

Negative Space

Antonia Hirsch in Conversation with Marc Glöde



Berlin-based Canadian artist Antonia Hirsch brings her multi-disciplinary project *Negative Space* to Gallery TPW. Originating from SFU Galleries in Vancouver, the exhibition investigates the interrelation of inner and outer worlds by mobilizing images and objects whose origin ranges from astronomy and contemporary mobile devices to black mirrors of the 18th and 19th century landscape painters. Taking up a history of reflection, *Negative Space* questions how, through our devices—both historical and present day—we favour the image over the real.

The following text is a conversation between Antonia Hirsch and curator, critic and film scholar Marc Glöde on the occasion of Hirsch's exhibition, *Negative Space*, at Gallery TPW.

ANTONIA HIRSCH, 433 EROS, 2014

Marc Glöde: **A few months back you invited me to follow the process of creating your newest exhibition *Negative Space*.**

I felt from the beginning that one of the most immediate connections *Negative Space* had in relation to your earlier works was your obvious interest and focus on blackness and spatiality. I saw this specifically in relation to works that had been digging deeper into the connection of colour and spatiality such as *unstill life*, *untitled window screens (RGB)*, and *colour shift*. With *Negative Space* you seem to pick up a thread in your work that leads back to questions you had been addressing in some of your previous works, for example, in *Komma* (After Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun*). I am curious to hear your take on this dynamic.

Antonia Hirsch: I think the connection between *Negative Space* and *Komma* is strong, although this was one of those cases where I was already quite far into *Negative Space* before I even noticed that there was a correspondence. There were some obvious connections, for example the predominance of black in general, and the fact that the pages of the *Komma* book (black, spangled with white commas) look a bit like a night sky. The night sky, or the image of outer space, played a fairly important role for *Negative Space*. But the fact that the entire *Negative Space* project would become about inner and outer space and how these two are mediated only transpired in the process. It wasn't until then that I thought: hang on, I've been here before!

Komma is a 16mm film and book project based on Hollywood script writer Dalton Trumbo's seminal anti-war novel *Johnny Got His Gun* and my approach was to essentially re-imagine Trumbo's work through a syntactical idiosyncrasy of his book: that it was written entirely without commas.¹

The central device of Trumbo's novel is the body of the protagonist, a young American soldier who, incredibly, has lost his face and both arms and legs during combat.² Unable to see, speak, hear, smell, or act, he is fully conscious, but seemingly completely without agency. Trumbo's book is basically a first-person narrative of Johnny's struggle to communicate with "the outside world." It turns out that the term "comma" is derived from Greek *komma*, meaning "something cut off"—rather shockingly underscoring the nature of the protagonist's plight.

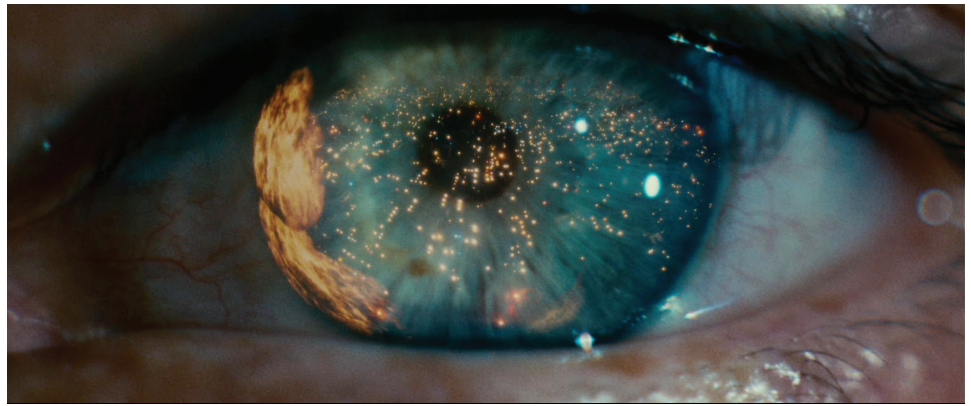
So *Komma*, too, was very much about this notion of inner and outer space; about how an "inner" experience might relate to an outer world, and the ways in which the two influence each other and constitute each other. However, *Komma*'s connection to the specific parameters of Trumbo's story were also a little limiting. I guess without really planning to, I wanted to go both broader and deeper with the subject of this inner-and-outer dichotomy—and perhaps break that dichotomy. Hence my desire to consider "outer space," not just as the space literally around us, or the space that's not in our heads, but to, in fact, also include the "outer space" that describes the universe, which in an interesting about-face becomes an inner space in the sense that it is a screen onto which so many fears and desires are projected—one need only think of science fiction or astrology to get a sense of this.

