dispersed and it's contained, refusing synthetical tidiness. To put a down a short and precise formulation, here where precision comes undone: *An Infinite Collapse* is *there* completely and it's *not there* at all. This is the theorem that diagrams it's double structure. The infinite collapse is that of the bridge that we incessantly (reflexively) try to place over the gap at the center of the object.

This impossible bridge that would re-link things, that would return us to the object that is self-contained and autonomous, is what Espinosa refuses to deliver or what he is perhaps proposing as out of tune with a world stitched together by networks and structured by disembodied forces. What he offers, instead, is the split-object. And more recently, we've gotten the absent-object or the object that is a little like Fritz Lang's Dr. Mabuse in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933) -- a network that has swallowed its center; a series of "external" manifestations that retroactively postulate a cause or center they can't quite confirm. In the film, Dr. Mabuse is a mastermind criminal who, after years of silence in an asylum, begins to write obsessively and produces a massive manual (the testament) intended to bring about the Reign of Crime. Sitting up in his bed the few times he is shown in the film, Mabuse is an empty shell and a writing machine--a senselessly productive body bereft of interiority and intentionality. And although the mad doctor is confined and dies halfway through the movie, the perfect crimes he has laid the program for are executed to the letter by a disconnected network of criminals led by a voice that emanates from behind a curtain in a secret room. Everything points back to Mabuse, but Mabuse is nowhere to be located.

In the end we find out that the "voice" who is unleashing chaos on the city belongs to Dr. Baum, Mabuse's psychiatrist. But of course, Baum is no more than a decoy. He is the voice behind the curtain that hides The Voice Behind the Curtain--the Absent Cause that generates concrete effects by putting out the urgent and implacable demand--as a manageable substitute to irresolvable social antagonisms--to be filled in. The Voice Behind the Curtain is the voice that is not there; the voice whose very absence we have to fill, whose missing message we are compelled to code. It's the voice that Mabuse's empty shell of a body and machine-like production serve as placeholders for.

Espinosa's most Mabusean project thus far is *Remote Viewing* (2010). He claims to have acquired a remote parcel of land somewhere in central Florida. Its exact location is secret. He constructed a sculpture on this property and left it there for people to bump into accidentally. There are no images of this artifact, except for a video that has been deposited somewhere on the Internet. Its exact location, like that of the sculpture, isn't being disclosed. There is the title, but it remains unclear whether this names the orphaned object or the process that the object's absence triggers--the need for those who hear about this "absent" sculpture to produce their own mental picture of it. It may be that the title names more than either of these.

We have to believe Espinosa regarding the existence of this abandoned artifact, I suppose, even in the absence of evidence, lest we risk this being only a hoax. (Though, in the end, it may not matter if it is a hoax, as the dam has already been opened and the effects generated demand we fill in the "absent cause" anyway.) So there is an object somewhere out there, its location is unknown, its morphology anyone's guess, its fate not only undetermined but unverifiable. And yet, even with this black hole at the center of the story, skepticism has no purchase here. Or rather, to doubt if any of this is true is to miss what is at stake: the entire economy of rumor has been activated. Calling up such a massive force, a tornado that moves only data while producing real physical effects, in order to consider its productive possibilities, to see where it takes us, renders any potential lack of veracity in Espinosa's claim of little consequence. All we need to do is hear the story and follow its movements, track the spirals spinning out of an empty eye.

"While still under the shadow of negativity, rumor nonetheless acts as an *enabler*..."<sup>1</sup> Although Avital Ronell is busy deciphering Heidegger in that line, what is of interest here is the question of enabling, of setting the conditions, if not the obligations, for production. Rumor is generative; it fires things up. In our case, it enables or "teleguides" the fantasy production of a potentially infinite array of images of a sculpture, each determined by the idiosyncratic mental modulations or limitations of the conjurer. And we can go further: this rumor *compels*, like a mad hypnotist, the emergence of this endless parade of morphological variants, of this insubstantial and dispersed field of delirious incongruity. It induces a kind of cognitive mobilization. Aren't you, as you read this, already working on a mental picture of this object, already



adding to the field of possible versions, even if, now that I've mentioned it, you fight against the impulse, refuse to be manipulated?

So, *where* do we locate the sculpture in this case? Is it the object abandoned in the woods? Is it the rumor that activates things? Is it in your head? Is it the endless flow of private images that form a kind of unbound archive? If we think that the latter is the case, then *Remote Viewing* will always be miscellaneous and unfinished. We'd be dealing with an "object" that has swelled beyond itself precisely by articulating itself as a flexible void, an open and unavoidable invitation, within the cognitive space of those whom the rumor catches up with. The sculpture can accommodate endless, heterogeneous iterations of "itself."

