

Exhibition Review

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Safe-T-Gallery, Brooklyn, New York, January 25–February 24, 2007

The fifteen forms that comprise Margie Neuhaus's exhibition *Sensory Jetty*, shown at Safe-T-Gallery in the DUMBO neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, were created over three years. Entering the gallery, one perceives objects and assemblages constructed from both natural and synthetic materials: vellum, wire, acrylic, nylon, vinyl, silk, wool, and rubber, through both visual impressions and bodily sensations. The exhibition affects a virtual experience into the living, active world of layered tissues, organs, cells, and organisms.

Neuhaus discloses that her inspiration comes from "microscopic systems and images."¹ This source material is technologically produced and makes the invisible visible. What was previously unknown becomes known, and prompts a desire to organize this knowledge. Nicolas Bourriaud has argued that the function of art engaged with technology is not simply to illustrate what a particular technology can do, but to shift the authority of the technology such that we awaken to productive and

creative possibilities for perceiving, thinking, and living (Bourriaud 2002[1998]: 66–71). Neuhaus's inspirational sources, and the materials employed (fabrics, rods, sheets, and threads) are re/arranged so as to produce for the beholder a liminal experience at the interstice of biology and technology. This juncture is not linked to any particular species, life form, or system of knowledge, but rather is the world of biology and the world technology opened up on a plateau of becoming (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Neuhaus engages low-tech methods common to the tradition of textiles. Cutting, threading, stitching, bending, and weaving are used to re/negotiate the predictable patterns of acquiring and organizing biotech information. The compilation of these repeated manual gestures, involving haptic as well as visual senses, activates a multitude of virtual potential for the current high-tech processes manifold in scientific imaging and biological inquiry.

Semitransparent and opaque hues of vellum are sliced into

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Textile, Volume 5, Issue 2, pp. 340–347

DOI: [10.2752/175183507X249512](https://doi.org/10.2752/175183507X249512)

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elongated, branched projections and nodules to create interleaved mappings, which oscillate between registering as an image of neuron activity or ganglia, MRI films of the soft tissue workings of the human body, or anatomical diagrams and models of instruction (Figure 1). In *Transmitter I* (Figure 2), a spillage of vellum florets holding pools of dried ink is pierced by networks of tubes, wire, and acrylic rods that project out from the wall to create a connective architecture that suggests a hushed interior communication highway of cells, neurons, and dendrites or perhaps an entire living organism. The inspired forms and fabricated views into the interior workings of cells and their connective relationships mirror the pulse of activity at work in our own bodies. The title, *Mars under My Skin* (Figure 3), reveals the mystery the

artist shares with members of her audience in (not) knowing the exact process and functioning of her own body, or how bodily sensations are precisely generated and registered. Like the function of individual cells, our bodies move through the space we inhabit, vulnerable to invasion, sensitive to structural damage, susceptible to environmental imbalance, yet capable of resilience and performing incredibly complex tasks.

The title piece, *Sensory Jetty* (Figure 4), combines the formal characteristics and differences of these possible life forms. Individualized shapes are suspended over and submerged within watery planes of white vellum and blue vinyl to offer an imagined view into an entire ecological system. The acrylic rods used in *Sensory Jetty* pass through the wall that supports it. This wall



Figure 1
Synapse, 2006, vellum and thread,
 11 in. × 14 in. [28 cm × 36 cm].

Figure 2

Transmitter I, 2007, ink on vellum, vinyl, wire, thread, and rubber, 21 in. × 15 in. × 15 in. (53 cm × 38 cm × 38 cm).

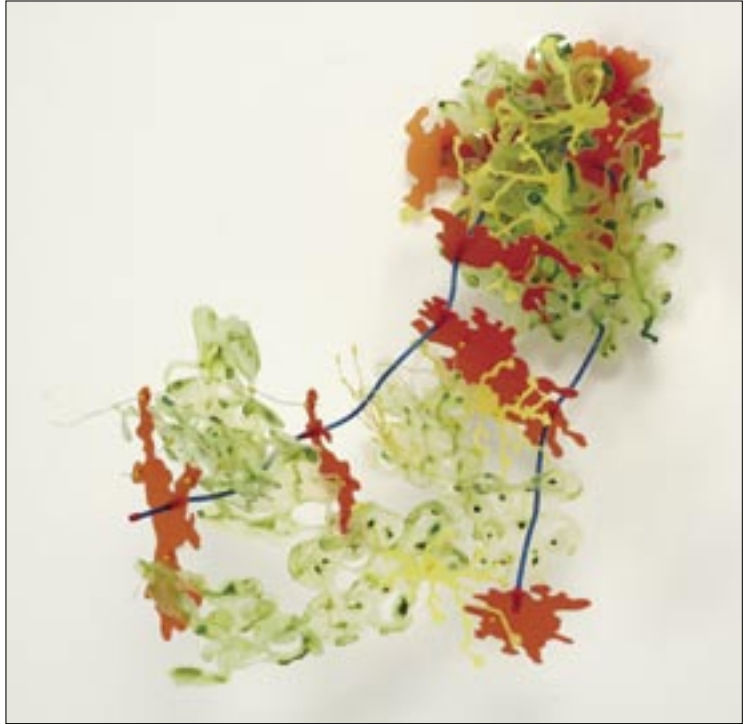


Figure 3

Mars under My Skin, 2006, vellum, 11 in. × 14 in. (28 cm × 36 cm).

