More Stars than there are in Heaven*

Christiane Schneider in conversation with Diana Thater

CHRISTIANE SCHNEIDER: In the installation at Haunch of Venison you employ the architecture of the building by taking up its multi-leveled structure. On each floor we find images of different elements of nature: flowers, clouds and stars. However on the ground floor, you show a text piece.

DIANA THATER: My text pieces are always indices that introduce or frame the video and film works. First I made them look like pages torn out of books and used them as the invitations to the shows. Later, they became supplements – like brochures – in the exhibitions. Still later they became the outside and inside covers of catalogs. At a certain point, I started to leave out page numbers and shorten them so the index texts could look more like poetry such as in the following text from 1993, which refers to my piece, *Occident Trotting* and also to its namesake, the famous Muybridge photo series:

Occident,
    cutting,
    running
    standing,
    trotting,
    walking,
    backward,

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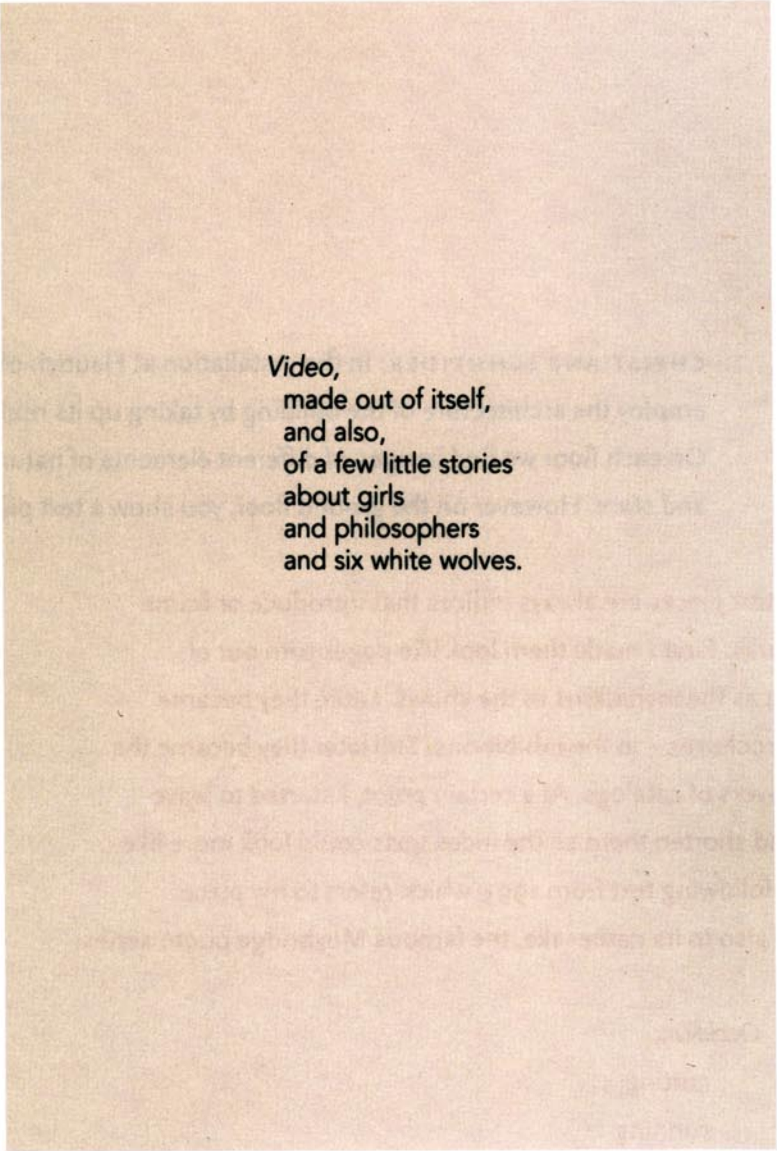
* Metro Goldwyn Mayer, advertising slogan from the 1940s attributed to Howard Dietz



Video,
made out of itself,
and also,
of a few little stories
about girls
and philosophers
and six white wolves.

Invitation card for
China, Crayons & Molly
Numbers 1 through 10,
David Zwirner,
New York, USA, 1996

And in a work from 1996, *Electric Mind*, two monitors flashing the text:

> mouse is, a
> cat is, a
> chimp is, a
> girl, a.

Which of course is also an index and when turned inside out reads:

> *A mouse is a cat is a chimp is a girl.*

The new work, *A Series of Events (Alex Thater)*, uses two synchronized monitors that depict a Hollywood movie marquee (from the Alex Theater in Glendale, California built in the early 1920's) on which is spelled out a series of individual words and phrases in alphabetical order. It begins like this:

> animals
> blue-eyed
> caged, empty
> deep, dispersed not

Reading indexically makes the punctuation visible and one can invert it in the following way:

> animals
> blue dash eyed
> caged comma empty
> deep comma dispersed not

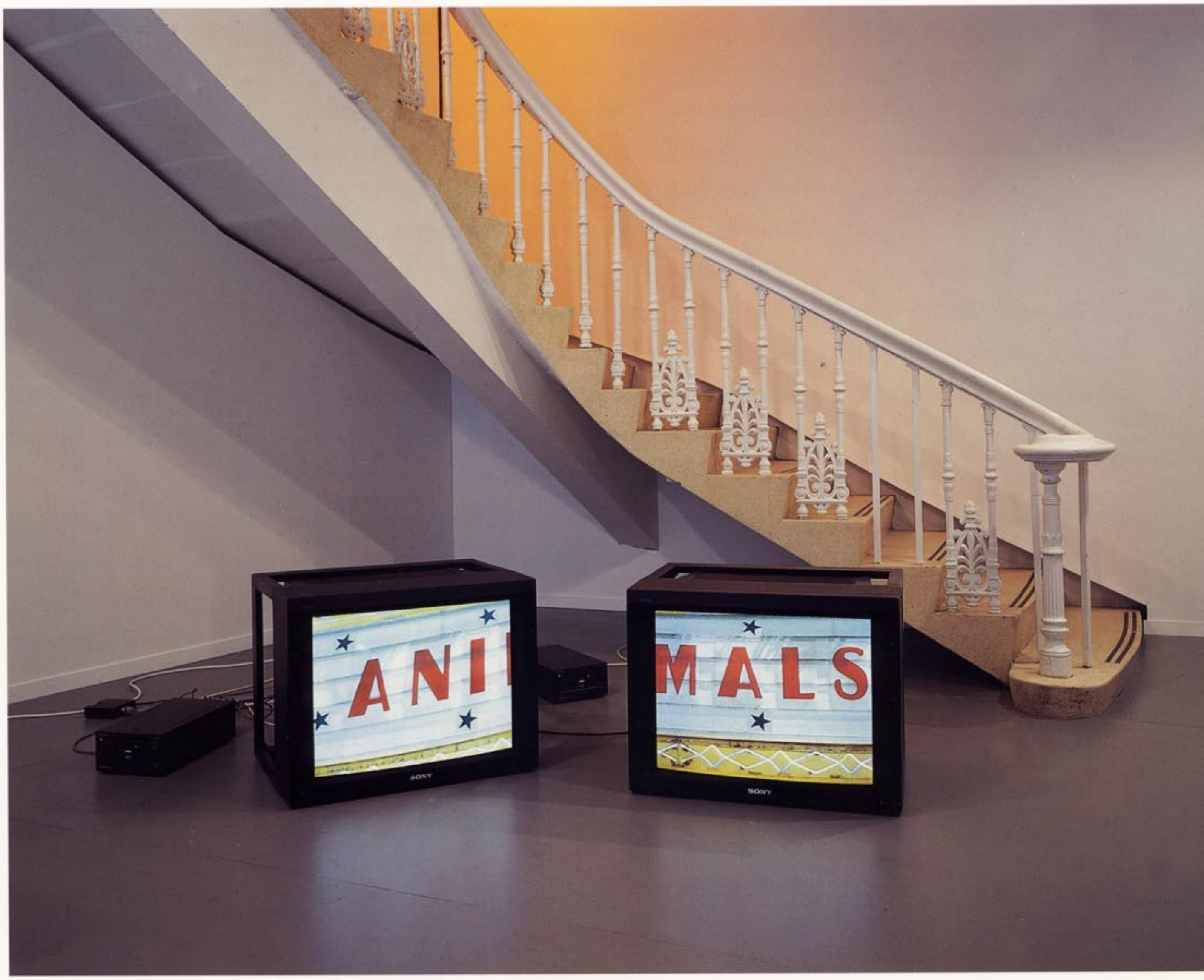
Or one could reconstruct it and read it this way:

> animals
> blue-eyed,
> empty caged
> dispersed not deep...

This indexical use of language and punctuation is not reversed language but rather a kind of syntactical inversion where punctuation becomes visible and nouns stand out like proper names. I began writing indices when I began making art, which was also the time when I started reading theory and philosophy. Being a dedicated reader of fiction, I found those forms difficult to understand sequentially so I would read them randomly using the index as a table of contents. When I realized that the index has its own logic and forms a kind of bold-faced overlay on top of this very complex text, I tried to write some for myself as artworks, and also ended up writing indices for a few art history and theory books.

Really, making text works satisfies my desire to have word images that function like poetry in that they are rhythmic and evocative without being descriptive and narrative. However they imply, they *evoke* the state of narrativity, which is always being expressed, or repressed in time-based media and must be addressed.

A Series of Events (Alex Theater), 2003
Installation: 2 video monitors,
2 DVD players, 1 synchronizer,
2 DVDs, lights, coloured lighting
gel, window film and existing
architecture
Installation view: Haunch of Venison,
London, 2003



I find this parallel between the way you use images and language interesting. Your index pieces seem to offer the same kind of freedom to the viewer that they have when moving through your installation and are able to choose from many different points of view. Without a narrative or a structuring grammar they can use the words the same way and create or imagine what they want.

There are only a certain number of words though, so the choices are limited. The viewer can't really imagine whatever she wants, she has a certain set of things with which to work and construct. However, this sort of indexed narrative removes one from a single point of view and allows for a kind of polyphony – a group of things that seem to exist all at once – because the index is a compressed re-sequenced version of the book and one is not sure where in the time of the actual text the references will appear. The real time of the text is effaced.

Also, dissolving these hierarchical structures means that you create the same kind of disorientation for the viewer as you do in your spaces.

We are not told in what order these things may come in the absent story to which they refer. In the index they are listed alphabetically, and so follow a different system and you must deduce the order. This does produce a disorientation similar to the installations, in that one system speaks in a different way about another system on which it rests and without which it does not exist. So, for example, the piece *Knots+Surfaces* at the DIA Center lays on top of the architecture and it twists the space on an axis. This move makes you much more aware of the original space as well as the video/fictional space that you occupy – but it also overlays an animate pictorial architecture on top of an inanimate dimensional one and so on. There are many layers in the work that move back and forth among themselves and cause the viewer to reorient, and so to re-imagine herself.

Are you interested in creating a situation where the viewer is constantly kept in a dynamic state of different ways of perceiving, constantly changing between reading and looking...