To be honest, at the moment I fail to really see the connection between *Negative Space* and those other works focused on colour and economy that you mention (*unstill life*, *untitled window screens (RGB)*, or *colour shift*), but that might be just a blind spot of mine! I can perhaps see a connection in *Negative Space* literally having produced a

“negative”—while those former works were all about emotions and colour, *Negative Space* has a very withdrawn and colourless quality. It seems to turn away from you. And while for me, there is also a connection through this fundamental idea of an economy being a system of exchange that could also be an exchange between inside and outside, a mediation in which abstraction plays an important role, I don't think this would be something apparent to anyone viewing the works. I would be interested in finding out where that connection occurs for you...

Also, in relation to the spatiality you are suggesting, I had not really thought about this with regard to the colour/economic works! I mean, perspective and reflection were something that was very important to me in the production of *Negative Space*, but not so much, or not consciously, with the colour works. Yet now that you mention it, especially when I showed that suite of “colour works” for the very first time at the Or Gallery in Berlin, it was a lot about spatialized optics, because *untitled window screens (RGB)* not only generated rainbow-shadows of everything in the room, but thanks to an architectural detail of the Gallery that I exploited, a veritable rainbow appeared over the entire breadth of one wall.

You have written extensively on colour and space and it remains, I believe, one of your research interests and influences your current curating and writing. I would be interested in knowing how you might frame the spatiality of black—it seems more possible to imagine space in relation to colour, but black, what could be the space of black? Is it just the absence of colour, a vacuum, or a vector? Or is that too esoteric a question? This query around black is a “material question” in *Negative Space*, but I don't think I answered it.



STILL FROM 2001 : A SPACE ODYSSEY,
DIRECTED BY STANLEY KUBRICK, 1968

MG: To answer your last question, I think there is a certain radicality in the spatial dynamics of black that we generally can experience and that specifically becomes an important factor in your new works.

There is the experience of a solidity, physicality, something that we can experience almost as a push towards us. At the same time blackness can develop the exact opposite dynamic, creating a pull away from us. It then can feel almost like an abyss. This spatial dynamic is essentially linked to a manifestation of categories like Self or World, our physical experience of Self and World, and corresponds exactly with what you were describing as the operational mode of *Komma* as well as one operative in this latest body of work. The dichotomy of inner and outer space in *Komma*, and, as you said, the widening of this aspect to a dimension of negative and positive space for *Negative Space* expands to a point where this system is maybe collapsing.

So in a way, on one hand both of your black works deal with a certain idea of order, stability and rationalism, which means the establishment of, for example, categories that create a way of functioning in the world (inside vs. outside, positive vs. negative). On

the other hand it becomes clear very quickly that these categories are dynamic and volatile. It is a momentum that can become deeply disorienting and create physically unpleasant moments. In this respect I would say your work encourages and fosters a negotiation of categories that are too often taken for granted. And I don't mean that as a kind of didactic strategy. To me it seems that you are more interested in creating a situation that Nietzsche summed up very astutely when he wrote: “If you look long enough into the abyss, the abyss is looking back into you.”³

For me it is also no coincidence that when you described these aspects of your work I immediately thought of Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey. I am sure you are aware of this correspondence and echo. The camera approaching the floating black monolith with its reflective surface in outer space and the camera that moves closer and closer towards the eye of the astronaut. Kubrick pushes it up to a point where we can't decide whether we are swirling around in the spheres of the universe or entering into the inner space (physically or psychologically) of the protagonist. The blackness of the universe (macrocosmos) corresponds with the blackness of the astronaut's eye

(microcosmos) until this dichotomy collapses and we enter one of the most amazing color sequences in film history: a pure abstraction, an intense sensual experience.