But, of course, Espinosa's understanding of the object as always double, always there and not there, always "de-laminated" from itself, paradoxically refuses to allow us to decouple things this easily and say that only these fantasy images constitute *Remote Viewing*. Whatever it is that triggered the production of these images, the "absent cause," insofar as Espinosa has folded it into the work by elaborating a story about it, is just as much a part of the sculpture. It's a structuring hole at the center of it. And if this is so, then the medium--rumor--that extends the process in time and space has to be incorporated as a fundamental aspect of the work as well. *Remote Viewing* may just be the entire network that is constructed between the missing causal agent or trigger (the black hole we feel compelled to fill), the medium of transmission (rumor), and the dispersed array of images that result. And one has to take things further, since rumors have a way of refusing to stay once we put them down: *the work is also in all the future images that will emerge*. It's already in the non-existent locations that it will actualize by filling. The whole thing is like a flexible and expanding and multidimensional Mabusean web. The work is distributed and disconnected to the point where we can't see the end of it--its absent source is mirrored by its potential lack of finitude. We are not before a sculpture but *in* it somehow, in the field of all the incongruent versions that have been/will be imagined, even if we can't really survey this field. This is sculpture as exploded drawing, but with this difference: it's not exploded spatially, it's exploded in time. It's sculpture re-molecularized into a quasi-hyperobject,<sup>1</sup> a "machine" of effects that, like Dr. Mabuse, is nowhere and everywhere.

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## The Baths of Esalen by Jason Kakoyannis

The goal of this writing is to revisit aspects of 20<sup>th</sup> Century art historical scholarship that positioned the artwork as a “world” or microcosm of a world, and juxtapose these with some discussion of the birth of the consciousness movement here on the west coast of the United States in the early to mid-1960s. The exercise provides a useful path into John Espinosa’s current works, which I argue stage a process of discovery, extrapolation into form, and mental projection of an artifact with unknown, potentially esoteric origins. The works enact or gesture toward a methodology for interpreting or disconcealing this artifact that seems to iteratively “think” through or in terms of vision, or a type of vision.



The artifact in *Glass Delusion*—the wall drawing—gives rise to an elaborate apparatus whose purpose seems to enable a type of vision where knowledge and sight are co-extensive, and where to “see” is to “know”. Perhaps the sculpture is a visual prosthesis of some sort, one

that wants to assemble a new type of image. My suggestion is that the sculpture wants to perform for us a mode of seeing that could loosely be called visionary in nature.



The Glass Delusion - Mirage Artifacts and their light reflections

Espinosa's sculptures dialogue with ways of thinking the pictorial image reminiscent of the Vienna School of art history and its exponents including Hans Sedlmayr, Alois Riegl, Erwin Panofsky, among others. For these researchers, the picture was a device for transmitting a historically distant world (a portal), paintings were containers of an emerging understanding of haptic space (navigable voids), and pictorial illusion was a cipher for and extension of subjective consciousness (prosthetics). More importantly, Espinosa's work hinges these models to the spiritually informed counter culture of mid-century California. This emergent culture looked to inner experience as the object of analysis and surely wasn't concerned with the artwork *per se*, however, some of the same rules seem to apply to the self-understanding of man as to the painting. It might be possible to say, then, that all that is signified by the word "consciousness" was conceived as a certain kind of picture or image.

### I. The world within the work.

Hans Sedlmayr begins his seminal 1931 text, *Toward a Rigorous Study of Art*, thus: "...a work of art only exists through a particular attitude in which virtually the entire historical situation is concentrated." Sedlmayr offers this concept of artwork-as-microcosm as he builds toward an art historical method founded on the "transition from a conception of the 'whole world' as a field of action and expression for its creator...to a conception of the world as the

object of examination and investigation."<sup>1</sup> The work of art is privileged here as the source and container of a world view. It was a primary site or origin of philosophy rather than a trace or remnant of something else "that was to be disclosed through it."

For Sedlmayr, perception has a habit of defeating itself as it advances. The critics' dilemma is that he is historically fixed in time, always battling to make the correct *angle of approach* to the object of analysis. In such a model, the experience of the work is discontinuous, conceived as a sequence of unfolding and relapsing particulars.

The artwork may contain a world, but it is a world partially ruined. This was the gloss offered by Walter Benjamin in his review of Sedlmayr's book in 1933, where Benjamin embraces the microcosm, but complicates it with the notion of aporia and permanent loss: "For if the most meaningful works prove to be precisely those whose life is most deeply embedded in their material contents...then over the course of their historical duration these material contents present themselves to the researcher all the more clearly *the more they have disappeared from the world.*"<sup>2</sup>

This is the extension of the line of thought laid out in Benjamin's famous book on allegory, where allegorical art's defining characteristic is to figure a type of loss even as it becomes the assembler of a type of understanding. This is its final truth. There is no eternal image of the past to return to through the artwork. The artwork precedes history. Through interpretation of the work, the critic "makes" and remakes an image of history rather than the image proceeding out of a totalized understanding of what has come before.

## **II. Horror vacui**

In *Late Roman Art Industry* of 1901, Alois Riegl narrates the moment in late antiquity when depth and pictorial space were produced out of flattened, ornamental rhythm. In the Augustinian aesthetic where rhythm predominated, the tension between interval and form or form and absence-of-form, had become unbearable. Something transpires when the formless interval is re-cast as the positive presence of "space." This negative interval is transfigured forward into a new, positive characterization. As Riegl states it, "Space has emancipated itself,

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Sedlmayr, "Toward a Rigorous Study of Art (1931)," in: Christopher Wood (ed.), *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s* (Cambridge, MA, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Rigorous Study of Art*, trans. T.Y. Levin, October 47.

but it is formed into rhythmic intervals (in contrast to the formlessness of modern art, which basically stresses the infinity of space stretching into depth)."<sup>3</sup> The spatial interval, now understood as a container of infinite space rather than an empty passage, has been made to submit to the dominating effect of rhythm and the aesthetic imperative of unity.



