

Red Room Green Screen

Brittany Utting
University of Michigan



Figure 1. Diana Vreeland in her Garden in Hell, interior decorator Billy Baldwin, 1971. (Image by Horst. P Horst, Vogue © Conde Nast.)

Red walls, dense and saturated, produce an atmospheric interior that is unfamiliar and unsettling. Filled with restless surfaces and figures—wallpapers, curtains, mirrors, pillows, and ornaments—the architecture visually collapses into the objects that teem over it. In this image of the aptly-named Garden in Hell reclines Diana Vreeland, former *Vogue* editor, jauntily showing off the salon of her New York City apartment designed by Billy Baldwin in 1971 (Figure 1). Although Vreeland is centered in the space and framed by the room, there is a degree of indeterminacy between her body and its context. Her presence is both undermined and exalted by the optical mimesis between subject and space. The color red completely subsumes the profusion of pattern and ornament, provoking a misreading of her outline against the textured room.

Diana Vreeland's Garden in Hell constitutes an analog for contemporary attitudes of the digital surface that use texture and pattern to obscure objects within a space. Instrumentalizing the visual noise of a mapped image, techniques of projection and graphic application can subvert the legibility of architectural space, flattening the building into a background image against which its inhabitants are subsumed by the "digital dust of vision."¹ Advances in technologies of visual mapping and machine learning contribute to state-sanctioned and corporate-sponsored campaigns of information gathering and digital invasion into the most intimate aspects and spaces of our daily lives. How can we co-opt these techniques of resurfacing to confuse the machine's eye and sabotage these watchful sentinels? Certainly, post-digital aesthetics have questioned the way we conceptualize the visual field and its surfaces, opening up diverse critiques of legibility, surveillance, and measurement. Through methods of texture mapping, bitmap patterning, and chroma keying, we can instead undermine the accelerating clarity of hyperreal digital imaging, appropriating the atmospheric materials of virtual space

to occlude, camouflage, and question the actual and perceived divisions between body and space.

The potential indeterminacy of the visual field and the possibility of new forms of erasure challenge the relationship between optical technologies and economics of surveillance, information, and analysis in contemporary image culture. These techniques of digital observation—behavior monitoring, financial targeting, political influencing—not only present real intrusions against our private selves, but support and profit infrastructures of control and vigilance. In our increasingly imaged environment, how do we avoid facial recognition softwares, geotracking, ID protocols, and AI predictive analytics that gather data on our habits, ambitions, and desires without our consent? A possible space of resistance to the accelerating condition of image analytics rests on this visual duplication of our environment. By confounding the machine's ability to recognize, disseminate, and persuade, we can opt out of this condition and construct a space for our own invisibility.

In the information-rich atmospheres of digital space, the image and its content grant social, technological, and material agency. In their text "Thinking Postdigital Aesthetics," David Berry and Michael Dieter claim that "Computation becomes experiential, spatial and materialized in its implementation, embedded within the environment and embodied, part of the texture of life itself but also upon and even within the body ... manipulated and manipulable and interactive and operable through a number of entry-points, surfaces and veneers."²

Digital materiality could then constitute a method of countersurveillance in which the image is no longer complicit with institutions of surveillance and documentation. The dissipation of Vreeland's body into the red room of the Garden in Hell is a compelling prototype for the transformation of an environment and its surfaces, exploiting the granularity of

photography to repurpose the figure-ground ambiguities of the object. While the texture map is typically deployed as a rendering technique that increases surface detail and enhances photorealism, what if this method can instead be used to frustrate the mimetic? In his installation at the Palazzo Grassi for the 2013 Venice Biennale, Rudolf Stingel created an analog of the digitally applied texture as a backdrop for his paintings, lining every surface of the exhibition space with a digitally enlarged carpet design reproducing the ornament of oriental rugs (Figure 2). The liner replicated the effect of a digital surface, visually collapsing the space via the two-dimensionality of the texture map. The pervasiveness of Stingel's optical environment and the simultaneous denial of the space's volume hints at the power of the digital surface in the deferral of spatial legibility.

The decorative exuberance of Stingel's digitized interior has the potential to enact a destructive relationship between object and field, between the legible and the indeterminate. Like the Garden in Hell, these surfaces can absorb, dismantle, or enhance the form of the body. The superpositioning of the texture-mapped body against the evenly covered field confirms the shallowness of the picture plane, flattening the space into an image. This atmosphere is a new class of digital "plenum" in which visual material fills virtual space and crowds its surfaces.³ Such a visual field, characterized by excess, creates an oversaturated graphic space of lines and color, what Lavin terms "clutter euphoria."⁴ The perceptual restlessness of this type of image-space is akin to the "optic horror" in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," where she writes that "Behind that outside pattern [in the wallpaper] the dim shapes get clearer every day. It is always the same shape, only very numerous. ...The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out."⁵

