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PRESENCE OF MIND

by

J. GLUCKSTERN

B.A., University of Colorado, 1983

A thesis submitted to the

Faculty of the Graduate School of the

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of the requirement for the degree of

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Department of Art and Art History

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This thesis entitled:

Presence of Mind

written by J. Gluckstern

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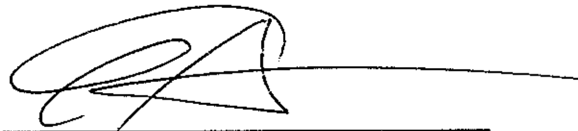
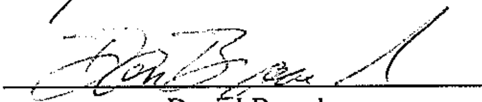


Alex Sweetman



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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Gluckstern, J. (M.F.A., Art and Art History)

Presence of Mind

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Alex Sweetman

This project uses the gifted monologist Spalding Gray — who committed suicide in 2004 — as a focus for an investigation into the compelling connections between creativity and mental illness, particularly manic-depressive illness or bipolar disorder. Its central metaphors — the condemned Sibell-Wolle Fine Arts building and the mind/body interface — provide both concrete and abstract frameworks for this investigation. The formal aspects of the project — a series of video projections triggered by an interactive interface — are constructed so as to provide the viewer with some empathetic understanding of both the frustration and creative potential of manic-depressive illness.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the following individuals for their help on, interest in, and support of the project: Deirdre Schwiesow (the Baroness); anGie yeowell (the nurse); Dave Willey (who allowed the use of selected songs by Toupidek Limonade and Hamster Theatre); Victor Jendras; Chris Osborn; Andy Busti; David Marek; Chris Pearce; Roger Carter; Paula Kamen; Mike Eisenberg; Peter Michelson; Junior Burke; Michelle Ellsworth; Michael Theodore; Travis Wilkerson; Steve Martonis; Lisa Tamiris Becker; Alex Sweetman; Daniel Boord; Yumi Roth; Melanie Walker; Phil Solomon; and Clint Culley. I'd also like to express my gratitude to my immediate family — B. Gluckstern, Susan Froyd, and Mark Gluckstern — for their enduring understanding and support.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In January 2004, the gifted monologist Spalding Gray went missing from his New York life. His disappearance came some two-and-a-half years after a crippling car accident that left him overwhelmed by depression, and his friends and family were, as a New York Magazine article written at the time put it, "left to fear the worst."[1] In Gray's case, that meant the very real possibility that he'd committed suicide, as his own mother did when he was a teenager. And in March 2004, when his decaying body was found washed ashore from the East River after he'd apparently jumped from the Staten Island Ferry in January, that fear was fully realized.[2]

As an avid follower of Gray's career since I'd seen the film version of his groundbreaking monologue *Swimming to Cambodia* in 1987, I was deeply affected by his death. This loss, along with my familiarity with the experience of a number of personal friends and family members who've suffered varying degrees of depression in the course of their lives, prodded me first toward a recognition of how common suicide is in our post-millennium society[3], then to investigate the clinical and social aspects of mental illness. At

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[1] Alex Williams, "Vanishing Act," *New York Magazine*, Jan. 26, 2004.

[2] Shaila K. Dewan and Jesse McKinley, "Body of Spalding Gray Found; Monologist and Actor Was 62," *New York Times*, March 9, 2004.

[3] Suicide was the eleventh leading cause of death for all ages in the United States in 2004 (32,439), and in 2006, roughly thirteen times that number (395,276) were non-fatally self-injured. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "Web based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System

the same time, I had to recognize a number of similarities between my own art practice and Gray's, notably the use of the self as a persona with which to tell autobiographical stories as a means of commenting on contemporary experience. And given my own response to Gray's work — more often than not, a profound elation combined with a feeling of unbounded creative energy and sense of possibility — I was disheartened that anyone with such a talent for recasting daily life as transformative allegory could not, in the end, transform himself. My own bouts of depression aside[4], I had to wonder if Gray's creative narcissism had something to do with his depression (and vice versa).

This investigation took many forms and followed a number of seemingly disparate paths of inquiry, a process that resembles, to some degree, the character of manic mental states. My meandering methodology is reflected in both the research and the formal aspects of my thesis project. The primary historical figures I've chosen to represent — Spalding Gray, Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Antonin Artaud, and Richard Semon — were picked for varying and sometimes tenuous reasons, but they all share an affliction with some form of mental illness that helped to isolate them from their peers, and three of the four (likely) committed suicide. Even the central inanimate metaphor of the project — the Sibell-Wolle Fine Arts building — was marginalized and isolated within its architectural context.

I've organized this thesis into sections designed to first state some of the clinical characteristics of manic-depression and suggest a link between creativity and mental illness, then to introduce some of the historical "characters" performed in the project and some of the key concepts associated with each of them, and finally to describe the intricate relationships between form and content that drive the installation, which I've titled "Presence of Mind."

(WISQARS)" [Online.] 2005. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC (producer). http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars/default.htm. (Sept. 25, 2007)

[4] Though I've never been formally diagnosed, I suspect I am and have been cyclothymic, a mild version of manic-depression (both of which are described in more detail later in this thesis). I feel it's given me some (I emphasize *some*) understanding of the experience of full-blown manic-depression without suffering the worst of its symptoms

CHAPTER II

MANIC-DEPRESSION AND CREATIVITY

"No one has ever written or painted, sculpted, modeled, built, invented, except to get out of hell."[1]

– Antonin Artaud

While the tortured poet and theatrical innovator Antonin Artaud may have been speaking somewhat subjectively, his visceral suggestion that the creative impulse is inextricably linked to mental anguish is hard to ignore. And though his struggles with mental illness were unique to his particular circumstances — prominently, he suffered from a recurring and consistent inability to maintain an ongoing train of thought[2], and he spent many years of his relatively short life in psychiatric wards[3] — this general coexistence of exceptional creativity and mental illness has been experienced to varying degrees by a veritable legion of writers, artists, and musicians throughout the history of art.

In her book, "Touched by Fire," Kay Redfield Jamison thoroughly explores this relationship, ultimately demonstrating "a compelling association, not to say actual overlap,

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[1] Jack Hirschman, ed. *Antonin Artaud Anthology*, San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1965, p. 149.

[2] Ibid., p. 11.

[3] Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched With Fire: Manic-depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*, New York: Free Press, 1993, p. 121.

between two temperaments — the artistic and the manic-depressive."[4] For the purposes of this thesis, I'd like to outline some of her research, specifically her mapping of the diverse cognitive and emotional states suffered by artists afflicted with manic-depression.

