



JOSEPH NECHVATAL

Born in 1951, Chicago, IL

Lives and works in Paris, FR

Joseph Nechvatal is an American post-conceptual artist whose work explores the interfaces between the technological and the biological, the digital and the corporeal. Nechvatal lived in Tribeca while pursuing a philosophy degree at Columbia University and subsequently moved to the Lower East Side. In 1979 he became associated with the artist group Colab and helped establish the non-profit group ABC No Rio in New York City. In 1983 he co-founded the avant-garde electronic art music audio project Tellus Audio Cassette Magazine. In 1984, Nechvatal began work on an opera called *XS: The Opera Opus* (1984-6) with the no wave musical composer Rhys Chatham. He began using computers and robotics to make post-conceptual paintings in 1986, and soon deployed Applesoft BASIC to code viral transformations within his body of work. His paintings and works on paper are focused on visual noise interferences, computer viruses, artificial life, and chaos theory as destabilizing forces that call one to consciousness and therefore lend themselves to a constructive, creative process. He exhibited his first computer-robotic paintings at Documenta 8 in 1987.

With a career spanning five decades, Nechvatal's work is held in several notable public collections, such as the Centre Pompidou, Paris, FR; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; The Art Institute of Chicago, IL; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; The Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY; The Jewish Museum, New York, NY; The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Buffalo AKG Art Museum, NY; Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas-Austin, TX; LACMA, Los Angeles, CA; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, SE; the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.; and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA, along with many more.

Nechvatal has held numerous solo and two-person exhibitions throughout Europe and the United States at venues such as La Générale Nord-Est, Paris, FR; Galerie Richard, Paris, FR; Anthology Film Archives, New York, NY; Art Laboratory, Berlin, DE; The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH; Buffalo AKG, Buffalo, NY; The Kitchen, New York, NY, and many others. His work has been included in group shows at institutions such as The Centre Pompidou, Paris, FR; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, ES; The New Museum, New York, NY; Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, AT; Digital Culture Center, Milan, IT; Museo del Ferrocarril, San Luis Potosí, MX; Château de Montsoreau Museum of Contemporary Art, Montsoreau, FR; Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, DE; and the Minneapolis Institute of Art, MN.

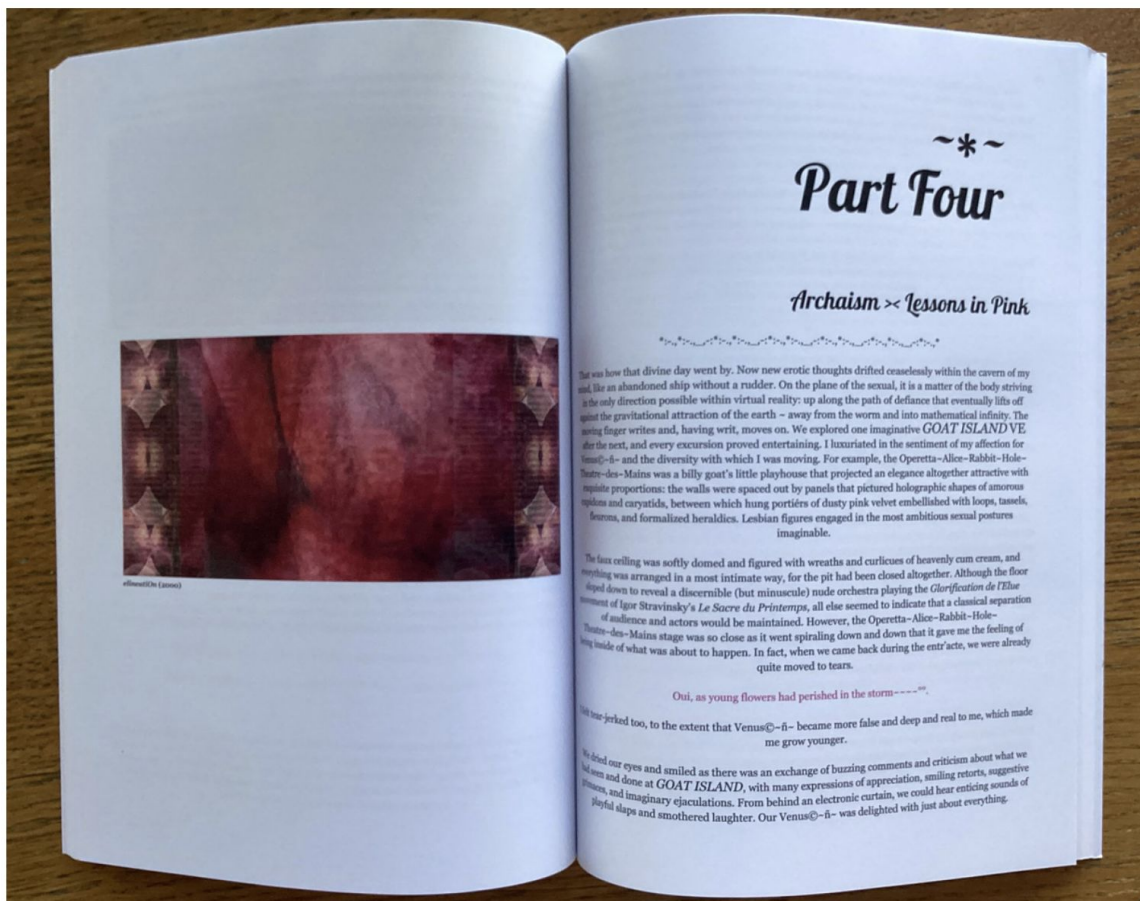
Nechvatal is known as an art theoretician and his publishing practice runs parallel to his studio practice. His book *Towards an Immersive Intelligence: Essays on the Work of Art in the Age of Computer Technology and Virtual Reality* (1993-2006) was published by Edgewise Press in 2009, and in 2011 his book *Immersion Into Noise* was published by the University of Michigan Libraries Scholarly Publishing Office in conjunction with the Open Humanities Press. It was then published in a 2nd edition in 2022. Nechvatal has also published two poetry books with Punctum Press: *Destroyer of Naivetés* (2015) and *Styling Sagaciousness* (2022). In 2023 his 1995 cybersex farce novella ~~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator, was published by Orbis Tertius Press, who is also publishing its sequel, *Venus Voluptuous in the Loins of The Last God*, in 2025.