So to me both of these fields—the spatial dynamics of blackness and the spatial experience of color—to a certain extent seem to be connected.

In a radicalized form both undermine our everyday concepts of the self and of the world. Therefore the sphere where they overlap becomes very intriguing as a field of negotiation. I assume that is why you were so interested in the surface/touchscreens of cell phones, the Claude glass⁴ or maybe even of the concept of the body and its limits (the skin)?

AH: I'm really pleased that you are reminded of Kubrick's monolith—of course it was on my mind while working on *Negative Space*, despite the fact that its use in contemporary art has become inflational. It is of course a really, really strong image. Almost like a modern-day myth.

This notion of the interface that mediates between inside and outside did become very important to me, that's true, but the skin as a membrane, as this site of negotiation did, perhaps, receive not enough attention.

In a literal way it might seem that skin received *all* the attention, because in *Cosmic Nightshade*, a video that is part of the *Negative Space* suite of works, I have a potato stand in for the asteroid 433 Eros and I am emulating footage that NASA shot of the planetoid in 2000.⁵ In a way, all you see there is skin, potato skin, that looks fascinatingly a lot like the surface of a heavenly body.

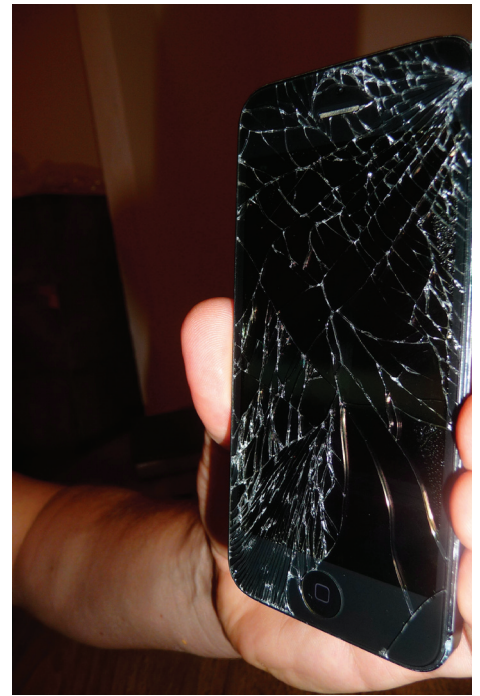
What I was trying to negotiate there was that, apparently, whether something reads as a bland-flavoured terrestrial vegetable or a libidinally charged space object all depends on context—perhaps another example of this collapsing dichotomy you mentioned earlier. And space, this black vacuum, is a very particular context in that it seems to have an abstracting effect. Abstraction had become interesting to me in the context of my work on economy, but it also features in *Negative Space's Solaris Panel* that is made up of a kind of bank of black, and I would say abstracted, screens of contemporary mobile devices.

MG: **The amazing thing about *Solaris Panel* is that you very decisively address the question of the surface and the skin. But furthermore—if you see it as one unit—it is actually a broken surface. The slick surface of technology here is transferred into a different haptic momentum. I was reminded of that when I dropped my smartphone other day.**

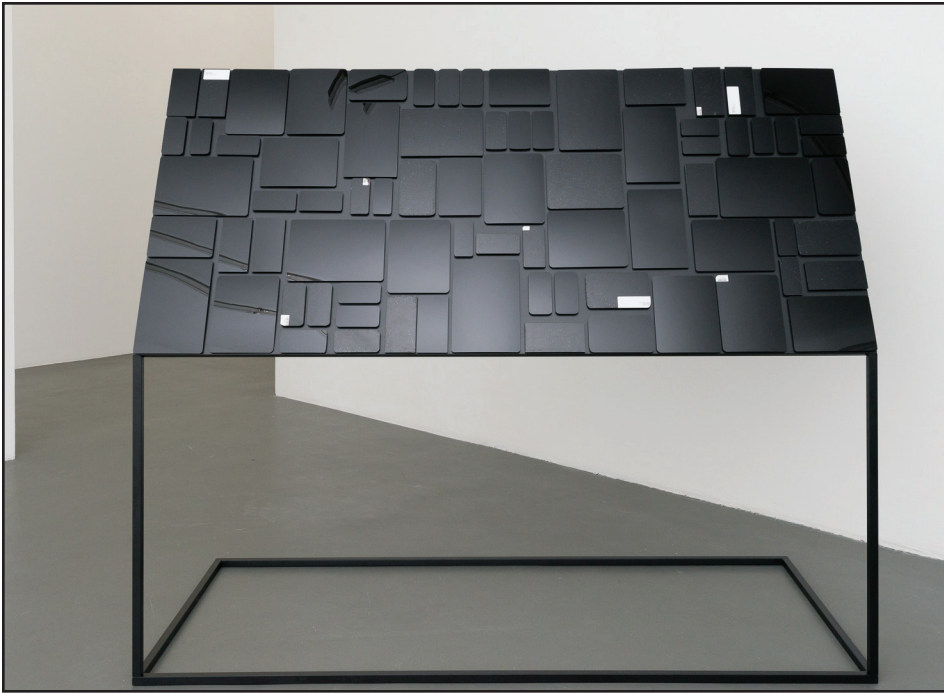
The shattered glass creates a different experience with this technology and with your own senses.