Jamison defines manic-depression fairly broadly. "Manic-depressive, or bipolar, illness encompasses a wide range of mood disorders and temperaments. These vary in severity from cyclothymia — characterized by pronounced but not totally debilitating changes in mood, behavior, thinking, sleep, and energy levels — to extremely severe, life-threatening, and psychotic forms of the disease."[5] The general symptoms of major depression include apathy, lethargy, hopelessness, sleep disturbance, slowed physical movement, slowed thinking, and impaired memory and concentration. The general symptoms of mania or hypomania (a milder version of mania) include elevated and expansive mood (though often accompanied by paranoia and irritability); increased energy or activity levels; decreased need for sleep; rapid, excitable, and intrusive speech patterns; and accelerated thinking, moving quickly from topic to topic. In addition, mania may induce periods of inflated self-esteem; a certainty of conviction about the correctness and importance of one's ideas; a grandiosity that can contribute to poor judgment; excessive spending; impulsive involvements in questionable endeavors; extreme impatience; and intense and impulsive romantic or sexual liaisons. "In its extreme forms, mania is characterized by violent agitation, bizarre behavior, delusional thinking, and visual and auditory hallucinations."[6] Other key aspects of manic-depressive illness are a cyclical oscillation between mania and depression, and the occurrence of mixed states, emotional conditions characterized by a mixture of manic and depressive symptoms.[7]

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[4] Ibid., p. 5.

[5] Ibid., p. 13.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., p. 36.

The characteristics of manic and creative thought that are of particular interest to me (and this project) include "fluency, rapidity, and flexibility … on the one hand, and the ability to combine ideas or categories of thought in order to form new and original connections on the other"[8] and an emphasis on "divergent" rather than "convergent" thinking. In making the distinction between the two latter types of thinking, psychologist J. P. Guilford suggests that "in tests of convergent thinking there is almost always one conclusion or answer that is regarded as unique …. In divergent thinking … there is much searching about or going off in various directions. … Divergent thinking … is characterized … as being less goal-bound."[9]

Quoting Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler, Jamison elaborates that the freedom suggested by this divergent thinking, while potentially fruitful creatively, is often problematic: "The *thinking* of the manic is flighty. He jumps by by-paths from one subject to another, and cannot adhere to anything. With this the ideas run along very easily and involuntarily, even so freely that it may be felt as unpleasant by the patient…."[10]

By contrast, depressive thinking may provide the "ballast" that allows for a methodical discipline needed to bring together the disparate ideas and insights mania can unearth.

> It seems counterintuitive that melancholy could be associated with artistic inspirations and productivity; the milder manic states and their fiery energies would seem, at first thought, to be more obviously linked. The extreme pain of the deeper melancholias, and the gentler, more reflective and solitary sides of the milder ones, can be extremely important in the creative process, however. Hypomania and mania often generate ideas and associations, propel contact with life and other people, induce frenzied energies and enthusiasms, and cast an ecstatic, rather cosmic hue over life. Melancholy, on the other hand, tends to force a slower pace, cools the ardor, and puts into perspective thoughts, observations, and feelings generated during more enthusiastic moments…. Depression

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[8] Ibid., p. 105.

[9] Ibid., p. 106.

[10] Ibid., p. 107.

prunes and sculpts; it also ruminates and ponders and, ultimately, subdues and focuses thought.[11]

Melancholic moods, particularly in alternation with manic ones, can also provide an acute first-hand understanding of the extremes of human emotion. "An artist certainly need not go through all extremes of all moods and all experience, but it is undeniable that familiarity with sadness and the pain of melancholy — as well as with the ecstatic, often violent energies of the manic states — can add a singular truth and power to artistic expression."[12]

The "cast"

Richard Semon

A tragic figure in the history of memory research, the German evolutionary biologist Richard Semon developed the concept of the engram — briefly and broadly, a trace of a memory — in the early twentieth century. While the implications of the bulk of his research are far beyond the scope of this thesis, I'd like to explore the metaphoric utility of a few of his seminal ideas.

The concept of the engram, in itself, was not that radical at the time. One thing that set Semon apart was his evolutionary perspective — his attempt to draw connections between evolutionary and hereditary development and the process of memory, particularly memory retrieval.[13] Another key point of Semon's research was that, while he "adhered to the view

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[11] Ibid., p. 118.

[12] Ibid., p. 120.

[13] Daniel Schacter, *Forgotten Ideas, Neglected Pioneers: Richard Semon and the Story of Memory*, Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press, 2001, p. 166.

that engrams are physically represented by changes in the state of the brain … he rejected the then popular view of localization that posited a one-to-one relationship between cerebral cells and memory traces."[14] At the same time, however, Semon believed that the apparatus of ecphory — again, briefly and broadly, the process by which memories are retrieved — was, in fact, a localized phenomenon[15] and that the relative success or failure of the ecphoric process is influenced by both internal (mental states) and external (environmental cues) stimuli.[16] Further, Semon "questioned the validity of atomistic associative accounts" of perceptual experience and "conceptualized engrams as unified complexes, comprised of 'emergent components' that fuse to form a qualitatively unique whole."[17] These components, in turn, are essentially fragments of an entire memory that could, if the circumstances of ecphory were suitable, be retrieved[18], and, importantly, the act of retrieval itself actually produces a substantively new complex of engrams.[19]

In metaphoric terms, Semon's research suggests some intriguing constructions. For one, a physical space — specifically for my thesis, the Sibell-Wolle Fine Arts building — can be considered as both an abstract metaphor for non-localized memory storage and a concrete site for ecphoric retrieval of the specific and interpretive "memories" of the various personas I've used in thesis.

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., p. 173.

[17] Ibid., p. 167.

[18] Ibid., p. 171.

[19] Ibid., p. 178.

Unfortunately, even as Semon's research provides a unique framework my investigations into memory, creativity, and mental illness, his biography yields many traumatic life events. Most prominently, he was a German Jew who converted to Christianity in 1885 as a response to an increasing atmosphere of anti-Semitism[20]; in 1897, he began an affair with a colleague's wife (whom he married in 1899), a series of events that isolated him socially[21]; when his published research was, beyond a few avid supporters, largely ignored, he became profoundly isolated professionally, which led to bouts of debilitating depression that haunted him for the rest of his life[22]; and mere months after his wife's death from cancer and in the face of Germany's defeat in World War I, Semon committed suicide in 1918.[23]

While a psychobiographical approach to Semon could elucidate more detailed connections between his life experience, his mental condition, and his research, such a task is beyond the scope of this thesis. Suffice it to say that the tragic subtext of his life work lends a certain gravity to his insights.

Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven

The Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven was a colorful figure in New York Dadaist circles of the late 1910s and early 1920s. Her contemporaries included William Carlos Williams, Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, and Man Ray. As with Richard Semon, her full historical import is beyond the scope of this thesis. But, again, as metaphor, certain aspects of her extravagant, often irrational behavior (even in the context of a movement given

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[20] Ibid., p. 30.

[21] Ibid., p. 55.

[22] Ibid., p. 71.

[23] Ibid., pp. 91-93.

to extravagant and irrational behavior[24]) provide a means for exploring the link between creativity and mental illness.

To get some sense of the presence of Freytag-Loringhoven, consider the following description by Georges Hugnet, quoted in *Irrational Modernism*, by Amelia Jones. "Like an empress from another planet, her head ornamented with sardine tins, indifferent to the legitimate curiosity of passers-by, the baroness promenaded down the avenues like a wild apparition, liberated from all constraint."[25] Jones goes on to suggest that Freytag-Loringhoven "lived, performed a kind of unhinged subjectivity that most of the other artists of her day … in spite of their aspirations to thwart bourgeois norms and define themselves as avant-garde, assiduously avoided."[26]

Jones ascribes at least some of Freytag-Loringhoven's behavior to neurasthenia, a mental condition marked by a sensitivity to stimuli so extreme that the body can no longer effectively process experience. Jones elaborates, suggesting that "neurasthenia (is) a complex network of bodily/psychic symptoms that rupture the subject's smooth functioning, propelling her into a heightened state of irrationality. To be neurathenic, suffering generalized anxiety and fear which can become incapacitating as they escalate in hysteria or panic, is to experience every stimulus of one's surroundings acutely as an attack on one's emotional and corporeal integrity. Under such an attack, the neurasthenic is suspended in a state of terror and dissociation as the fight-or-flight system begins to randomly misfire."[27]

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[24] Amelia Jones, *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004, p. 5.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., p. 28.

This irrationality also extends to problems encountered with comparisons of the human body to machines, an undeniable characteristic of post-World War I Dada practice. "The most important and highly charged aspect of the body/machine nexus is the inevitable *failure of the process of rationalization successfully or fully to contain or regulate human bodies/selves. ...* it is precisely this *failure* that is sketched through the representation of *dysfunctional* machines."[28]

As with Semon, Freytag-Loringhoven's life was also quite tragic, particularly her last years. Reduced to selling newspapers and living in a hovel in Paris[29], she was found dead in her apartment, which was flooded by gas from her own oven, in 1927.[30]

How these aspects of the Baroness and her historical context relate to the project will be explored further in the next chapter.

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[28] Ibid., p. 129.

[29] Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven, [Letter to Margaret Anderson and jane heap]. *Little Review*, 13 (1929), pp. 34-35.

[30] Amelia Jones, p. 235.

CHAPTER III

FORM AND CONTENT

On a formal level, this project is an attempt to create a sympathetic environment with which to explore the cognitive landscape (so to speak) of those suffering with mental illness, specifically bipolar disorder or manic depression. Of the fifty-seven video clips included in the project, roughly one half are programmed to change very quickly; change randomly; play faster, slower and/or backwards; and/or play simultaneously in the same video window. These clips constitute the "manic" phase of the installation. By contrast, the other half of the clips, the "depressive" phase, are programmed to play in their entirety, often with no interference (visual or aural) from other clips, though there is occasionally some lingering interference from the "manic" clips. This architecture loosely reflects the experience of manic depression documented in clinical studies. The content of the clips is drawn from a variety of sources and are presented in a variety of styles. For example, selected excerpted texts from Spalding Gray monologues are both performed by myself and also used as visual elements; original monologues were written and performed with Gray's working practice in mind; and excerpts from poems by Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Antonin Artaud are performed in ways that reflect their unique sensibilities.

The use of space and material in the installation should be noted. In a half-darkened gallery, a paint-splattered table and chair stand under a dim floodlight. As the viewer walks through the space, different videos are triggered. When the viewer sits at the table, he or she is in the best position to trigger three longer monologues, each of which features me performing a monologue while sitting on the same chair at the same table. This identification

and connection between the gallery space and the videos is two-fold. On one hand, there is a visual identification that connects the viewer's experience to mine (like it or not). On the other, and importantly, this concrete material connection between gallery space and video space allows for some critical overlap between the mapping of the space of the gallery and the mapping of the conceptual space of the installation. With this connection, the respective maps are not completely arbitrary; they share the physical presence of the chair and table. This reflects, to some degree, the flexibility of Richard Semon's ideas concerning both the material and abstract qualities of memory storage and retrieval.

The following sections delineate the formal elements of each video clip (or set of clips) and relate those structures to the conceptual basis of the work. Unless otherwise noted, each clip is assigned a specific trigger in a video frame grid[1], though some triggers also start a short delay circuit, which is programmed to start the next clip in a sequence after a certain interval of time. (The intervals are both random and arbitrary, depending on the trigger.) There is also a small set of triggers designed to select and play random clips and/or change the speed or loop direction of a clip already playing. (For a map of where various triggers/clusters are approximately located within the video frame used to trigger the videos in the installation, see Figure 1.)

[1] In this project, each video is triggered by changes in an associated portion of a video frame divided into 450 zones (a thirty wide by fifteen deep matrix). Within that matrix, fifty-seven zones contain triggers.

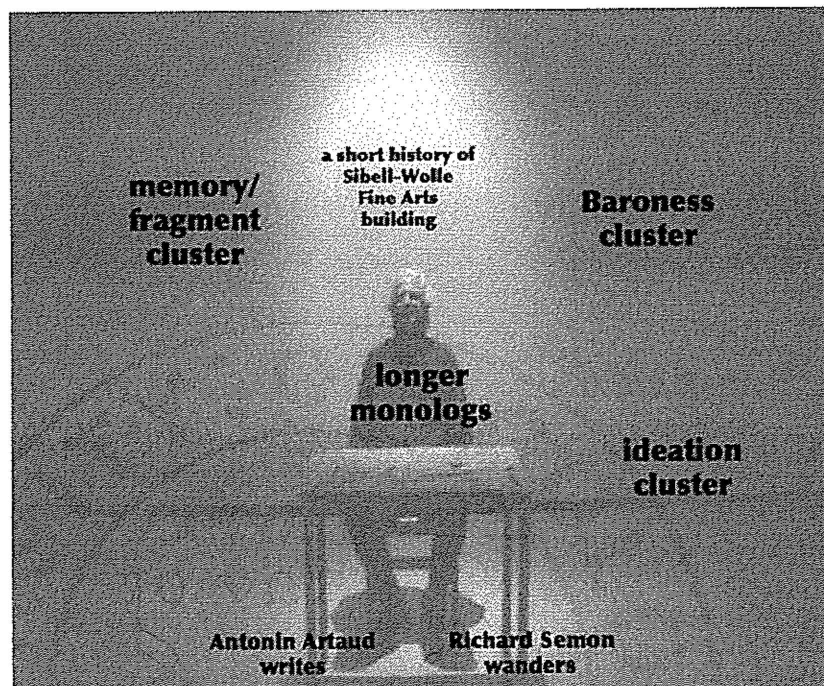

Figure 1. As the viewer moves through the gallery space, triggers associated with various locations within the above video frame are activated. The text shows which videos and/or clusters are associated with those locations. (The above video frame is an approximation of the actual frame used in the installation.)