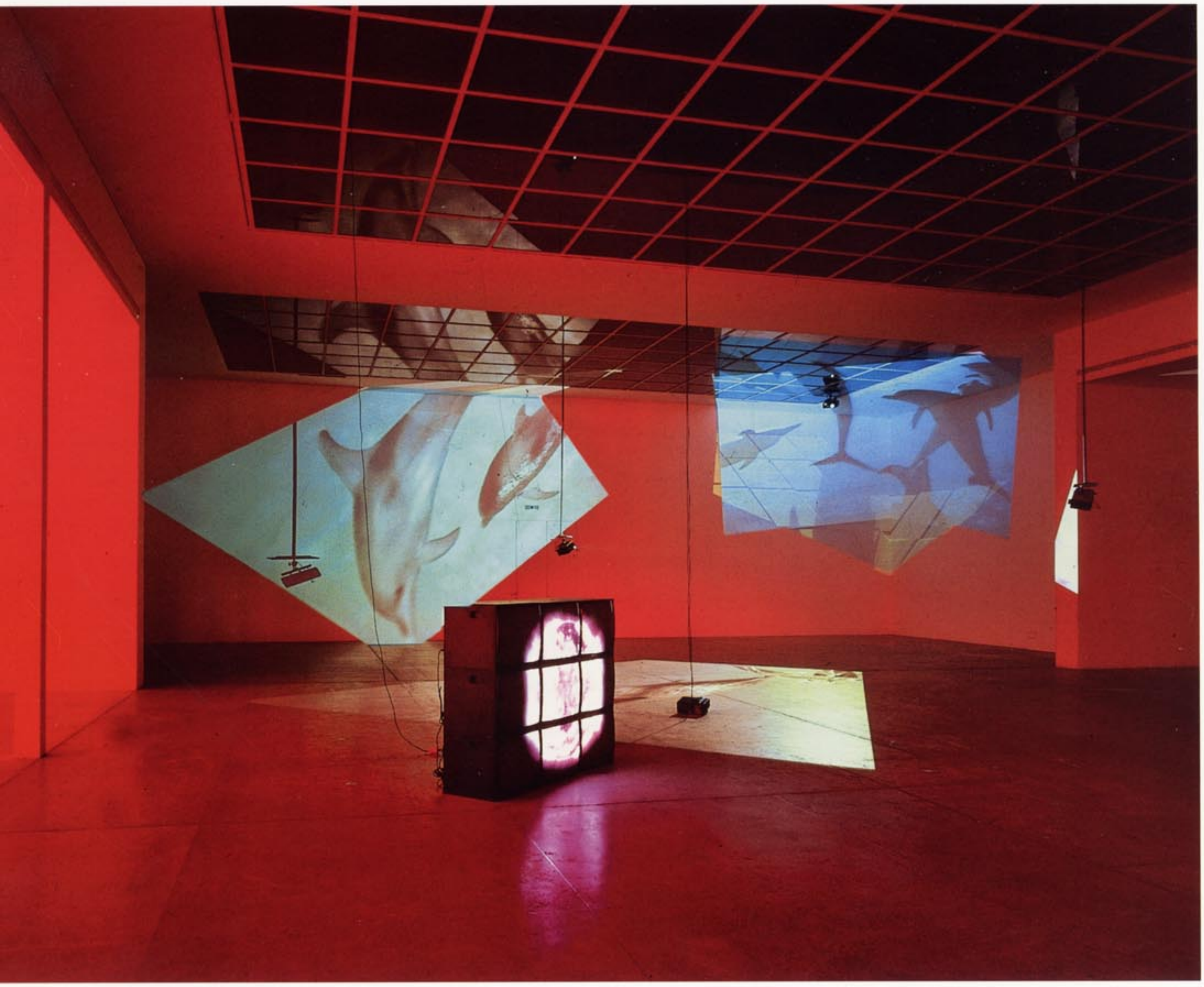
Yes – that dynamic state is what I want to produce. In the text pieces and the image pieces, I am not looking for a way *out* of narrative, you know, but looking for a way *through* it. There must be some other paths through time and space that are neither sequential and relative, nor purely aesthetic and subjective. Somewhere between classical narrative and experimental filmmaking is this place where relativity and subjectivity are in the process of being formed. Being aware of this forming is a kind of dynamism.

Can you think of any examples in art where this has been tried? Are there any other artists you can think of who have already worked, or do work in that way? Or is this something that hasn't existed until now and you have to explore and develop?