*An Infinite Collapse*

This idea of a will to form internal to art is termed *Kunstwollen* by Riegl, and the *Kunstwollen* of a specific age embodies its own distinctive schema. In researching the late Roman *Kunstwollen*, Riegl argues that late Roman artifacts emphasize deep vision and optical depth—the first beginnings of a notion of infinitude expressed visually.

Riegl is writing the pre-history of figure/ground relations. From within the flatness of ornamental design, he perceives a freeing up of the interval as a pocket of space with potential to become a “self-contained unit of aesthetic potency.” The spatial interval, absent of ornament, is nonetheless pregnant with the possibility of becoming a depth.

Deep plastic space, as it evolved from flat ornament, becomes the direct expression of the unfolding of the “human spirit”. Perspective is an extension of consciousness’s desire for order, transforming the irrational, disorderly psychophysiological space of inner experience into a perfectly mapped mathematical exterior space. Erwin Panofsky’s essay, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, is the most eloquent theorization of this argument. Perspectival systems served

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<sup>3</sup> Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, Rome: G. Bretschneider, 1985.

as projections of the desire for precisely the integrity and mappability that was denied actual human consciousness. Perspective was a dream of unity dreamt by a dreamer in fragments.

This push/pull dichotomy between the inchoate nature of man's inner world and the illusion of a perfectly coherent exterior world is impossible to transcend. In one of the final notes appended to the essay, Panofsky critiques a 1925 essay by Soviet painter/architect El Lissitzky with a comment that to modern ears seems a commonplace regarding the limits of the early constructivist notions of space, namely that their radical break with Euclidean geometry is overrated.<sup>4</sup>

For his part, Lissitzky didn't deny that his *proun* paintings actualized something more reminiscent of Euclidean space than not, his point was that they took advantage of certain newly discovered short cuts for reproducing the effect of space without the apparatus of perspective. "New optical discoveries have taught us that two areas of different intensities, even when they are lying in plane, are grasped by the mind as being at different distances from the eye."<sup>5</sup> The *proun* system is positional, optical, relying on the arrangements of form to produce distances, or sensations of it, that refute any systematic measurement. These distances are themselves rendered "irrational," in the strictest sense of the term. The surface of the *proun* ceases to be a picture, turning into a structure round which we are asked to circle, looking at it from all sides. For Lissitzky "the result is that the one axis of the picture which

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<sup>4</sup> Panofsky states it thus: "Most instructive, although—or perhaps precisely because—disputable, is an essay by El Lissitzky in Kiepenhauer's Verlag-ALmanach for 1925, p. 103ff. Older perspective is supposed to have "limited space, made it finite, closed it off," conceived of space "according to Euclidean geometry as rigid three dimensionality," and it is these very bonds which the most recent art has attempted to break. Either it has in a sense exploded the entire space by "dispersing the center of vision" ("Futurism"), or it has sought no longer to represent depth intervals "extensively" by means of foreshortenings, but rather, in accord with the most modern insights of psychology, only to create an illusion "intensively" by playing color surfaces off against each other, each differently placed, differently shaded, and only in this way furnished with different spatial values (Mondrian and in particular Malevich's "Suprematism"). The author believes he can suggest a third solution: the conquest of an "imaginary space" by means of mechanically motivated bodies, which by this very movement, by their rotation or oscillation, produce precise figures (for example, a rotating stick produces an apparent circle, or in another position, an apparent cylinder, and so forth). In this way, in the opinion of El Lissitzky, art is elevated to the standpoint of a non-Euclidean pan-geometry (whereas in fact the space of those "imaginary" rotating bodies is no less "Euclidean" than any other empirical space). Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 1927, trans. Christopher Wood, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> El Lissitzky, "A. and Pangeometry," ABC-Beitrage zum Bauen, Basle 1925, reproduced in Lissitzky-Kuppers, El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts, London 1980.

stood at right angles to the horizontal was destroyed. Circling round it, we screw ourselves into the space."<sup>6</sup>

If Lissitzky's imaginary space describes a mere modification of axonometry and not a true break from it, it surely owes to medieval perspective its very ability to conceive of directionality altogether. To move in all directions at once, to have "directional indifference," assumed what the medieval had established, namely the "homogeneity of the representational substratum." Panofsky's point is to show that both axonometry and Lissitzky's imaginary space are conservative, not revolutionary, modifications because they continue straight out of the same phylogenetic tree as perspective. This turn has been repeated before: mannerism, baroque and rococo have all made false moves against perspective through similar cases of a "rotated" backlash against geometric space.