The Baroness cluster

Drawn from a poetic criticism of William Carlos Williams' "Kora in Hell," written by Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and published in The Little Review in 1921, this cluster of clips is designed to recreate a "manic" cognitive state. This is accomplished by several formal strategies. The first was to split the few phrases I've excerpted into thirteen

individual clips, divided as follows (the text of each clip is separated by a semi-colon): "Art"; "no mechanical toy"; "is life as life"; "purposeful machine"; "palpitating brain"; "Hypocrisy stored up through ages"; "Nothing ever is"; "has been"; "supreme about hypocrisy"; "Jackassy"; "nincompoop"; "cocky bastard soul"; and "can hypocrisy inform — ever."[2] Each clip is set to play for ten seconds (regardless of each clip's length, which means that each phrase may loop several times before a delay circuit selects the next clip in the sequence), unless the viewer moves on to another trigger, which starts another clip immediately. There are also three special triggers — one programmed to play a random clip in the same video window (resulting in an intermittent superimposed image of two clips); one programmed to either change the playback speed of the clip (within a range of one-tenth speed to double speed) or change the direction of the loop (so the clip either repeats from the beginning or is played backwards once it reaches the end); and the third is programmed to shut off the second video feed and reset the playback speed to normal speed. These special triggers allow for unique re-combinations of the material in terms of both the sequence (and repetitions) of the clips and the superimpositions possible due to simultaneous playback of two clips. It should also be noted that a few of the random clip selections are from memory/fragment cluster (described below) and another is a scrolling text recounting one of the more harrowing aspects of neurasthenia[3].

The second important aspect of the cluster is that the sixteen triggers are arranged in three parallel tiers (as opposed to a single layer line) so that normal movement through the space would almost never trigger the videos in the sequence programmed into the delays. As a result, while the viewer has choices about which clip to activate, the hard-wired mix of

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[2] Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, "Thee I Call 'Hamlet of Wedding-Ring': Criticism of William Carlos William's (sic) 'Kora in Hell' and Why … Part II," *Little Review*, 8 (Autumn 1921), p. 109.

[3] Amelia Jones, p. 252. "Medically speaking, the neurasthenic feels everything so acutely that her body can no longer effectively process stimuli; ultimately, the capacity for pleasurable sensory experience disintegrates and all input becomes horrifying or overwhelming in effect."

random triggers and programmed delays will almost always produce a sequence different from what the viewer experiences as "possible" through his or her own movements. So, while a viewer might have some idea of *where* in the space a particular cluster can be triggered, finding and playing a specific clip or recombination of clips without interference is very difficult. This is designed to suggest to the viewer the anxiety and frustration associated with the imprecise and uncontrollable nature of manic cognitive states as well as the peculiar elation arising from creative discoveries made under the influence of those states.

The memory/fragment cluster

This cluster consists of nine individual clips ranging in length from about ten seconds to about thirty seconds. While this cluster shares many structural elements with the Baroness cluster — multiple related clips programmed with delays; the possibility of more than one clip playing simultaneously; and the intent to simulate manic cognitive states — there are some important differences. First, each clip is already a (green-screened) composite of two images of me: In the foreground of the image, I'm sitting at the painted table used in the installation, and most of the clips begin with me reaching for one of six books on the table (all written by Spalding Gray), opening it at random and reading a passage; in the background of the image, I wander about a large white room formerly used as a storage space by the CU Art Museum, empty now except for two large cabinets, and as I wander, I recite fragments of my own memories, often about awkward or embarrassing moments in my life. At one point, I even climb into one of the cabinets, thus suggesting the notion that my image is a memory looking for a place to be "stored." Each individual clip is a short section of a longer clip that weaves my own awkward memories with the random memories I read from Spalding Gray's books.

The second important formal difference in this cluster is the process by which the next clip in any given sequence is chosen. Instead of a set delay of ten seconds, each delay is randomized in length with each trigger activation, with a possible range extending from zero seconds to roughly five seconds longer than the duration each specific clip. (This means that any given clip will only occasionally run for its entire duration.) In addition, the next clip is also chosen randomly (as opposed to the arbitrary sequence programmed into the Baroness cluster). Furthermore, each clip trigger also starts playback of the same clip in the same video window at the same time. The intermittent superimposition created by the same clip playing simultaneously on top of itself (inevitably with a slight delay) results in a disconcerting jittery composite image and the slight delay adds a reverberating quality to the audio. This simultaneous superimposition is interrupted when the first clip randomly cuts to another clip, but since all the clips share the same foreground and background image, the random cuts only seem to reset the starting point within the longer video clip from which each individual clip is pulled. The same special triggers (random superimposition; speed/loop direction changes; and a reset trigger) included in the Baroness cluster are used here, too, though an extra one has been added — in some cases, a third video clip is activated to play simultaneously with whichever clip or clips are already running.

By suggesting multiple metaphors about how memories are stored — the books on the table represent Spalding Gray's apparatus for memory storage; the cabinets mine — I hope to build on my basic conceit that the ways in which the Sibell-Wolle building represents the brain are flexible and contingent on the context of how the images of the building (and those of my wanderings within the building) are presented. I also hope to suggest the problematic nature of my own identification with Spalding Gray's methods and relation to the self. In this cluster, my own memories merge with Gray's while the presentation of those memories mimic a manic cognitive state. It's hard to say where my persona leaves off and my

impersonation of his begins, and cross-pollination between these seemingly concrete individual memories becomes inevitable.

The ideation cluster

Once again, a number of related clips and their associated triggers are arranged in a cluster. The focus of the majority of these clips (ten out of eleven total) is the concept of suicidal ideation, which, briefly, is a concrete plan to kill oneself devised by a person who is considering suicide. At first glance, all of the clips (including the tenuously related eleventh clip described later) seem to take place in a painting drying room in Sibell-Wolle. However, only five clips were actually photographed in that room; the rest were photographed in a television studio with a green screen behind a fixed set of me sitting at the painted table used in the installation, and each of these clips starts with a shot of the painting drying room screened in behind me. This play between the physical foreground and the changeable background opens up a virtual context to consider memory storage and retrieval, as well as suggesting the problematic nature of a fixed recollection.