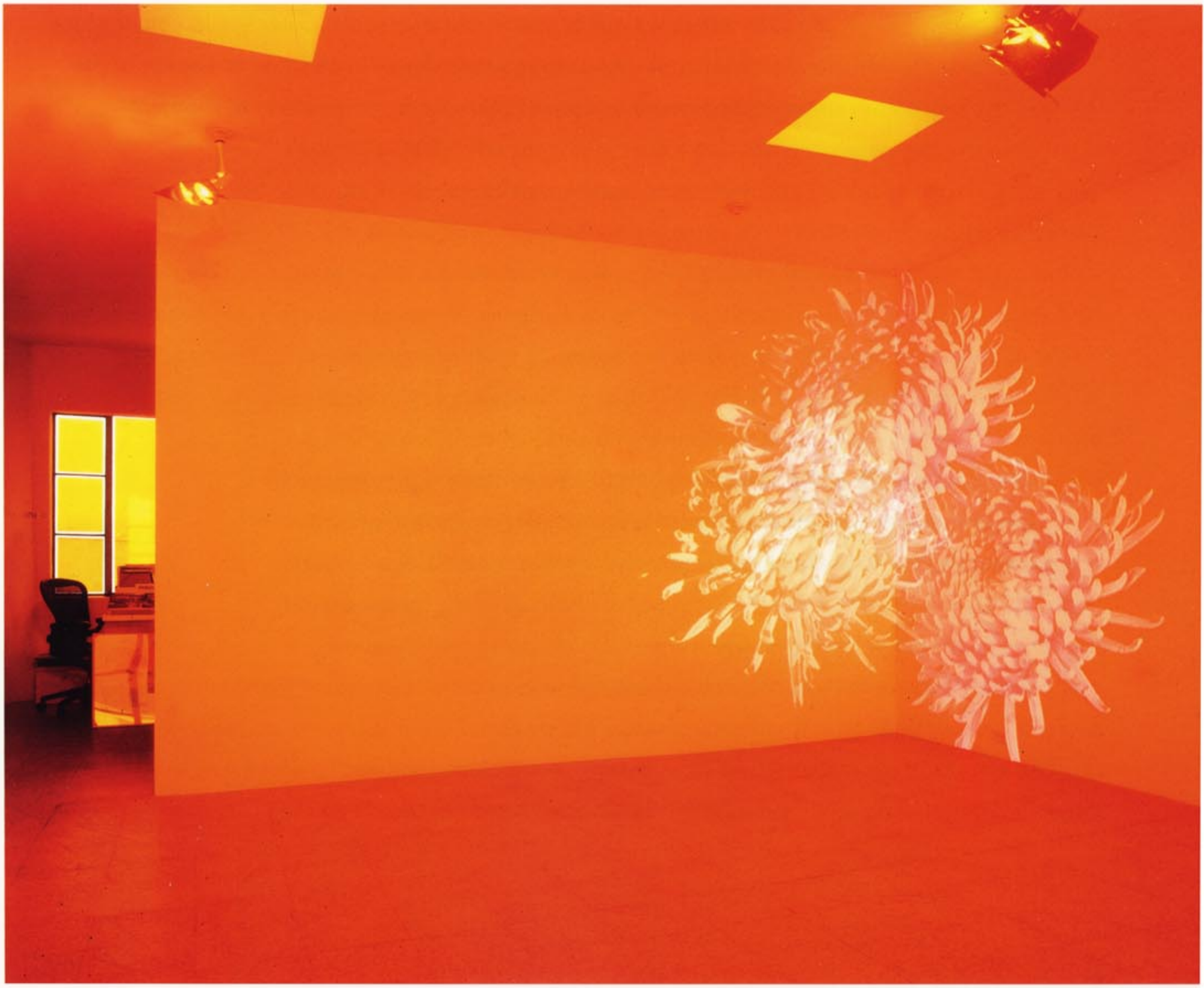
Does this touch your interest in a perception that is more peripheral, a kind of unconcentrated perception?

That is an important observation and brings up another reference that is really present here: a film by Hollis Frampton titled *Zorn's Lemma* (1970). This is a 16mm film in three parts, it utilizes the alphabet as an ordering system along with imagery of street signage. With Frampton of course it is also structural in that it uses an ordering system other than narrative to make a readable sequence. And though one concentrates on reading – peripherally as you say – meaning is being made. I think Frampton's film *Poetic Justice* (1972) is another good example. Again it is a film of a text – a script that is laid out in front of the camera page by page with a cut between each page, and describes a cinematic scene in which there is no dialogue, only blocking. With each cut, a new page covers the previous one and the script progresses. Page covers page until an

Delphine, 1999
Installation: 4 video projectors, 18 video monitors, 6 laserdisc players, 2 video wall processors, 1 synchronizer, 6 laserdiscs, lights, coloured lighting gel, window film and existing architecture
Installation view: Vienna Secession, Vienna, Austria, 2000



Orange Room (Wallflowers), 2001
Installation: 3 video projectors,
3 DVD players, 3 DVDs, lights,
coloured lighting gel, window film
and existing architecture
Installation view: 1301 PE,
Los Angeles, California, USA, 2001



entire scene has been described and there is now a pile of written script lying on the table in the film and you have gone somewhere as a viewer in space and time that is something like fiction and something like film and something like living because you see, the text refers to "me" (presumably the filmmaker), "you" (the viewer) and "your lover" (the third person). Our – first, second and third person – story is told therefore in the image of language.

The installation at Haunch of Venison contains a lot of issues that are crucial for your work and I would like to address some of them. First of all I would like to ask you about the way you deal with space. In this exhibition we pass through different kinds of space: narrative space, outer space, colour space and architectural space. Do you consider an installation as a space of the imagination where one can easily move from one world to another?

This is the object of my work and the spaces you list are all present in this particular exhibition. Here, as in *Delphine* or *Orange Room (Wallflowers)*, architectural space is made tangible by color that works in concert with it and renders actual space visible by turning a room into a volume. Narrative space is always addressed in my work over actual, as opposed to cinematic time – that is it happens over the course of an installation or over a series of installations or over a series of years. Because this exhibition has a sequence of floors/rooms, it is possible to treat the architecture narratively. Movement through the space by the viewer and movement within the space by the installation are simultaneous and are narrative in a way similar to choreography. You mentioned this earlier in our discussion by referring to the sequence of rooms as being connected to the series of images or types of imagery and this is of course consideration number one in the work. How does the architecture work and how can the work be a progression through and with it in a meaningful way?

Outer space is often depicted for us as diagrams or pictures, and we understand its time theoretically or hypothetically since we cannot live it. So my interest is to put it into pieces like *Dark Matter,* which is a double monitor work made out of animated scientific data about space. These are animations of The Big Bang and of Dark Matter itself made by scientists and not by cartoonists. They are therefore scientific attempts to improvise factual information with as little embellishment as possible (embellishment being antithetical to the goals of science.) I'm interested in these animations because they have an actual function in the world, and the notions about time and space that they express are so much a part of my ideas about scale and narrative. This is not to say that I like digital animation art – can't stand it really. Usually it's fake, ugly pixels and swirls and pointless sequences that claim to be "moving abstract painting." What a bore.

You combine monitor pieces and video projections on the walls and ceiling. Monitors seem to have the space "inside" whereas the projections are creating a space "outside" the apparatus. Is this part of the variety of perspectives you offer the viewer to activate perception?

That differentiation is something I have always used. I make specific works for monitors that are about constructing time as an object via editing and that are about the flat screen. I make installations that are about space as an object and are about penetrating the depth of the color field.

You make the viewers move in the space, look down on the stars in the sky and up to the ceiling, you confuse dimensions by making stars small and flowers huge. Could your installation be seen as a stage where the audience is performing?