Perhaps the postdigital subject is the mediated one, barely discernible,

whose clear outline is impossible to keep steady against the restless background of patterns and figures. Diana Vreeland's *Garden in Hell* and Stingel's *Palazzo Grassi* show surface conditions able to create atmospheres where visual noise and texture mapping flatten space and subject. Such atmospheres resist the measurable and objective terrain of grid space; like in "The Yellow Wallpaper," the instrumentalization of excess prevents detection and surveillance. Such architecture of disappearance—camouflage *qua* visual excess—can frustrate information technologies that perform the management of our digital selves. Hiding in plain sight may in fact be atmosphere's new agency, a digital smokescreen that can resist technologies of perception and measurement. Countering our distrust of ambiguous space and surface, how can we leverage expectations of legibility to counter software of edge detection, identification, and recognition?

Emerging aesthetics of the digital open up spaces in which to resist these image-based economies of detection and attention, creating optical tactics to sidestep regimes of visual surveillance. The digital image achieves an atmosphere and materiality that defines a new corporeal condition: "Within the realm of the New Aesthetic spectacle, images do not necessarily exist above and supersede objects, but become tangible in a new, distorted way... becomes a bodily, graspable image," state Christiane Paul and Malcolm Levy in their essay "Genealogies of the New Aesthetic."⁶ These postdigital aesthetics are more than an overlay of data and object; they comprise a totalizing ecology of both virtual and physical environments.

If today digital space serves as an increasingly important platform for the construction of the self, how do we control our own terms of participation? How do we decide the political condition of a body's digital presence or absence, navigating these zones of disappearance and visibility? In her 2013 parody instructional video *HOW*



Figure 2. Rudolf Stingel, *Palazzo Grassi*, 2013, installation view. (Courtesy and copyright of the artist and Stefan Altenburger Photography Zurich.)

NOT TO BE SEEN, Hito Steyerl explores the different ways in which to avoid being photographed, imaged, or otherwise digitally represented. She begins by listing the most ordinary of strategies: to hide, to move off screen, to swipe, to disappear.⁷ By explaining how to disappear digitally, she opens up a technological space in which the human subject can escape detection. Steyerl speaks of this "negative image"⁸ in digital optics and measurement, as an "invisibility [that] is politically constructed and maintained by epistemic violence."⁹ In the video, Steyerl co-opts this invisibility, using the chroma key to erase her corporeal-digital self. Standing in front of a green

screen, she rubs keyed paint onto her face. As the green pigment becomes more legible, her post-produced image is replaced by the television broadcast screen test; she fades, rendered invisible by the background footage (Figure 3). Such methods of erasure—the chroma key, texture mapping, and image projection—become tools

Figure 3. Hito Steyerl, *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, 2013, HD video, single screen in architectural environment, 15 min., 52 sec. (Image © 4.0 Hito Steyerl; courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Esther Schipper, Berlin.)



to reappropriate platforms of digital mediation, resisting detection rather than enabling it.

This project of nonrepresentation embodies a visual ethos with potential political instrumentality. The materialization of digital space as a densely filled plenum of visual information allows the excess and profusion to undermine mediating technologies that rely on legibility and recognition. While these visual practices may ultimately be incorporated into the same technologies they are trying to undermine, they suggest alternate tactics of subterfuge and duplicity. Countering visual fidelity with illegibility, the surfaces of the red room and the green screen can be used to disappear. However, as the machine's eye continuously adapts to this only temporary resistance, we must concede in the eventuality of our visibility. How, then, do we collectively construct our own Garden in Hell?

Author Biography

Brittany Utting is an architect and lecturer at Taubman College at the University of Michigan where she was the 2017–2018 Willard A. Oberdick Fellow. She holds a Master of Architecture from Yale University and received a Bachelor of Science in Architecture from the Georgia Institute of Technology, graduating as presidential scholar. Utting is a licensed architect and practiced at Thomas Phifer and Partners as the project designer for the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. She also worked at *Log, Journal for Architecture*, and is currently a member of the editorial team for *CARTHA Magazine*.

Notes

- 1 Alan Liu, "Information is Style," in *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 219.
- 2 David M. Berry and Michael Dieter, "Thinking Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation, and Design," in *Postdigital Aesthetics*, ed. D. Berry and M. Dieter (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 3.
- 3 Sylvia Lavin, "Architecture in Extremis," *Log* 22 (Spring/Summer 2011): 59.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow*

- Wallpaper* (Boston: Small, Maynard, & Company, 1899), 28–29.
- 6 Christiane Paul and Malcolm Levy, "Genealogies of the New Aesthetic," in Berry and Dieter, *Postdigital Aesthetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 38.
 - 7 Hito Steyerl, *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*. 2013 HD video, single screen in architectural environment, 15 min., 52 sec.
 - 8 Hito Steyerl, "Missing People," in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 148.
 - 9 Ibid., 155.