The clips in this sequence fall into four categories: The first contains four clips of me reading a passage from Spalding Gray's *It's a Slippery Slope* concerning his anxiety about approaching the same age as his mother when she committed suicide (age 52) and how that anxiety generated very specific suicide fantasies of his own. These clips were actually filmed in the painting drying room.

The second category contains two clips of me explaining the concept of suicidal ideation: in the first, I confess that I, personally, even though I'd been depressed, have not been compelled to devise any specific plans to commit suicide; in the second, in lieu of an actual suicide fantasy, offer up an obituary that I'd once written for myself (and the circumstances in which I'd written it). While the screened in background (of the painting

drying room) for these two clips is static, multiple lines of text stream across the screen from right to left. In the first clip, the text reiterates the criteria for determining whether a patient might be engaging in suicidal ideation. (A few of the specific quotes, drawn from the American Academy of Family Physicians Web site, include: "How often do you think about suicide? Do you feel as if you're a burden? Or that life isn't worth living?" and "Do you have access to potentially harmful medications?"[4]) In the second clip, not only do lines of text (from my "obituary") stream across the image, the foreground image (of me sitting at the table) becomes a transparent mask through which the lines of text can be seen, making it seem as though the substance of my body is made up of text. In both clips, the lines of text stream both behind and in front of my image (or, in the second clip, the outline of my image), seeming to sandwich the image representing me between lines of text. In metaphoric terms, I'm both constituted by and constrained by texts — in these cases either written by myself or drawn from clinical language used to define and diagnose suicidal behavior — suggesting a malleable boundary between the language and structure of self-definition and the material circumstances of representation.

The third category contains four clips of me reading a passage drawn from Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia* in which he recounts his experience of the "perfect moment." This experience took place while Gray was swimming off the coast of Thailand after completing his role in the movie, *The Killing Fields*. Briefly, Gray allowed the current to take him far from the beach, where, bobbing up and down in the water, he experienced a sort of bodiless transcendence beyond his physical self. ("Suddenly, there was no time and there was no fear and there was no body (for sharks) to bite. There were no longer any outlines. It was just one big ocean. My body had blended with the ocean.") This feeling of bliss abruptly ended when

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[4] Michael F. Gliatto and Anil K. Rai, "Evaluation and Treatment of Patients with Suicidal Ideation," *American Family Physician*, Vol. 59, No. 6 (March 15, 1999). http://www.aafp.org/afp/990315ap/1500.html

he heard his companion, Ivan Strasburg, a South African cinematographer, calling to him, "Spalding, Spalding, come back man! I haven't tested those waters yet!"[5] Formally, the background of these clips are also shots of the painting drying room, but in this case, either the camera is moving; the light source in the room is moving; or multiple moving camera shots are superimposed over each other so the wooden bars in the room appear to blend into one another. This is an attempt to reflect the transcendent nature of Gray's "perfect moment" and visually suggest the malleability of the physical world in the face of powerful subjective experience.

The fourth category contains only one clip and is only, but tellingly, tangentially related to the rest of the sequence. The clip is of me doing a liberally interpretive impersonation of performance artist and self-proclaimed "exotic theatrical genius"[6] Jack Smith, quoting a line he uttered to Don Yannacito while setting up for his First Person Cinema show in Boulder in 1980 — "And then … and then, we'll wait … for the perfect socialist moment!"[7]

Assorted "standalone" clips

In this section, I'd like to briefly summarize the form and function of a number of secondary clips used in the installation. Each of the following clips has only one trigger,

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[5] Spalding Gray, *Swimming to Cambodia*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985, p. 80.

[6] This phrase is on a business card Jack Smith gave me in 1980.

[7] Personal conversation with Don Yannacito, August 2007. According to Yannacito, after several days of preparation, which included securing the services of a photographer, a seamstress, an oboe player, and six dancing girls dressed like Maria Montez (the Dominican-born B-movie actress); the cleaning of some 3000 slides; and the construction of a movie screen out of hanging strips of gauze, Smith refused to start the show until the arrival of "the perfect socialist moment," which, of course, never came.

though other clips from the aforementioned clusters occasionally continue to play when these clips are activated.

"A short history of Sibell-Wolle" provides a few key bits of the historical context of the Sibell-Wolle Fine Arts building, emphasizing that the name of the architect who designed it is unknown today, and that it was the last building built on campus before the university hired Charles Z. Klauder to oversee the development of a signature style based on rural Italian architecture. It was this signature style, which still influences every new capital construction project on campus, that former University of Colorado President George Norlin referred to when he characterized the physical buildings of the university as the "body" that was designed to provide a unique and worthy vessel for the "soul" of the university's educational mission. Sadly, the Sibell-Wolle building was not included in this glowing assessment of the university's facilities, and at one point, it was rumored that Klauder had placed the Ketchum Arts and Sciences building in its current location to block the view of Sibell-Wolle from Norlin Library, one of Klauder's most lauded achievements.[8]

"Richard Semon wanders" contains a series shots of me dressed as Richard Semon wandering the abandoned and cluttered spaces of Sibell-Wolle. In one scene, I lament a few of the tragic events in Semon's life ("I alienated my entire circle of friends for love"; "I was a Jew, and I became a Christian so I could teach"); in another, I accidentally step on a pile of broken glass on a landing as I climb a flight of stairs; in another, I look into an empty office and say, "The morons, they think they're memories are stored in here." In this way, I give Semon a chair at the table, so to speak, and mix his melancholic image and history with the others that wander Sibell-Wolle.

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[8] William R. Deno, *Body & Soul: Architectural Style at the University of Colorado at Boulder*. Boulder, CO: Publications Service, University of Colorado at Boulder, 1994, and William R. Deno, *Body & Soul: Architectural Style at the University of Colorado at Boulder*, University of Colorado Facilities Management and University of Colorado School of Journalism and Mass Communication. (videorecording, 25 minutes, 2005)

"Antonin Artaud" begins with a shot of me sitting in a beat-up chair, aimlessly drawing on a sheet of paper in my lap. A nurse approaches me and hands me a white Styrofoam cup containing "psychedelic" pills, which I ingest. (The "psychedelic" effect is accomplished through green-screen compositing.) As I do this, a voiceover of me reading an excerpt from Artaud's prose poem "Shit to the Spirit" fades up, and the image dissolves into a composite of my arms vigorously writing incoherent scribblings in a small notebook (in the foreground) as the background changes from various locations in the Sibell-Wolle building to the roof of the building to a grassy meadow and back to Sibell-Wolle. The composite image makes it seem as though I am writing on the floors of various rooms (as well as on the roof and meadow); as the backgrounds shift, duplicates of my scribbling arms and hands at different angles and screen positions are added to the composite until the frame is filled with scribbling arms. But, as the poem reaches its disillusioned final lines ("I tell myself that there's scum and crud abroad and god's sucked Lenin's ass:/ and that's the way it's always been,/ and it isn't worth talking about anymore,/ and it doesn't matter, it's just another fucking bill to pay."[9]), the duplicate arms fade, leaving the original set to throw down a pen in disgust. The general thrust of Artaud's poem is a rant against the transcendental strategies of the "spirit" over the material (or "body"), and the final disillusionment reflects Artaud's recognition that the battle has already been lost — in his mind, too many people believe in the spirit in spite of Artaud's very real experience to the contrary.[10]

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[9] Jack Hirschman, p. 112.