Scale is the most important thing in art. In my work things are always a different size than they are in the real world so the viewer is physically conscious of the objects she approaches. Playing into that also is a technical kind of event I began exploring in 2000 (*Knots+Surfaces, Orange Room (Wallflowers)*

and *Bastard Pink*) which is the erasure of the video rectangle. This allows the image to take the shape of the object being recorded. In *Pink Daisies, Amber Room*, I can blow the objects up and make scale events out of them since everyone knows the size of flowers, and then erase the video frame and make the flowers seem more singular, more present.

But to your question about the performative nature of the audience participation, I don't want to make so-called interactive art because of course by definition all art is somehow interactive and I am insulted by the idea that I should go to a museum to use a computer and a mouse and so interact with art. Only bad art posits the passive viewer who must be activated by jumping around or making choices that change the work. Good art is about discourse, which I guess we could say must be performed.

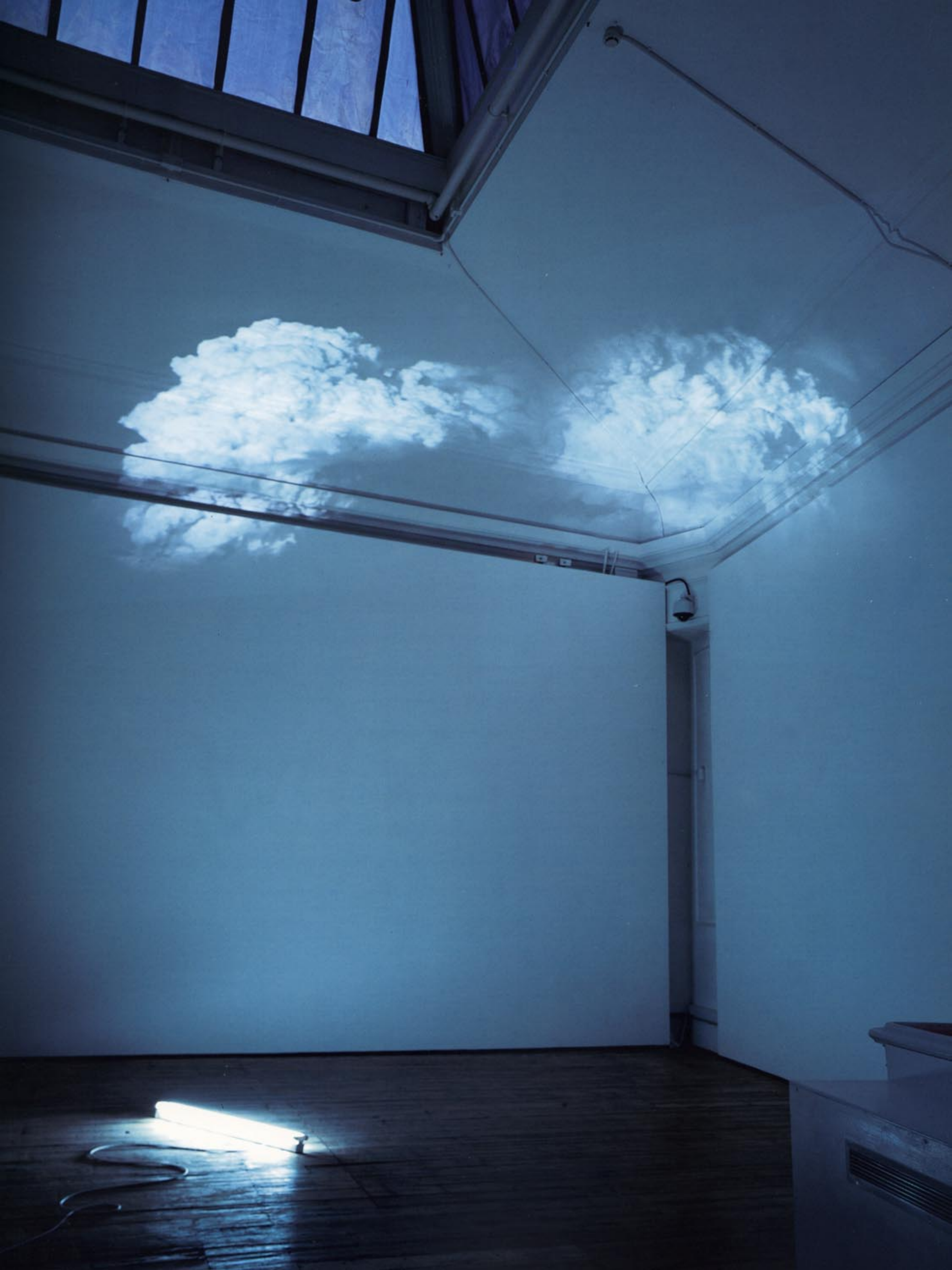
With the video projections you blend pictorial and sculptural qualities into each other. In the installation *Pink Daisies, Amber room* as well as in *White is the Color* you are transforming the space through colour and images. How does your work refer to painting?

A lot has been said about my work in reference to painting and I want to be clear that my work is not meant to be "moving painting". To expand on what I said about interactive art; the great thing about paintings is that they do what they do *without* moving – that is actually one of the points of painting (otherwise it would be theatre or film etc.), so to actually intend to make moving paintings is not just dumb, it's SUPER dumb.