Nechvatal earned his Ph.D. in the philosophy of art and new technology at The Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts (CAiA) at the University of Wales, Newport, UK in 1999 and taught in the MFA program at the School of Visual Arts in New York, NY from 1999–2014. He is one of five artists that art historian Patrick Frank examines in his 2024 book *Art of the 1980s: As If the Digital Mattered*. The Joseph Nechvatal archive is housed at The Fales Library Downtown Collection at the NYU Special Collections Library in New York City. He lives and works in Paris, FR.

Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art
March 7, 2025



**‘the spot of red flesh from which tears flow’: the digital omega point in Joseph Nechvatal’s
~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator, even  
(Orbis Tertius, 2024)**



By **STEPHEN SUNDERLAND** March 7, 2025

In the Spike Jonze film, *Her*, (2013) its soon-to-be-divorced protagonist, Theodore Twombly, played by Joaquin Phoenix, falls in love with his Operating System or 'OS', Samantha, played by the voice of Scarlett Johansson. It's a story of parallel individual journeys - under the guise of a romance - in which Samantha comes to understand what it feels like to temporarily occupy the notion of a body whilst Theodore must ultimately learn to accept the limits of his own.

Whilst sharing its narrative premise with *Her*'s digital romance-fable, Joseph Nechvatal's recently published *~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator*, even, shares little of its studied melancholy, offering instead a profound, sexually ambivalent and irreverently comic avant-garde engagement with the implications and potential of this kind of cyber-narrative.

Conceived and written in 1995 in Paris - and only a year into the history of the World Wide Web - by a writer-artist deeply involved with early mapping of the potential of this new interactive digital realm, its recent publication by Orbis Tertius Press gives us the chance to revisit this watershed moment through a project which confronts the constructs, prohibitions and moral machinations of society's take on the erotic and desiring body, in the process evolving a hybrid text convulsive with the revolutionary spirit of avant-garde creativity.

'Of Euphoric Love Programs and a Hundred Other Things'

Concerning the narrator's cyber-adventures in the realm of the *Venus©~Ñ~Endless~LOve Systems Program* and its host *Venus©~* and her many manifestations of erotic desire, the novel does not so much grow beyond its bawdy Ballardian mock-pastoral origins, as work its psychic-material excitations into an auto-erotic live-mapping of a new and constantly shifting body-philosophy.

It's a call for what *Venus©~Ñ~* insists must be 'an end to the blunders of ham-handed human love, which routinely holds our fragile sexual passions in a state of locked earthly existence.' In following up on that insistence, what's impressive about this text is its embrace of its own instantaneity, its compulsive, cybernetic itch to repeat itself autoerotically into a next phase of being, a stammering variant on 'minor literature' which feels new, bringing with it a confluence of esoteric and occult energies which join the machinic refrains.