[10] Ibid., pp. 27-28. In some ways, Artaud was one artist who learned, through multiple stays in mental wards, how to use medication (and, unfortunately, various recreational drugs) to regulate his brain chemistry. For him, the body (and blood) ruled the mind, not vice versa.

Introduction to Metaphor

This is the first of the three longer monologues/discourses meant to be activated when the viewer sits in the chair. It provides a theoretical framework for the piece as a whole — namely, one of the central metaphors of the piece, the idea that our brains are the "hardware" and our minds are the "software"[11], and assorted riffs on Richard Semon's theories of memory storage and retrieval — but it also introduces a certain visual malleability within the frame and me (and my image) as a ubiquitous presence throughout the piece. The clip begins with me sitting at the table used in the installation asking someone off-screen (my cameraman, David Marek) whether the camera is running, thus immediately revealing the reality of the space beyond the frame as well as a flexibility in what constitutes the "beginning" of any given clip. (This strategy is repeated at the end of the clip, when the elaborate composite image onscreen is very quickly removed, layer by layer.) I then launch into a short explication of the central metaphor (hardware/software), which is augmented visually by the appearance of a DVD player remote hovering over one of my upward-facing open hands (representing "hardware") and a flower hovering over my other upward-facing open hand (representing "software"). The next phrase — suggesting that "Sigmund Freud was a software guy" and that "Oliver Sacks is more of a hardware guy" — is accompanied, respectively, by a hovering picture of Freud and a hovering hat (an amusing reference to Sacks and his seminal book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales).*

I then introduce a short clip within the clip that continues this visual wit with multiple representations of the brain — one segue superimposes a phrenology-based mapping of the

[11] I need to credit University of Colorado computer science Professor Mike Eisenberg for this general metaphor. Although problematic for reasons far too involved to examine in this thesis, it provides a resonant and quickly understood framework for some of the more oblique and esoteric associations touched upon as the viewer explores the installation.

brain onto the architectural plans of the Sibell-Wolle Fine Arts building, then superimposes images of specific rooms/spaces in the building onto that particular room on the larger blueprint of the building. After this, I launch into another clip within the clip that whimsically introduces Richard Semon's ideas about memory storage and ecphoric retrieval. This sub-clip labels an image of me trying to get into the Sibell-Wolle building as "a memory," a conceit that continues as I appear, wearing different clothes, in various spaces within the building. My changing appearance provides a visual metaphor for Semon's complex of engrams that changes with each ecphoric activation — the overall gestalt-like memory remains constant while the particulars of its retrieval are constantly in flux. Another important aspect of this engram metaphor is introduced as the last image of myself (in this sequence) picks up the chair I'd been sitting in and lugs it off frame. As this is the same chair the viewer sits in, there is not only some continuing sense of identification with my image (my "memory") but also a new nuance to the metaphor in that my memory needs to supply its own context/chair in order to have a solid presence as it wanders about the space designated as a brain.

The next section of this clip talks about how Semon's ideas about memory allow for the simultaneous consideration of memory as concrete and abstract (discussed above) and offers a few biographical facts about Semon's life (his isolation and eventual suicide). This melancholy note marks the beginnings of my manipulation of the background images within the clip, which begins with two large, mirror-image photographs of the mustachioed Semon facing one another behind my image. As I segue into the tragic biographical details of his life, the background photos dissolve into an image of an empty basement room in Sibell-Wolle, into which I enter, dressed in some approximation of nineteenth-century apparel. (I wear a dark suit coat and a low-brimmed conductor hat.) This manipulation of the background image accelerates in the final section of the clip, wherein the image of me sitting at the painted table begins to rub the background image (while informing the viewer that "even the physical spaces of the brain are not what they seem"). As I rub, another image of me, now shirtless

and wearing a white wig (the same one worn by the actress portraying Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven elsewhere in the piece) dances within the rubbed out part of the screen, and just before the image deconstructs itself, my revealed image reminds the viewer, "Remember, it's just a metaphor."

As the seemingly concrete aspects of the image become remarkably fluid (and far more abstract in terms of what those images *represent*) by the end of the clip, the formal aspects of the clip have demonstrated the creative and metaphoric potential of Semon's flexible scientific framework. In a way, this represents the mind/brain combination at its most creative, but also suggests the problems of maintaining consistency and balance within consciousness when literally everything the mind can grasp is subject to radical change.

"Original" Spalding Gray monologue

In this clip, I take a step toward understanding Spalding Gray by writing and performing an "original" monologue about two incidents in Gray's life of which I have first-hand knowledge — the two times I met him in person. Drawing on these experiences, as well as from three interviews I conducted with Gray when I covered his performances in Boulder, Colorado, for a small daily newspaper, I fabricated a narrative that attempts to reconcile my interpretation of Gray's subjective experience of meeting me with my own memories of the same events. This amounts to ecphoric gymnastics of a peculiar order, and I hope that I've been a least marginally successful. As with the final stages of the Introduction to Metaphor monologue, the background image is in constant flux while the foreground image of me sitting at the painted table wearing a plaid flannel shirt (my Spalding Gray costume) remains relatively unchanged. It is also worth noting that, to the best of my recollection, the events and dialogue described by me (as Gray) are real.