This work does follow from painting in a slightly more complex way, I hope, in that I am trying to make work that is abstraction, the great 20th Century innovation in painting. However, film/video and painting are abstract in different ways because their relationships to representation are so categorically different.

previous pages:
Pink Daisies, Amber Room, 2003
Installation: 2 video projectors, 2 DVD players, 2 DVDs, lights, coloured lighting gel, silver mylar and existing architecture
Installation view: Haunch of Venison, London, 2003

opposite page:
White is the Color, 2002
Installation: 2 video projectors, 2 DVD players, 2 DVDs, 1 two tube fluorescent light fixture, window film and existing architecture
Installation view: Haunch of Venison, London, 2003



Yes, that's an interesting aspect – in painting abstraction is still connected to representation but condenses it in layers – whereas in video or film, abstraction can be completely detached from the level of objects and instead be about the way we perceive time through processes. For example, if you look at an abstract painting by Gerhard Richter, it is a different kind of abstraction than, for example, found in Werner Herzog's movies.

In film or video, the representation is of sequence, sometimes of narrative and always of time – the progression of time. So in video, one needn't make a blurry image of colored stuff and then call it "abstract". What one needs to do is make the sequence an abstraction of time or alternately a non-representation of narrative time.

My work is in line with a trajectory of art, which for the most part is the history of painting, but it is also completely in line with a history of cinema, which rarely gets mentioned because most people in the art world don't know anything about cinema. That, by the way, is why we have so much horrible video running around in the artworld, and also why we have this new, stupid fashion of projecting actual films onto the walls of art museums as if they are installations. The only thing that this achieves is that it allows the viewer to ignore the fact that films are dependent on being viewed from start to finish. Instead we are supposed to believe that there is no place for art cinema (you know, like film festivals and Cannes and Sundance, etc.) and that filmmakers want their work shown on video on the crappy painted walls of galleries. Why?

Nature has been traditionally linked with ideas representing the sublime or transcendence. What is your concept of nature and what makes it interesting for you to work with?

Nature is representational without (necessarily) being figurative. As well, (referring to my previous answer) nature is the only thing I can think of that is inherently non-narrative and thus fits well with my idea about time-abstraction.

I like the idea that one could look at this show as a contemporary version of landscape painting. A 3-dimensional space where the viewers can move through and experience different views of nature, is presented here in a way that makes us aware of how we construct our image of nature: fragmented and by means of media and technology.

I want the viewer to come to consciousness about the image of nature by disturbing what has been thought of as contemplative imagery with the use of artificial color and scale and by the introduction of language. All of this work must be understood as having been constructed and machined, yet in the end that is not the issue – that is not the matter – what is the matter is that the affect, transcendence and exchange, precludes the machined and happens. It happens just the same. It happens without angels (religious transcendence). It happens without gods and satyrs running around (mythic transcendence). It happens without four or five million dollars (capitalist transcendence).

One needn't make pictures of angels or Greek gods (in the 21st Century no less!) to engage with the sublime, unless one is speaking to a viewing public made up of art historians, ancient Greek playwrites and little old ladies, or one wants to cater to the disabilities of a viewing public that needs, wants and has to have mythology. Of course I have no interest in such an audience. I don't want new mythologies and I don't want nature to be contemplative and reassuring but sublime and terrifying. Not terrifying in that 19th Century way

China 1995, 35mm
production still

Still from *White Dog*, 1982
directed by Samuel Fuller
Courtesy Christa Fuller and
Jon Davison

It gave me the idea to have a bird – beautiful – white – coming down to water. A crocodile attacks it, smashes it and starts eating it. Another crocodile fights this crocodile and they go crazy over that big white bird. And they're bleeding. And I want to follow the bleed downstream to a school of piranha – they taste the blood – and I follow them right back – no cuts! And they attack the two crocodiles and within thirty seconds to a minute they are reduced to skeletons. Another white bird comes and flies over and grabs the piranha and flies off with it!

Does man eat man?
Does animal eat man?

SAM FULLER in *Tigrero*, 1995,
directed by Mika Kaurismäki

where it is yawning wide – endlessly dangerous and devouring, but in that 21st century way – like a dead or dying body because we've killed it and it is gone and that *is* terrifying.

I understand that you are trying to show that beauty – and to a certain degree linked to it the sublime – is not metaphysical but real and a potential part of everyone's life. How is this connected to your choice of the title of the show: *Transcendence is expansion and contraction at the same time*?

That is a quote from Penny Florence, an art historian and contemporary writer on art. She said it in a lecture I heard in 1998 and I just wrote it down because it was such a perfect definition and it had so much to do with how I want transcendence to function in my work. It's not tied to the spiritual but to the idea of scale. Scale could become a spiritual matter but it needn't. The sublime and the beautiful could become spiritual matters but they needn't either.

Thinking of your imagery in this exhibition – flowers, clouds and the heavens – the work of Andy Warhol or Ed Ruscha come to mind. Nature is made visible as mediated, as something constructed and as a projection but nonetheless powerful.

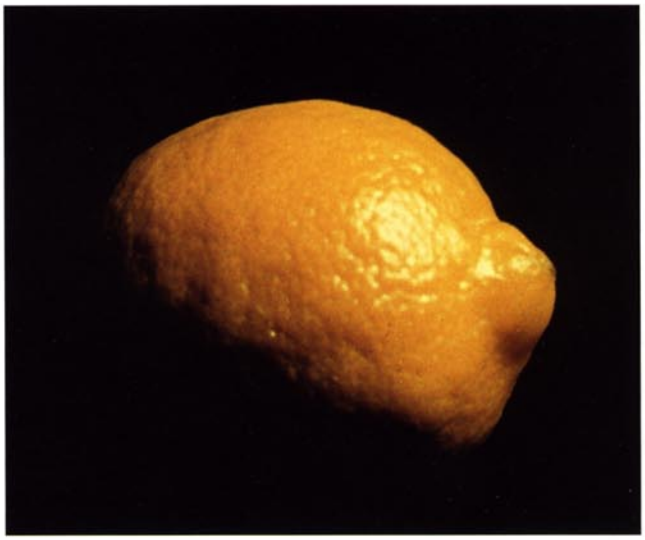
Yes that's true in terms of subjects, but I think my work is much closer to nature images like those of John Ford or especially Sam Fuller – where the idea of the natural has the substance of a character. With Ford the identification of the subject with nature is so close that they cannot be separated and they mutually fill one another up with meaning: the figure and its field are symbiotic. In Fuller, the subject (nature) is in full-out war with objectification (man). I have tried to make landscapes like Ford – landscapes that are characters – and I have made work inspired by Fuller's magnificent film *White Dog* (1982)where the dog fights for his subjectivity. In my work the subjective always turns from the objectifying force. *China* really addresses Fuller directly through the

Installation view looking from *White is the Color* through to *Dark Matter*, Haunch of Venison, London, 2003

Fairytales, myths, movies, art. Are they really so different? They are not so different.