Lissitzky continues:

"Lobatchewski and Gauss were the first to prove that Euclidean space is only one instance in the unending succession of spaces. Our minds are incapable of visualizing this, but that is precisely the characteristic of mathematics—that it is independent of our powers of visualization. Hence it follows that the multi-dimensional spaces, existing mathematically, cannot be represented, and indeed cannot be materialized. We can change only the form of our physical space, but not its structure."<sup>7</sup>

So long as physical vision remained a product of the inalterable anatomy of the eye, mental visualization could not fully grasp what mathematics had succeeded in describing. The use of visual prostheses—the convex camera lens and elapsed time film exposures, for example—led a path beyond biology, but only in part. The mathematical conception of irrational space always serves as the horizon of vision—the point at which total coherence becomes intellectually possible, but remains beyond the limits of imagining it as a physically navigable space. Biological reference points—the so called instruments of vision—are at the basis of consciousness, and Lissitzky's suggestion is that consciousness may be restructured or expanded simply by changing the physical structure of the eye.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

#### IV. Symptoms of the Image

"If something is to stay in the memory, it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory." Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*

Perspectival systems became the symbolic of the dream of a new world freed from the baggage of a physical body, and a new "mind" that can move past the constraints of brain. But the dream of surpassing the constraints of biology has primal origins. Aby Warburg discussed the repression of the body, and of its associated primitive drives, as the ongoing scandal of western society. He examines the Walpi (Apache) Snake dance in his 1939 essay entitled "*A Lecture on Snake Ritual*". A glimpse of the stage of this magical-associative practice unveils the primitive origins of the symbol to Warburg. The Walpi shaman grabs the snake and carries it in his mouth in order to "bring about an actual union of the serpent with the masked figure." The snake is literally thrust into its role as lightning-sign when the Indian throws it at the paintings scratched into sand.<sup>8</sup> The live rattlesnake is thus consecrated to meaning in an act of force that depends on physical proximity and ritualized moments of contact.

The sacral relations that produce the Walpi symbol are achieved with force and bodily proximity, a most extreme intermeshing of the signifier and signified. Forging the sign-symbol requires physical bodies managed under pressure. In the utter "coarseness" of these proceedings, Warburg recognizes an attempt to provide cause—"the masked dance is masked causality"—the first movement to protect against formlessness, later to be organized into systems of philosophy.

In the Warburg imaginary, the tragedy of western culture is the persistent cleavage between body and mind. Warburg's intellectual project aimed to reveal that the time of primitive man is continuous with the present, the primitive still lies in waiting beneath the veneer of civilization and notions of progress. The snake-dance of the Walpi is for Warburg also a halfway stop in the evolution of human ritual between the empathy of mimic action and the extreme exponent of the primitive: the blood-sacrifice itself. In his view, the blood sacrifice has never been left behind.

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<sup>8</sup> Warburg describes it thus... "Then it is cast on to the floor of the kiva, where there is a picture drawn in sand representing four lightning-snakes with a quadruped in the middle. In another kiva there is a sand drawing of a bank of clouds with four differently coloured streaks of lightning, in the shape of serpents. The snakes are flung down violently on to the first sand picture so that the drawing is obliterated and the snake itself is covered in sand. There is no doubt in my mind that this magic throw is intended to make the snake provoke the lightning or bring rain." Aby Warburg, *A Lecture on Serpent Ritual*, 1939.



Warburg's invention of the concept he termed *Pathosformel*, translated loosely as "model of feeling," stemmed from his desire to trace out over history what he felt to be the consequences of this denial of the primitive: the overall schizophrenia of western culture. Warburg sees images of bodies as runes of this split—the ecstatic (manic) nymph on one side and the (depressive) river god in mourning, on the other. His research focused on the iconographical representation of bodies in movement. He catalogued the gestures of Classical bodies, saw these gestures as persisting into the art of the Renaissance and beyond, each image continuing along a particular "pathos formula" which gives it a specific resonance of the primal. As he catalogued gestures and styles of posing the active human form, he erected what has been aptly termed "a psychic symptomatology" since the internal psychic condition was always on display in the bodies represented in painting.<sup>9</sup> Bodies flex and pulse in an array of gestures that persist through history from Botticelli to contemporary advertising. For Warburg, bodily expression is frequently understood as the return of the repressed within the image.<sup>10</sup>

But if the logic of Renaissance pictorial space was a dream of control, it was always under the threat of being overwhelmed from below by the spastic, shambolic ecstasy of the figure in movement. George Didi-Huberman states that for Warburg, "the fundamental, uncanny duality of all cultural facts was as follows: the logic they set allows the chaos they combat to overflow; the beauty they invent lets the horror they repress burst through; the freedom they promote leaves the constraining drives they try to break intact."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Dialektik des Monstrums: Aby Warburg and the Symptom Paradigm*,

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<sup>10</sup> "Amongst other things, I was sincerely disgusted with the aestheticizing history of art. It seemed to me that the formal contemplation of the image, which does not consider it a biologically necessary product between religion and art practice (which I only understood later), led to such sterile prattling that after my trip to Berlin in the summer of 1896 I decided to switch to medicine. I had no idea that after my trip to America the organic relationship between the art and religion of 'primitive' peoples would appear with such clarity that I plainly saw the identity, or rather the indestructibility of primitive man who remains eternally the same throughout all epochs..."

<sup>11</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Dialektik des Monstrums: Aby Warburg and the Symptom Paradigm*,

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## V. The Vision of a Thousand Eyes

The persistent asymmetry of the body and mind might give the arc of art historical narrative its shape, but these concerns are not native or unique to art history. Under the art historical lineage traced thus far, the body is confirmed as the essential content of art. In the slow migration of gestalt psychology and its derivatives from Middle Europe to the west coast of the United States (the mechanisms of which are outside the scope of this paper) during the American mid-century, a loose but palpable continuation of this theme is evident.