Our first meeting took place in Aspen, Colorado, in 1987 or 1988. He was traveling with the film version of *Swimming to Cambodia*, and after the show, he went to a festival-sponsored party at an Aspen disco. In my impersonation of Gray, I surmise that this activity of watching the world, then performing what he sees, then talking about performing is a "compact little loop" that lends structure to Gray's life. Unfortunately, it's also a rigid construct that causes anxiety when things happen at the wrong point in the cycle. After some time watching him interact with other festival-goers, my real self approached him and, very shyly, thanked him for what he did. Although he was cordial, I felt (no doubt, largely self-consciously) that I made him nervous, and in this monologue, I attribute that nervousness not only to Gray's lifelong paranoia, but also to a predicament he mentioned to me in interviews — the problem of needing a certain amount of anonymity in order to create monologues, but feeling pressure to become a bigger "name" in the business. "It's always about kicking the person upstairs, and if you're not up there at a certain age, then they're a failure."[12] Attendant to this was an irritation with being recognized on the street; it was flattering, but it also began to feel like a tacit invasion of his privacy.[13]

This invaded feeling is more prominent in the second half of the "original" monologue, which recounts our meeting in Boulder, Colorado, in 1995. In the monologue, we chat a bit about an article (*not* written by me, incidentally) in the Colorado Daily about his performance that night (*Gray's Anatomy*), but there is no interview because a publicist had told the writer that Gray was "incommunicado." This line is accompanied by an image of the first page of the January 2004 New York Magazine article on Gray's disappearance while the sound of lapping water can be heard on under the voice over on the audio track. The darker

[12] J. Gluckstern, "Spalding Gray plays hard and lives to talk about it," *Colorado Daily*, March 2, 1990, p. 23.

[13] Spalding Gray, *It's a Slippery Slope*, p. 40.

notes suggested by this juxtaposition increase, reaching a peak in the final sequence of images.

The second half of the "original" monologue ends when the "tall, awkward, gangly young man" and his more extroverted friend walk by Gray, now surrounded by his friends, which I (as Gray) describe as "being in the bubble" of his own privacy. As the pair passes Gray and company, my (real) friend says, "It must stink being famous." At this point, as the music accompanying the voice over reaches a dramatic crescendo, the background image morphs from several phrases of type from the final sentences of the first part of *Swimming to Cambodia* — "… I had a flash. An inkling. I suddenly thought I knew what it was that killed Marilyn Monroe."[14] — to a looming (and ponderously expanding) image of Gray that slowly fades to black.

In cognitive terms, this monologue approximates a mixed state, somewhere between mania and depression. The light tone that starts the monologue is, incrementally, replaced by a portentous sense of loss — of possibility, of livelihood, of connection with the world.

Final monologue

In this monologue, my persona vacillates between seeming to impersonate Spalding Gray and delivering my own musings on the deteriorating health of my mother. (I've included the full text in an appendix.) These transitions between personas are marked by quick dissolves between me wearing a solid red shirt and me wearing a plaid flannel shirt (my Spalding Gray "costume"). As with the other longer monologues, the background is malleable, given to mercurial shifts of form and content.

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[14] Spalding Gray, *Swimming to Cambodia*, p. 59.

It begins with my recounting of a recent conversation with my mother, wherein she describes certain hallucinations with so much conviction that even the formal elements of the film seem to follow her lead. (When she suggests that a hip operation she'd just had took place in eastern Colorado ("where the Indians *are*"), the background fades from an empty Sibell-Wolle basement space to a field of grass bathed in golden sunset light accompanied by a simple tune played on a flute; a bit later, an enormous bee flutters and buzzes into the frame, an image drawn from another hallucination my mother had about a month after her hip operation.) This thread of hallucination leads to a rather psychedelic sequence containing images of vibrating and glowing pills and spinning bees, which then fades from a peak of pure white background to a mundane staircase that begins to turn slowly on its side while my persona talks superficially about the Indian history of Colorado and wondering if it had something to do with my mother's life-long attraction to Indian art.

After a visual joke using Norlin Library's pillared façade to illustrate "what the white folks have done with the place (Colorado)," the monologue takes a darker turn. As I talk about my mother's disturbing loss of memory (she's "someone I know, and someone I don't"), Gray's persona follows with a grim passage about his mother's suicide from "The Anniversary," a short monologue included in *Life Interrupted.* At this point, my shirt quickly dissolves from plaid to red (I'm "myself" again), and I'm overcome by emotion, here conflating my feelings for my mother with my feelings of empathy for Gray. This important confusion of emotion clarifies the problems of empathy and, hopefully, reveals some of Gray's confusion of his own feelings of desperation and those of his mother. The monologue ends with a somber reading of part of the last page of the first part of *Swimming to Cambodia* (which, as described in the "original" monologue, after a litany of goodbyes to the seductive aspects of the "paradise" of Thailand, ends with Gray's inkling of understanding what killed Marilyn Monroe), but before I reach the final line, I begin to "say goodbye" to Spalding Gray's life and work ("Farewell to *Swimming to Cambodia* … to Aspen … to car accidents

… to perfect moments"). By the end, I, too, have a revelation — as a bundle of constantly ascending helium balloons finally reaches the open sky, and as the foreground finally disappears for good, I utter my own last words, that "I suddenly thought I knew what it was that killed Spalding Gray."

As the culminating monologue of the installation, it draws together a number of its disparate parts and imagery — the set of doors representing memory storage in the Introduction to Metaphor, the empty basement room that I wander about while impersonating Richard Semon, and the idea of the "compact little loop" of existence, to name but a few reiterations. But it also introduces new imagery shot beyond the sound stage or the environs in or around the Sibell-Wolle Fine Arts building — notably, calming and beautifully lit scenes of nature and a small bundle of helium balloons disappearing into a luminous sunset. This ostensibly transcendental imagery, used in the context of loss of memory (in my mother's case) and loss of a viable way of living (in Gray's case) is not merely ironic, but also harks back to Antonin Artaud's quote about using art to "literally get out of hell."

Conclusion

The centrality of the flexibility of Richard Semon's ideas should not be underestimated. Just as the table and chair remain constants in both the gallery and contemplative video spaces, Spalding Gray (and my image/persona) are constants in both the stories we tell and the real histories we recall. The table and chair, as well as Gray and my impersonations of him, become conduits between the space the viewer navigates and the abstracted spaces of memory and history the piece invokes. (See Figure 2.) In short, these constants become important cues in the ecphoric retrieval of the variegated experiences mapped in the video clips. (The other, tantamount, cue, of course, is the viewer's movements through the gallery space.) In this context, we can come to understand Gray's fixation with