DIANA THATER, *Electric Mind*, 1996

Marlene Dietrich, *c.*1932
Courtesy AKG London



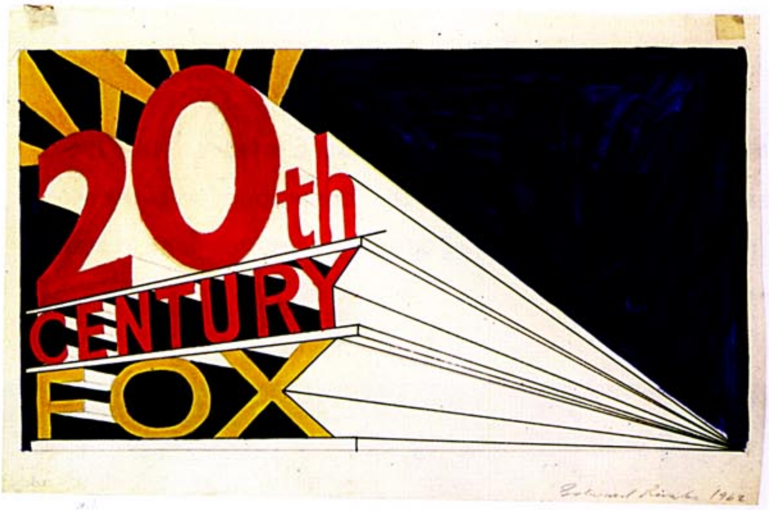
Still from *Lemon*, 1969
by Hollis Frampton
Courtesy the Hollis Frampton Estate
and the Museum of Modern Art,
New York, USA

performance/portrayal of a white wolf (named China). The subject (China) fights via the technological construct. The camera itself was built to make the world monocular – but in my work video cameras and projectors serve to multiply, make transparent and otherwise undermine the singularity and solidity of animal objects.

It seems to me that your work has changed in the last few years. I have the impression it has become more abstract and that the production of the piece, which in your earlier work used to be very important, is less evident. Has this issue come to an end for you?

I haven't really thought about the progression of the work in that way since the issues seem the same to me – though you are right in that a certain kind of meaning that was once adhered to the image of the "making" of the work has gone (for now anyway). This has allowed me to foreground other things. Also, my work from 1990–1995 was very much based in an idea of structuralist filmmaking. Coming on the heels of Hollis Frampton – I wanted to make neo-structuralist installation and I think I did that and achieved what I wanted to with it up until *China*. After that work, which summed up all of my early pieces, somehow I was free to use the filmic/video language in any way I liked – including non-structuralist ways. And I am free to see so much more in, for example, Frampton's filmmaking. I can now see the lemon in the film called *Lemon* (1969) as the basis for the construction of an idea in the same way that Marlene Dietrich is the basis for an idea that we confusingly also call Marlene Dietrich. Shadow, light, camera, the apparatus of filmmaking creates an idea-object exponentially greater than the original.

Ed Ruscha *Trademark # 5*, 1962
Oil, ink, tempera and
graphite on paper
8 3/4 × 12 1/2 ins (22.3 × 32 cm)
Courtesy Ed Ruscha



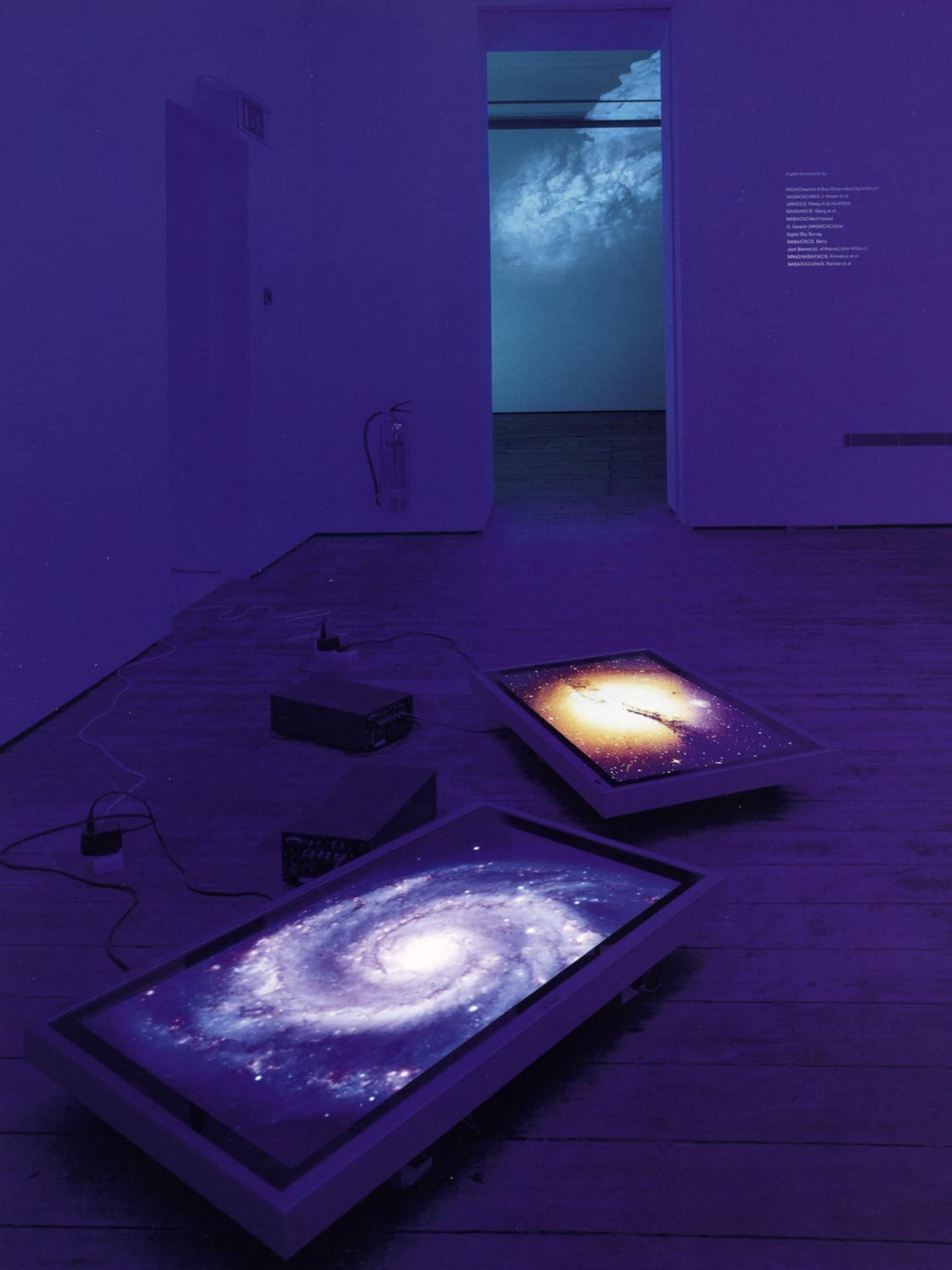
Less obvious than your use of space and architecture is the differentiated way you deal with time, blending different speeds and ways of perceiving into each other, like synchronization, slow motion, or acceleration. How do you deal with it in this show?