In a way I was reminded of Deleuze's idea to create a stutter in cinema (in order to shatter the serene certitude with which we might otherwise consider our surroundings). For me your solar panel seems to do the same: creating a moment of critical reflection and offering a new way of thinking about our own sensual experience.

In this way you propose to not generalize a criticism of the surface and its potential, but you instead foster a different understanding and approach towards the surface. So with this in mind I would say this work and this exhibition are inviting the audience to experience technology with a resensitization



MARC GLÖDE'S SHATTERED SMARTPHONE,
SEPTEMBER, 2015



ANTONIA HIRSCH, *SOLARIS PANEL* (INSTALLATION VIEW), 2014

that shifts away from everyday experience and is combining this with an apparatus critique—both in the Foucauldian sense and in the way Jean-Louis Baudry talks about it.⁶

AH: That is a really fantastic complementary image to *Solaris Panel*. Though I'm sorry for what happened to your phone!

And it is true, there is something like a visual stutter that happens with *Solaris Panel*—not temporally but spatially, in that it reflects its environment not only broken up, but also in odd repetitions and overlaps because the surfaces making up the whole are minutely off-kilter. The resulting reflected image could be seen, as I just suggested, as a broken whole, or conversely it could be conceived as a whole that is constructed of multiple parts that don't entirely cohere with each other, even though they share a more or less common plane.

Actually, when I was contemplating my own engagement with the topic of the skin earlier, I was hoping I could lure you into talking about your research into the skin relative to the notion of abstraction. Now that you mention a critique of the apparatus, I'm hoping even more that you will share some of your thoughts on this! Because I suspect that when you refer to this apparatus, you mean not so much an apparatus in the sense of a technological device, but the apparatus in the Foucauldian sense—a sociopolitical formation. Am I getting this right? I would not presume to be able to critique the latter, but what can we say of the abstraction performed by the device and the screen that are, after all, also mediating and constituting aspects of the Foucauldian apparatus?

MG: Well, to me the question of the haptic, the skin, perception of space, and the abstract became very important after my research on colour. With colour I was already digging

deeper into the question of the conceptual distinction between an outside and inside world: how is the formation of the self and the concept of “I” consolidated through the external object or a world on the opposite side of that self-formation. As I pointed out before—this distinction is very volatile. As a matter of fact, these are fields of a bipolar system that overlap strongly, interfere with each other, and constantly shift. Colour to me was the mediator to understand that dynamic, this constant process. Specifically through colours' potential to be on one side closely linked to the inside world as inner experience, a subjective form while on the other side being a form attached to objects and spaces. It is a form that constantly shifts back and forth between the two systems of self and world. This makes it quite understandable why rational philosophy was so interested in discrediting the potential of colour—it was just too instable and subjective for a way of thinking that tried to create a rational sphere in which clear presuppositions produce clear and fixed positions.