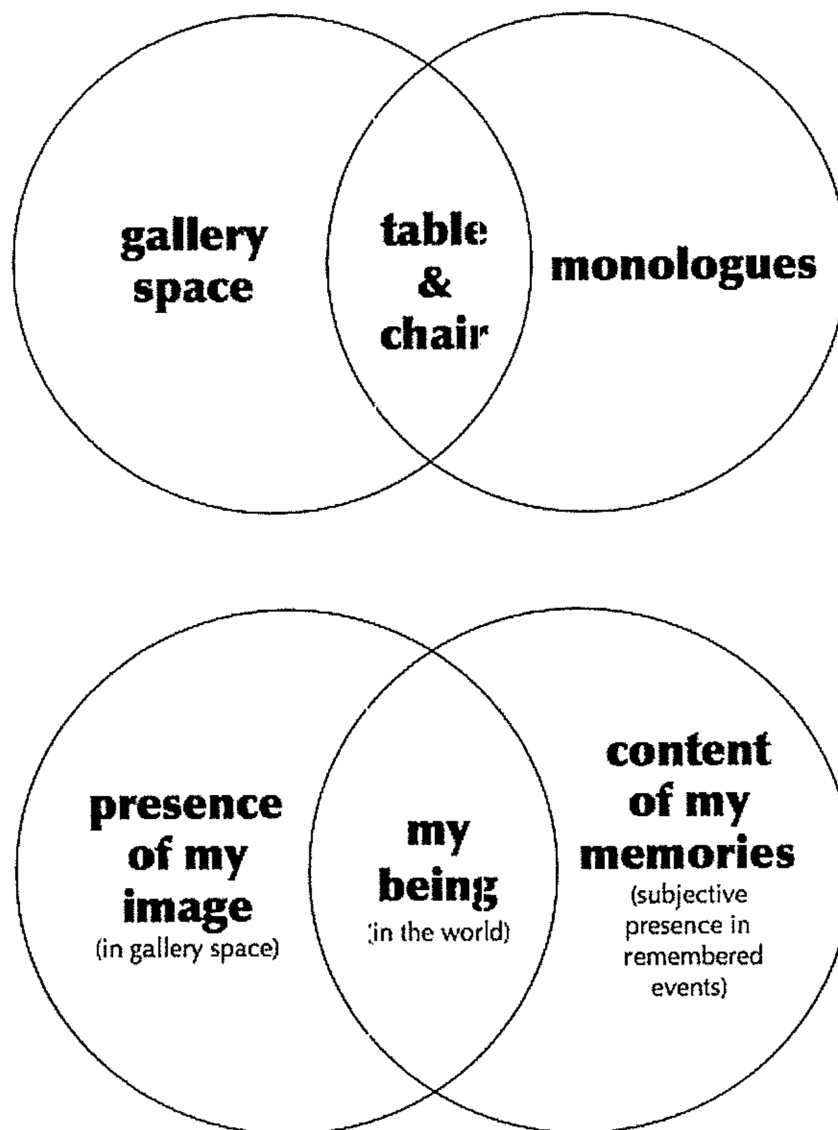

Figure 2. The upper diagram shows how the materiality of the table and chair used in the installation is shared by both the gallery space and the conceptual space of the monologue videos. The lower diagram shows a similar construction for the way in which my material presence (or some representation of it) inhabits both the gallery space and the conceptual and abstracted spaces of my memory.

his mother's suicide as a key ecphoric cue in his retrieval of his life experience (as well as in how he "coded" it in the first place). His recurring motifs of death, grief, melancholy, and depression functioned much the same way. So, in spite of his "movement" through the world, he simply couldn't escape what he came to see as hard-wired destiny or fate. And because his fixations provided both a means of framing his life and access to an empathetic response to the world (his mother in particular), he couldn't relinquish the control they had over him. Similarly, the ubiquity of my image and the table and chair provide a useful framework for mapping the spaces involved, but they will never allow the viewer to transcend them.

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APPENDIX A

TEXT OF FINAL MONOLOGUE

It was something about the Indians.

I was talking to my mother — she has what you might call a certain elegant and articulate comportment; everything she says is very thoughtful, just this side of authoritative, but always thoughtful. It's something she might have learned from her mother, who I never knew before she succumbed to Alzheimer's, or perhaps from some eloquent progressive doyenne my mother met in the Thirties — someone who could defend Franklin Roosevelt in front of a room full of Republicans without completely losing it.

So I was talking to my mother — she'd just had a hip operation the day before — and she started to tell me that the operation had taken place in a part of the hospital in eastern Colorado, "where the Indians were ... where the Indians *are*." I wasn't quite sure how to take this — she was already showing signs of Alzheimer's, now topped off with anesthesia hangover and pain killers. Somehow, in her mind, just before they knocked her out, she looked out the window and saw the Pawnee National Grasslands. Even confused, that demeanor came through, that thoughtfulness, just this side of authoritative. I had no reason to believe she didn't believe what she was saying. My mother thought that operating room would be a good place for my niece to learn about the Indians.

I said, "Mom, I think you're hallucinating — you know, from the drugs ... after all,

we're all just a shot in the vein away from total incoherence."

And she looked at me, astonished — "I hadn't thought of that."

You know, this wasn't the first time the Indians had come up in recent weeks, or in past years. My mother had spent a good chunk of her life collecting Indian art — R. C. Gorman, Francisco Zuniga. Pear-shaped women lined her living room. We'd spent a good chunk of my childhood taking car trips around the Southwest — Hovenweep, Mesa Verde. Maybe this had something to do with why my mother came to Colorado in first place — that progressive doyenne told had her about the Sand Creek Massacre, and in the Forties, my mother came out to Denver University to see just what the white folks had done with the place.

Who knows? It's all locked up in a box that's getting harder and harder to open. It's like a five-dimensional cube, I'm seeing faces I've never seen before as time unfolds. She's familiar and unfamiliar, someone I know and someone I don't.

(At this point, I pick up Gray's *Life Interrupted* (p. 108) and begin to read.)

"On the subway I tried thinking about the words 'fate,' 'necessity,' and 'chance.' I kept trying to put 'necessity' and 'sacred' together. I thought also about how I could not imagine living without my children, and how I would either have to die or learn to live without them. I thought about my mother and how she took the more extreme way out."

I read about Spalding Gray's mother, and I think of mine. Is that selfish? Is that empathy? Narcissism? Is it a way of injecting a little order into this universe? To bring

another's pain or pleasure into that illusionary compact little loop of our own existence? When confronted with the senseless, what do we do?

(I pick up *Swimming to Cambodia* (p. 59) and begin to read.)

"Riding in the car, I said a silent farewell. Farewell to the fantastic breakfasts, the pineapple like I'd never tasted and probably will never taste again. Farewell to the fresh mango and papaya, farewell to the Thai maid and the fresh, clean, cotton sheets on the king-size bed every night. Farewell to the incredible free lunches under the circus tent with fresh meat flown in from America every day ..."

(Although my tone doesn't change, I stop reading the text and begin reciting my own words.)

Farewell to *Swimming to Cambodia*, to *Sex and Death to Age 14*, to *Impossible Vacations*; no more *Monsters in the Box*, no more *Slippery Slope* ... *Gray's Anatomy* no more. Farewell to Aspen, to skiing, to cocktail hour, to my therapist. Farewell to ferry rides, to car accidents, to perfect moments.

And just as I was dozing off, the words falling from my hands, I had a flash. An inkling. I suddenly thought I knew what it was that killed Spalding Gray.