Figure 4
Sensory Jetty, detail, 2007, acrylic rods, vinyl, fabric, vellum, wire, and rubber, 74 in. × 75 in. × 28 in. (188 cm × 190.5 cm × 71 cm).



sits two feet in from, and parallel to, the wall that marks the exterior of the building. A window permits a view from the street below into the gallery and to the backside of *Sensory Jetty*. Daylight, passing through this window, flows across and passes through the acrylic rods to illuminate their tips on the other side. The tips create bright dots of neon green and yellow that echo light-emitting diodes (LEDs). Electrical impulses of the life actively inhabiting this world are made visible and the concept of the wall is changed from solid partition to “membrane.”² At night the piece is artificially lit from behind, which serves to maintain the LED effect. Inside the gallery, unless one ventures around to the two-foot space between the partition and window for a closer look, the permeability of the wall, the view from the street, and the exact source of the LED-like illumination carry on unnoticed.

Like the exhibition’s title piece, *Seeping In* (see Figure 5) includes

the wall and gallery space in the interplay of seen and unseen, known and unknown. Safe-T-Gallery is accessed via an interior corridor. An interior window sits to the left of the gallery door. Positioned in front of this window, shadows cast onto a sheet of vellum create an X-ray-like image when viewed from the corridor. This window-become-X-ray both exposes and obscures *Seeping In*. The X-ray-like image also prevents a visitor from seeing into the gallery to view other works in the exhibition.

Once inside the gallery, one learns that a piece of silk is the mass that casts the shadow on the other side. The cut and stitched fragment is suspended gracefully yet eerily on a one-inch grid of woven nylon thread strung across a large acrylic frame. The grid sits above and in front of a large sheet of vellum. The spaces between these layered parts subtly yet radically disrupt the typical visual and scientific process used to

Figure 5

Seeping In, detail, 2004, silk fabric, hand-dyed embroidery thread, nylon thread, Plexiglas, and vellum, 30 in. x 24 in. x 4 in. (76 cm x 61 cm x 10 cm).



explore this skin, bacteria, virus, or tissue (remove it from its source, place it in controlled conditions, restrict its movement, and subject the observations made to a set framework of investigation) and propose a yet-to-be-determined method of inquiry.

Points of view, trains of thought, and mental outlooks create both virtual and physical forms, which in turn create frameworks for social interaction (Bourriaud 2002[1998]: 58). Cultural convention, a virtual form, tells us our bodies are separate from the bodies of others.

Neuhaus's inexact yet repeated attempt at replicating cellular, somatic forms unlocks this cultural convention. The term "body" and the accepted understanding of cutting and connection are opened, and give way to new possibilities for subjectivity.

In *Sensory Jetty*, Neuhaus has seized the flow of art inherent in Eva Hesse's work not by imitation or appropriation of the corporeal, but by extension of the virtual. To behold Hesse's sculptural work is to teeter limitlessly at the fissure of the psyche (the virtual space of the body and subjectivity) and the corporeal body itself. This internal emotional dissonance was captured in Hesse's forms to create an intimate place for the viewer in relation to the industrial dominance of minimalist art. Neuhaus releases this internal teetering into and onto the spaces of the multiple bodies made (partially) known by technology through forms that model cohabitation and coexistence for the human body with other bodies at the site where technology meets life (the microscope, the laboratory, the MRI, the surgical table or Petri dish).

As a body of work, *Sensory Jetty* propels and awakens us to the limitless possibility of understanding "bodies" as a collection of observable and invisible, knowable and secretive, independent worlds of life. These bodies pulse and exchange information in continuous connection, of which we are part, and from which we attempt to create understanding and relationship. Rather than a utopian vision offered by a specialist,

Neuhaus's engagement with the inter-effects of technology and biology is an enchanted imaginary proposition open to negotiation and participation. Her forms carry us to a threshold of sensation and perception that an ethical exploration of bodies demands and continuously brings. This is a virtual space extracted from the power of technology, and the flow of life, organized with an aesthetic sensibility "allowing viewers to imagine what is under the surface and on the skin, to see inside and be within."³

Notes

1. Artist's statement printed for the exhibition made available to the author courtesy of Safe-T-Gallery.
2. Author's interview with the artist, March 23, 2007.
3. Artist's statement.

References

- Bourriaud, Nicolas. 2002[1998]. *Relational Aesthetics*. Trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with Mattieu Copeland. Dijon: Les presses du réel.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.