In the California scene of the 1950s and 60s, the syncretism of spiritual practice, emancipatory politics, awareness of Eastern religion, counter cultural lifestyle formations, and the paroxysms of the Korean and Vietnam wars gave rise to an emancipation rhetoric of the American hippie and spiritualist school where the self was thought as a container of worlds.

Stephen Gaskin, founder of the well known Monday Night Classes at San Francisco State University, describes a particular type of acid trip that members of his social scene were wont to have. For Gaskin and his fellow travelers, LSD was used as a prosthesis of consciousness and tool for self exploration: [See Image 4-a or Image 4-b]

There's four and a half billion of us—of our particular life-form—here on this planet. We can't really see, much less recognize, every one of those faces, but we can see, visually and telepathically, some related things—one of them being the Vision of the Thousand Eyes. It's as if you're looking into the inside of a sphere made of eyes. You open your eyes inside this sphere of eyes, and those other eyes open too—and you look into all of them and they all look into you, and you all recognize each other. You all know it at once, and you just look. It only lasts a few seconds, because it's too heavy to hold for very long. But it's a gas while you can do it.

There was a yogi on Haight Street we called "Superdupe" and he put a flyer on telephone poles in the Haight, describing this vision, known to the Hindus as the Vision of the Thousand Eyes, which several of us had had by then—and some others as well. It said, "If you have had any of these visions, call Yogi Superdupe." I thought that was pretty hip.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen Gaskin, *Monday Night Class*, 1971.

This acid trip diary crystallizes a certain notion of the eye as the supra-organ, totally engulfing emotionality and intersubjective awareness. The overwhelming connectedness described in Gaskin's *Vision of a Thousand eyes* relates to a consciousness that has been gleaned of any physique, suspended in a state of pure immediacy of connection. The autonomous subject merges here into the oceanic presence of "all the others" but the immersion is preceded by total knowing expressed as sight—"you all know it at once, and you just look." To see is to know in this trip.

Gaskin's acid trip describes a model of pure immanence that is best understood as symbolic, not unlike the world within the artwork that Sedlmayr described. Where Gaskin's tripper dreams of bridging intersubjective distance—the psychic distance between one another—Sedlmayr dreams an artwork that bridges historical distance. The affirmative momentary totality of the symbol in Gaskin's trip is the opposite, however, of the radical discontinuity of the allegorical structure. The acid tripper exists in a fully transparent world without shadows. For Gaskin's empathic acid tripper, the tragic element of his symbolic unity trip is expressed simply by the fact that it has to end.

## VI. Pacific Wall

"When we have found all the meanings and lost all the mysteries, we will be alone, on an empty shore."- Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia*

Espinosa's work is infused by a certain distillation of hippy counter-culture, drug experience, conspiracy theory, animism, unexplained phenomena, eco mysticism, etc. which serve as an ambient background against which specific structuring activities and sculpturally "significant forms" are elaborated. In some ways the sculptures dream up a corporeal order that would frame the energies of these discourses, something like the way a pentagram functions in Crowleyan "magick"—as a stage where occult or ineffable energies might manifest.

This impulse to structure the ineffable, or crystallize its energies into form, finds a counterpart in the Esalen Institute, based in Big Sur, California, founded in 1962. The founding of Esalen deserves more extensive treatment than can be accomplished here, but it is described as the first esoteric or alternative academy where the human potentialities of mystical and psychical experience could be protected, educated, disciplined, and eventually

stabilized within a set of transformative practices.<sup>13</sup> Esalen provided an institutional framework for the loose strands of a consciousness movement whose key features were: a) the idea of a persistence through historical forms of religion (or image); b) the belief that experimentation with psychedelic substances can be a prosthetic extension of consciousness and lead to genuine metaphysical insight; and c) the idea of latent human potentialities and untapped mental capabilities.<sup>14</sup>

The British “mystical expatriates of Southern California” (Aldous Huxley, Gerald Heard, Christopher Isherwood) were important transmitters along the axis connecting the Vienna School art historians to the dawning Aquarius age in California. Aldous Huxley had been a mentor and early influence on Richard Price and Michael Murphy, the founders of Esalen. Huxley’s concept of the perennial offered in his 1944 book, *The Perennial Philosophy*, resembles Warburg’s *Pathosformel* in the description of the human species as reservoirs of the “evolutionary energy” of pain and lust. Huxley refers here to a set of mystical experiences and beliefs thought to form a common core of all religious and spiritual systems, ones that persist and episodically returns throughout the history of religion. As Huxley states it: “*Philosophia Perennis* is the metaphysics that recognizes a divine Reality; the ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal.”<sup>15</sup>

On the sight of a natural mineral spring overlooking the ocean, and which had historically been a spot for clandestine gay orgies, the human potential movement took