Time and space, as I've said many times, are the two hardest things to make a viewer consciously recognize. It must be like trying to describe water to a fish. To them it must be as invisible as space and time are to us since we inhabit them. One can't describe the house one lives in if one has never gone out and looked at it from the outside. One can only describe what it's like to be inside it.

I alternate between, and often combine, making time (with editing) and making space (with installation). Certain kinds of editing flow and make film time a smooth, naturalized kind of time. Yet other ways of editing make time jumpy. Think of Godard's revolutionary use of the jump-cut which at first was disturbing to the viewer's sense of time, but now is invisible because Godard made it a part of film language and other directors picked it up and made it an everyday kind of edit. So with my work, differentiation among the works allows for the viewer to feel time shifting around her from real time (the movie marquee is filmed in real time and edited in camera) to non-time (the endless flowers and clouds never changing) to endless time (galaxies spinning slowly over millions of light years). And space from object-sculptural space (two-monitor movie marquee) to color space (the amber-tinted room for the flowers – like being under orange water) to an inside posing as outside space (clouds hang above fluorescent lights – a super-artificial space) to the picture of space on a flat, flat screen (outer space on two flat plasma monitors.) All artificial, all referential, yet all real and capable of meaning. This maybe is where we could refer to Ruscha as an influence on my work through his paintings of words that make meaning as images.

You are known for the important role that animals play in your work. In your early work you filmed a lot of animals that have been taught how to act in movies, like the zebra, horses or the wolves, and then with the dolphins you concentrated on wild animals. This work particularly showed the ambivalence you created between the viewer being usually the subject looking at an object, but in this case being the object to be looked at by the subject, the animal. In this show there aren't any animals – who is the counterpart of the viewer?

The text refers to the missing element in the exhibition: the living subject/object/star. There are the animal subjects present only in poetic phrases, through which I try to describe them (animals cannot be interpreted – no matter how many computers dopey scientists give chimps to use or how many objects you can teach your African Gray Parrot to name – from our perspective – they can only be described. This is what the title from 1998, *The best animals are the flat animals* refers to: only flat description can do them justice because it eschews interpretation. Interpretation of the absolute other seems arrogant and bound to fail.) In *A Series of Events (Alex Theater)* the text talks about


Digital Animations by:
NASA/Chandra X-Ray Observatory/April Hobart
NASA/CXC/ASU/J. Hester et al.
UMASS/D. Wang et al./VLA/NSA
NASA/HST/D. Wang et al.
NASA/CXC/April Hobart
C. Sarazin (NASA/CXC/UVa)
Digital Sky Survey
NASA/CXC/D. Berry
Josh Barnes (U. of Hawaii)/John Hibbard
NRAO/NASA/CXC/S. Komossa et al.
NASA/CXC/UMd/S. Randall et al.

the missing animal subjects whom I use as models for the idea of subjectivity itself and as questions about the mutability of subjectivity. Though their images are not here for you to fixate on, the idea of subjectivity is present just the same.

So the text piece on the movie marquee on the ground floor can be considered the very basis of the whole installation?

The movie marquee is not the "earth" in this construct but really is the ground for my work: a foundation that suggests we begin with a language that tries to describe and then move up from there. It is also for me a foundation in another way because movies are the first artworks I can remember loving and the marquee is an exciting and enticing thing! It is a sign that says: "The Movies". In fact, simultaneous with my discovery of art was my discovery of film as a child. And in my mind they have always been intertwined. The last image in the show *Dark Matter* is one of the actual stars that brings us back around to where we began on the ground floor with the "movie" stars described on the marquee. There are "stars" you see and then there are ***stars***.

Dark Matter, 2003
Installation: 2 flat screen monitors, 2 DVD players, 2 DVDs, lights, coloured lighting gel, window film and existing architecture
Installation view looking through to *White is the Color*, Haunch of Venison, London, 2003