At that point in my own research it was very helpful for me to go back to reading Benjamin (and it seems to me that he might be key for your work as well). In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* he writes about perception and specifically points out how our perception changes in a crisis situation. To him it was the increasing speed of analog machines that triggered these changes in perception, but I think we can translate these questions into the digital age. Now as then when our vision is in a state of crisis we immediately come back to the haptic sensorium. If we imagine ourselves in a pitch black space, we instinctively return to an orientation through the haptic and auditory senses. There we “see” with our fingers, our skin, understand the connectedness

of all our senses. In the contemporary context this hapticity has become key to corporate machines. Smartphones teach us every day that we need to use hapticity in a formally pre-structured way. And against that backdrop we can say that these new tools and apparatuses reestablish the bond between the haptic and the visual field. Nevertheless we have to acknowledge that the software and user surface of these tools keep us on a tight leash. Alexander Provan has pointed out this development very precisely in an interesting essay recently.⁷ And what we can understand in this context is, that the fields of experimentation and alternative self exploration have been reduced in relation to what Benjamin was addressing.⁸

But I think that this actually is where art (then and today) comes in, as we can see in the topics you raise. The question is how to become critical (and by that I mean reflected, aware, and capable of self recognition) of the machine-body connection and its sociopolitical formation. This is not in any way meant as a technophobic argument. But the question is: how to deal with this complex scenario? Artists were always in the position to challenge the established modes of functionality. And we can see this very nicely in *Solaris Panel* as well as in your image of the asteroid/potato.

Nevertheless the question is also aimed towards the other direction – meaning, towards the body involved. When I thought about this, specifically in relation to the skin, a very old narrative came to mind: the ancient Greek legend of Marsyas who had challenged Apollo in a flute competition. When he lost, his punishment was to be skinned alive. After the skinning he cried out: what have you done to me? You have withdrawn me from myself.

In Latin the word used is *abstrahere* which can be translated as “stripped off,” “taken away,” as well as “freed from.” By taking away that skin as mediator between the two areas (inside and outside) a new state of being has been established. Cruelly, almost unbearable: a radical abstraction.

It seems to me that mythic scene actually opens up a pretty interesting turn in relation to what we have been talking about. Because if we are heading towards a critical reflection of technology and our perceptual apparatus, namely the body and its sensorium, we also need to come to terms with our understanding of abstraction. But I guess that is something, as you said, you are very interested in with all of your recent works...

AH: Wow, that Greek myth really is a shocking take on abstraction! I had never considered it as, literally, so visceral. Though the existential drama of it resonates also with physically less drastic forms of abstraction—particularly where it's synonymous with alienation, as, for example, in the case of labour.

You raise a lot of different really interesting issues here, and I don't know whether I can do justice to them in the space we're given, especially your suggestion of “vision in crisis” and a return to the haptic. This is certainly evoked in *Solaris Panel*, but the work does not have any real haptic elements. You don't need to touch anything to experience it... I don't know whether I just got trapped by a museal logic there, with it's dictum to not touch the artwork. But actually, I don't think so. The work emphasizes this disembodied state, where everything is a picture (even the touch screens in *Solaris Panel* are rendered ineffectual flat simulacra), and where we are only connected to things by this “immaterial sense” of vision that is also so treacherous.

One work in the group we haven't talked about at all is *Narcissus Screen*. It's super simple... essentially it is a free-standing triptych consisting of three “panels” that are actually just frames made of black metal tubing. Only one of these frames holds a pane of glass that, depending on where you stand and depending on the direction of light, lets you see through it, reflects you, reflects the rest of the piece itself (setting up a Rorschach-like symmetry), or it reveals other elements in the space via this reflection. This one glass pane has the potential to make you question whether the other two segments of the triptych are reflective barriers, too, but in actuality, you're able to walk through them, like through some sort of gateway.

I think the suite of works mobilizes exactly this denial of the haptic, an abstraction, as you suggested, in the sense of a withdrawal, a pulling away. It presents you with something that seems to want to get touched, like the representations of the mobile devices, but they just reflect your image. Similarly the intensely visceral-looking potato skin—it is not only a mere projection, but it also pretends to be an asteroid that has never been seen by a human eye, let alone been touched by a human body.