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<sup>13</sup> Keeping Espinosa’s interest in superheroes, animism, and fantasy tropes in mind, this observation from Kripal is of interest: “If I may gloss all this with a modern American mythology, we might better speak here not of a Superman but of the X-Men, those gifted mutants whom evolution has graced with supernormal powers that need to be affirmed, nurtured and trained by the telepath Professor Xavier in his secret Westchester Academy. Oddly—synchronistically—at almost the exact same cultural moment the West Coast evolutionary mysticism of early Esalen was introduced to the public (in the fall of 1962), so too was the east East Coast evolutionary mythology of the X Men (in the fall of 1963). Both cultural visions, moreover, imagined an esoteric or alternative academy where the human potentialities of mystical and psychical experience could be protected, educated, disciplined, and eventually stabilized within a set of transformative practices...both Professor Xavier’s Westchester Academy and Michael Murphy’s early Esalen vision insisted that it is evolution that produces these metaphysical mutations and uncanny superpowers (*sidhis*) that signal the mutant forerunners of the species’ superhuman future and its life divine.” Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Huxley, as quoted by Kripal in *Esalen*.

institutional root at Esalen. It brought together the disparate strands of what was in the air of the day (and which I have referred to loosely as the “consciousness movement”): psychological practice and experimentation, emancipation rhetoric, miraculous “happening” style moments of social connectedness, sex therapy, drug therapy, visionary insight, sensory awareness, sensitivity, encounter, massage, “meditation”, bio-energetics, etc.. Seekers of the “intersubjective zap” came to Esalen to teach and acquire tools for inward expansion and access to the world within the self. Esalen was one node of the ethos that was present throughout the United States, in disparate communities, cells, scenes, and social formations all having as their goal the “enlargement of the aperture of consciousness.”

In the thought and rhetoric that emerged out of Esalen, the depth of potential within human consciousness—heretofore untapped—was discussed in terms that recall the limitlessness and infinitude of pictorial space discussed by Panofsky and Lissitsky. Even if it had left the artwork behind, the consciousness movement still indeed worked and thought in terms of images, specifically an image of an inner self that followed the logic of pictorial space. Consciousness was organizable yet limitless, subject to emergent rules, able to be assembled on the one hand, and on the other, undisclosable, curved, folded, spatially incoherent, and having as its true content a network of repressed primal urges.

The dream of the consciousness movement was to exceed any conventional image of man, indeed to exceed the category of humanity either by dissolving the individual through true connectivity to a community, or by unlocking inner capacities that would augment him beyond recognition. Where Esalen’s promise was a total un-concealment of the nature of mind, its exuberant rhetoric was not immune to a form of critique that had overtones of Warburg and Benjamin.

Marco Vassi, erotica writer, spiritualist, and counter cultural journeyman writes critically of Esalen as a quintessentially American phenomenon, a mixture of therapeutic effectiveness and shallow hucksterism:

“It began as the private home and grounds of one man, who started a conventionally wealthy-man’s trip of inviting his friends to his country estate. After a while, his friends invited friends, and within a few years there was a very quiet groovy scene going on...However, through some mechanism or other, the people there got the idea to turn the place into a human growth center, and they began to attract a long list of defectors from the psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic communities...But a strange change took place once the place stopped being a natural home for a group of friends, and became a business. Soon, Esalen began to sell sensitivity, to charge stiff fees for joy, and maintain waiting lists for awareness...As with all things, it was organized, ritualized, jargonized, and finally turned into a religion...Also, the community remained silent on the fact that going into a room full of naked strangers, being led

in a massive group grope, and running out among the breathtaking grandeur of Big Sur will turn anyone on, and has nothing to do with the supposedly theoretical underpinnings of any psychological approach. Esalen's major crime came in refusing to cop to the fact that all they were doing, essentially, was providing tired an uptight middle class America with mild orgies and a vain hope for a fuller life...As with so much of the California scene, no one there seemed to have the historical perspective to see themselves not as a cure for society's ills, but merely one of its more vulgar products."<sup>16</sup>

Vassi's analysis of Esalen as guilty an ahistoric, spiritualized sexual tourism is the right complement to the limitless, transparent, fully accessible imago of consciousness needed in order to complete our story. The symbol of Esalen are its baths: famous for their breathtaking view over the endless time-space of the Pacific and for the open air love making and group encounters they hosted. The baths represent the primacy of the body as it relates to the organized attempt to stage and structure a type of visionary vision. In the dark sulphurous bathing pools frequented at night, in the awfulness of mistaken gropings and awkwardness of group encounters with aged strangers, there is as well the allegorical blindness and miscomprehension at the heart of any such positivist enterprise.

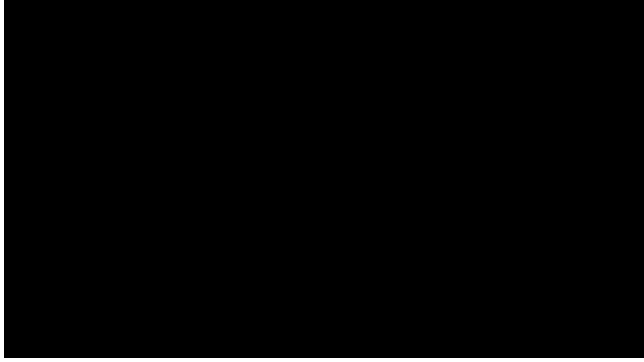
Espinosa's sculptural apparatus seems to deeply integrate the art historical narrative that sees a development of human subjectivity in the evolving investigations of essentially pictorial themes. Figure ground relations, the unfolding of pictorial space, gesture as repository of cultural memory, and the inwardly turned vision of the consciousness movement find their telos at Esalen, which "has the body." Espinosa's sculptures portray a similarly long, historical detour through topics and themes, physicalizing them by providing a stage or setting for acid-trip like visionary insights to occur. The sculptural, plastic dimension of visionary experience is never left behind, because the visionary image is always an image of the body. As art historian Chris Wood has written: "Illusion reaffirms the body as the central preoccupation of art. The body generates perceptions and memories which it then imitates by fabricating images beyond its own boundaries, such as paintings or films. The illusion is nothing other than an external image that has come to resemble very closely an internal image, thus seemingly abolishing the boundary of the body. The body merges with its environment and so postpones annihilation."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Marco Vassi, *The Stoned Apocalypse*, 1972.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Wood, "Art History Reviewed VI: Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*," *Burlington Magazine* 151, December 2009, 836-39



**Q&A** with Gean Moreno and John Espinosa on "*Remote Viewing (2008)*"

**GM:** Let's start with a description of the project.

**JE:** Remote Viewing is a sculptural object made of undisclosed materials and dimensions that I primarily made in my studio in Los Angeles, and then completed and installed it at an undisclosed remote location in the Florida wilderness.

**GM:** Disclosure, then, seems its theme.

**JE:** Disclosure was not necessarily the impetus, but it is a layer present in the work. But primarily, the lack of available descriptive information was a means to maximize the potential visualizations of the object.

**GM:** But I think that disclosure is more than a layer; it's fundamental, constitutive. It is by carefully staging the operations of disclosure, by controlling the lack of information, that you "maximize potential visualizations of the object." Not disclosing materials, forms and location are careful exercises in controlling disclosure, in testing what the deliberate withdrawal of data can produce.

**JE:** It's important for me that the project be as porous as possible, and anointing disclosure as the work's central theme concretizes it. You are absolutely correct that the managed dispersal of data was an essential methodology and is what holds the project together. But it is not the whole, only a dominant characteristic that functions like a hard reflective outer shell that is difficult to penetrate. Which is why I wanted to de-emphasize it (even if for just a moment) to allow for the less spectacular, but no less important, attributes to seep into the conversation.

**GM:** Which attributes?

**JE:** The image of the object delaminating off of its matter - leaving a void - so as to create a visually anarchic condition in which an object could exist with infinite potential visualizations

But let's go with your instinct and explore disclosure. The words you chose frame the project in the context of manipulation and power dynamics. To me fundamental to creating is the configuring of data; whether it be tangible data (matter) or intangible information. It can be by accrual or negation or as in this project, both.

**GM:** I find the project to be very much about "manipulation" and "power dynamics," however I think you are using the terms in a negative sense. I'm not. I considered it a project that employs certain historically specific conditions (immaterial production, for instance) and attempts to harness certain flows (rumor, for instance). It exploits the current impetus for bottom-up, accumulative narrative building not only through a continuous introduction and configuration of data, but through a welcoming of emergent qualities that may appear along the way. In other words, what you manipulate is a series of conditions and in the process generate a space of narrative production, which remains active precisely because it is structured to accept and incorporate new data (i.e, new, imaginary versions of the sculpture). I think that the project is as much about establishing the ground that supports an "anarchic condition in which an object could exist with infinite potential visualizations" as it is about the visualizations themselves. And this ground, in this project, is produced by manipulating disclosure.

**JE:** Also, on the flipside of that condition created by the shaping of disclosure is the apparition of the actual physical object to whomever by remote chance encounters it. For that person the experience of the project is inverted, the data vacuum is reciprocated.

**GM:** But this figure is a double figure. Let's say the "real" person that finds the sculpture. And the person that we imagine finding the sculpture. This second one is a parallel or extension to the "object [that] could exist with infinite potential visualizations."

**JE:** Yes, I love that. And for the finder the maker is an "imagined figure" but also exists as a "real figure."

The object set in the Florida wilderness is a "real" object that for the non-finder is a placebo object that instigates potential realities, parallel to the actual "real" object. I think that is my favorite way to think about the project. For me, Remote Viewing's elastic properties allow for a possibility that the project's physics could be set in a quantum mechanics (multiverse) context. I know that is asking for a lot, but that is something that I love to imagine.

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**Suspension of Disbelief** by Carlos Suarez de Jesus

*Miami Herald* review for the exhibition "Standing Still While We Move Across Land" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami

Confronting John Espinosa's startling exhibit at MOCA, mythographer Joseph Campbell's saying, "the psychotic drowns in the same waters a mystic swims in" seemed to hum in the air like the dissonant pitch of a warped tuning fork. For his first solo museum show, Espinosa orchestrates a mysterious and quirky vision of animals, birds, and people caught in transformative moments of "revelation and delusion" that reference his upbringing as a Jehovah's Witness raised in the shadow of Disney World. He wryly channels an otherworldly sensibility into his pieces, teetering across those murky liminal spaces between the sacred and the profane with phenomenal results.