It strikes me how, about a year after their first exhibition, the works remain really quite foreign to me. In saying this I don't mean to disown the work, and I certainly didn't abandon my authorship during the making of the work, but now that it is done, I encounter them in a way perhaps more akin to how I would encounter the work by another artist. I seem to be prepared to accept the inner logic of what I have produced in the sense that it isn't a question of whether I managed to bring something to the “right” conclusion. I face my own work here with a kind of

curiosity and criticality that doesn't assume I already know everything about it there is to know. Maybe this is what I am really trying to say, even if it sounds a bit flaky: the work still holds some mystery for me, even though I made it. Perhaps it is the way in which the elements in the exhibiton position and reflect, produce subtle illusions and coax you into finding meaning in visual or formal relationships that rely purely on perspective. There is pleasure in visually arranging the pieces and by finding a position for oneself, and yet it's all very tenuous—it's a question of where you stand and where you look. In this way, it seems as if the unsettled distinction between inside and outside is maintained for me as the producer of the work, too.



ANTONIA HIRSCH WITH TREVOR GOOD,
COSMIC NIGHTSHADE, 2014.

Endnotes

1 Antonia Hirsch, *Komma (After Dalton Trumbo's Johnny Got His Gun)*. Vancouver: Fillip Editions, 2010. To view a video version of the film, please visit antoniahirsch.com/projects/komma/1

2 Trumbo's book is set around the time of World War I, and the novel with its inconvenient anti-war message was first published in 1939, only days before the onset of World War II. However, the book didn't come into true prominence until the Vietnam war era and until after its author had re-emerged from McCarthyist blacklisting throughout the 1950s. Dalton Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*. London: Penguin, 2009.

3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Aphorism 146.

4 Named after Claude Lorrain, a seventeenth-century landscape painter, the Claude glass was a proto-photographic artist's aid. used primarily during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by landscape painters. The device consisted of a slightly convex mirror, usually made from black glass or obsidian. Its purpose was to provide an image of the landscape "cleansed" of excessive detail, colour, and contrast, as tonal integration was then considered crucial to a "pleasing" image. Effectively already framed, the artist would use the somewhat abstracted reflection to transform an actual vista into a painting. Significantly, the Claude glass requires turning one's back onto the world to see it reflected.

5 433 Eros is a potato-shaped near-earth asteroid. It is part of the Amor group of asteroids and is roughly thirty-four kilometers in length. The public was enlisted to help assign each of the asteroid's craters the name of a lover from history, mythology, or fiction, including, for example, Orpheus, Lolita, and Genji.

6 See, for example, Jean-Louis Baudry and Alan Williams, *Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus* In: *Film Quarterly* Vol. 28, No. 2 (Winter, 1974-1975), pp. 39-47

7 See: Alexander Provan: March 2013. Source: www.alexanderprovan.com/2013/03/01/gestural-abstractions/

8 Obviously it is important to acknowledge and stress certain differences between Benjamin's era and the digital age. Maybe most of all the fact that hapticity first appeared as a field of scientific research concurrently with Benjamin writing his text in response to newly developing analogue technology. Today it seems that the haptic is not only reappearing with renewed urgency, but also as a key element in the development of new technologies per se. In other words: technologies are prestructuring the senses we hope to use as alternative strategies to potentially outmanoeuvre these same technologies.

Marc Glöde

Marc Glöde is a curator, critic and film scholar. His work is focusing on the relation of images, technology, space, and the body, as well as the dynamics between fields such as art/architecture, art/film, and film/architecture. He received his PhD at the FU Berlin and taught at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden, The Free University of Berlin, and as Assistant Professor at the ETH Zürich. From 2008 until 2014 he has been curator of Art Film, Art Basel's film program. Most recently he published his book *Farbige Lichträume*. His writing has been published in *Fantom*, *Texte zur Kunst*, *Parkett*, *Art in America* and *X-TRA Magazine*, among others.

Antonia Hirsch

Antonia Hirsch is a Berlin based artist, writer and editor. Her work has been exhibited at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver; The Power Plant, Toronto; Taipei Fine Arts Museum; Tramway, Glasgow; and ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art, Karlsruhe, among others, and is held in the public collections of the Vancouver Art Gallery, National Gallery of Canada, and Sackner Archive of Concrete & Visual Poetry, Miami Beach. Her writing and projects have appeared in *artecontexto*, *C Magazine*, *Fillip*, and *The Happy Hypocrite*. She is the editor of the anthology *Intangible Economies* (Fillip, 2012).

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