*Standing Still While We Move Across Land*, 2004, a large sculptural diorama that gives the one-man show its name, depicts a flock of birds frozen in mid-flight at contrasting heights, an arrangement that suggests the points of a star. The five birds project what appear to be light beams from their eyes, perhaps alluding to the forces of spirit struggling against those of darkness. The thin yellow rods jutting from their eyes converge in a geometric cat's cradle between the orbiting birds, seemingly hinting at the universe in expansion. The artist incorporates ultraviolet light and phosphorescent pigments in the structure, which appears to hover within three transecting grids, to diagram the flow of body heat exchanged between the avian entities.

In a small collage on paper titled *People With Eyes*, 2004, a concentric swirl of faces leer at the spectator with vacant yellow eyes and toothy grins. Arranged in a mandala-like pattern, the work is strikingly peopled by what made me think of a busload of tent revivalists in rapture or fugitive B-movie zombies from a George Romero nightmare. Other collages in the show, one featuring a ring of clasped hands at a Victorian seance, bespeak Espinosa's interest in metaphysical esoterica.

In another sculpture, *A Billion Years*, 2004, a chocolate-colored hare seems to melt atop a stack of rectangular and square blocks painted over to suggest deep galactic space. Black rods emerge from the animal's eyes and extend outward in linear folds brushed red at their tip. In ancient myth, the hare was considered to define the concept of being and elemental existence. It was also, appropriately, a symbol of fecundity, with this unusual body of work, Espinosa tips his hand as an inventive and peculiar talent.

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## Fantastic Adventures by Gean Moreno

*Art Papers Review, Fantastic Adventures, Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami (1999)*

More appropriate than an invitation to “Fantastic Adventures,” John Espinosa’s first one person show (Fredric Snitzer Gallery, May 14 – June 19) would have been a one-night courtesy pass, because one shouldn’t go see this show as much as go “live” it. One has to check into it’s reality the way one checks into Disney’s – swallowing the improbable narratives that serve as foundation, buying into it’s pseudo-utopia as if it were the real thing, enthralled by the manner in which it slips into the real seamlessly. In fact, the theme park metaphor is acutely insinuated everywhere through scale.



*Forever and Ever* (all works 1999) is a six by eight-foot lightbox that depicts a massive explosion. Bereft of depth, it is like an oversized poster that glows the way we’ve always wanted them to. We find ourselves engulfed in it’s cool inferno, unscathed.

Before *A Crowd in a Field of Grass*, a five by five foot surface on which a crowd of ceramic figurines (the sort used in architectural maquettes) have been gathered, and *The Garden*, a miniature orange grove, we are spectators overlooking what could be the climax scene of those odd UFO-encounter films. As one moves through the show, one’s role continually shifts between spectator and “participant,” between being tiny (belittled?) before the immense images and larger-than-life as we look down on the sculptures. The perspectives take advantage of that strange cognitive dimension theme parks and movies have given us.



Espinosa's enthusiasm for contemporary American fantasy is candidly earnest. This is not a critique of spectacular culture. On the contrary, it is an unconditional embrace of it; it is what have left after we realize we have no place to stand outside the culture industry, after all the roads have been barricaded. Nowhere do we catch a whiff of the melancholy and longing that drives an antagonistic approach; nowhere do we find signs of that secret yearning to subvert everything. In fact, every work in this show proposes that everything is fantastically fine, better than perfect. The *Blue Bambi Series* is an effort to collapse even art into this exciting wonderland. A tiny plastic fawn has been placed next to well-known art pieces - on Judd's plexiglass-topped boxes, in Paul McCarthy's installations, on Beverly Semmes' translucent fabrics, next to the Nike's the Chapman Brothers fit their cunt-faced girls with - and documented like the most stringent of conceptual art with the vagaries of a children's story.

*Empire*, like it's Warhol namesake, is the interminable presence of a single image - in this case, the Cinderella Castle at Disney. Looking to out-pop Pop, the banality is all there but improbably bigger, made somehow impure by the delight we come to feel from the benign building depicted, from the memories it conjures up.

For the heavy burden of deadly-serious conceptual art that Espinosa gets beyond, he deprives us of something else - the idiosyncrasies of a subjectivity that we always come looking for in a work of art. He merely plugs in into pop-culture, Warhol-like, and flows with it's fluctuations. What we miss, despite decades of trumpeting the death of the author, is an authorial presence that is not an absence, the mark of someone who, unlike the rest of us, is more than just carried by the tide of images and stories have, unresisted, become our shared narrative. Espinosa's "absence" leaves the images he appropriates - Bambi, Spiderman, Magic Kingdom architecture, Hollywood explosions - feeling as anonymous, as soulless, as they they are outside the gallery. We can say of the theme park Espinosa has turned his show into what Gertrude Stein said of Oakland: "there is no there there." It is impalpable spectacle. He has left us nowhere and feeling as selfless, as effaced collectively, as he poses. The work registers the opposite of crisis - a stone-hard platitude, the suspect peace of meadows by other means.

It gives us the real as a never-never land that is, at once, ours and not ours, just there and forever beyond us. As we do everyday watching television, except in a more poignant way, before Espinosa's work we continually oscillate roles: we are simultaneously conscious agents with critical faculties and inert image consumers. "Fantastic Adventures" poses coyly as an allegory of our Disneyfied contemporary world – and we cannot help but feel the only imperfections burdening its precise landscape.

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