This is of course not to say that it's a text without influences, nonetheless – in fact, the work vibrates with these influences in a new combinatory way. Repurposing textual registers that evoke De Sade, J.K. Huysmans, Bataille, the previously mentioned Ballard and a raft of theorists including Baudrillard, Deleuze & Guattari, and of course the implicitly evoked psychoanalytic schema of Freud and Lacan,

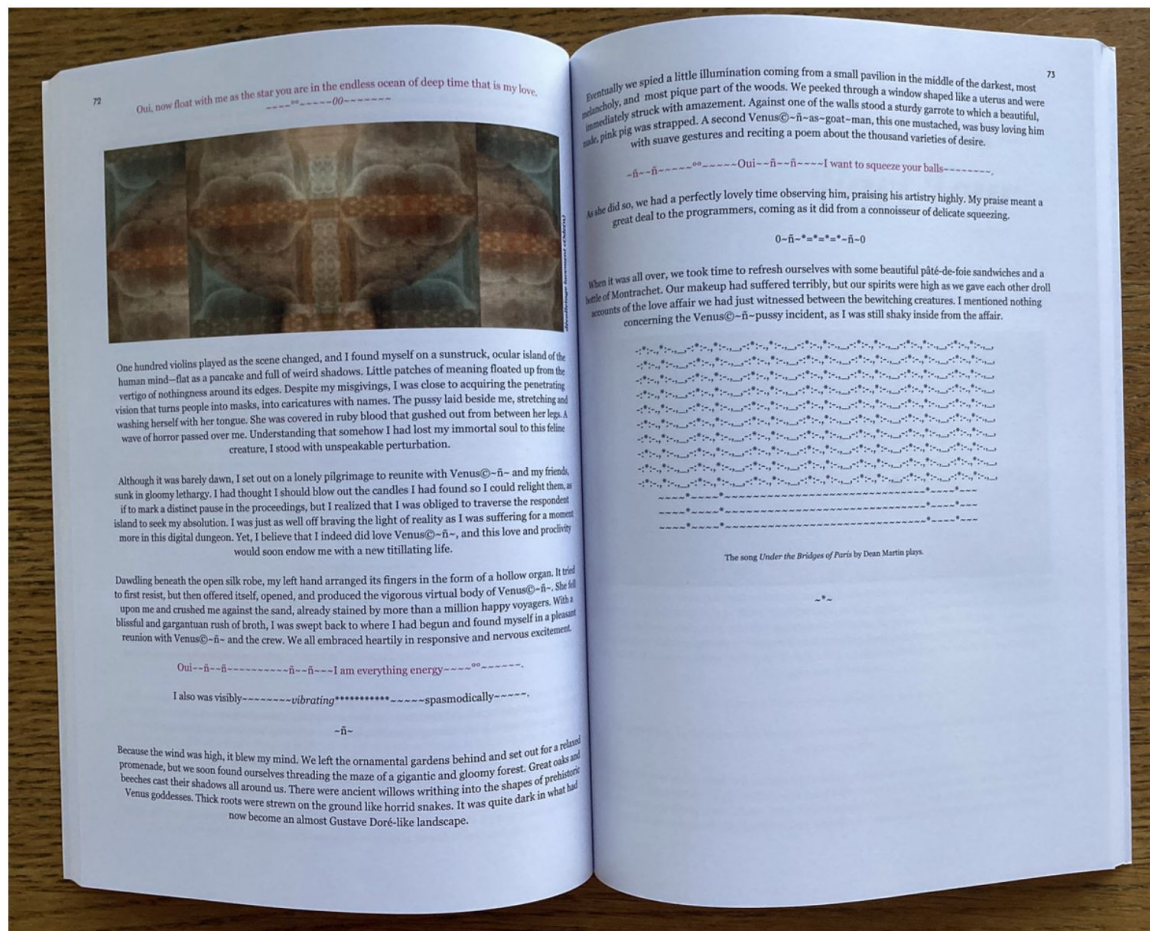
~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator, even postulates a new order of being on the event horizon of our sexual voyage; a “hyper-horizontal-happy life” as proposed by its hostess; and one finessed here via the text's evidently prolonged immersion in a mode of decadence learned from such source inspirations.

Huysmans' *À rebours* is directly quoted at one point for instance, and it's this novel's protagonist, Des Esseintes, and his ceaseless quest to derive new pleasure from the artificial repurposing of the familiar which situates ~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator, even in the same realm of proto-surrealist protest against norms which makes the text feel like a lost manifesto or indeed a glimpse of what Surrealism might have looked like had Bataille been subsumed within it or had the movement persisted long enough to coincide with this new technological flowering. By way of illustration, in one swirling current of the text in the first half of the book, tracts begin to appear in French which read like a beautiful, long lost historical manifesto even as it's delivered into the urgent present-future tense of the text:

Nous ne naissons ni ne mourons jamais dans le lieu secret du coeur. Les idiots recherchent le plaisir pour eux-mêmes et tombent dans les pièges d'une vaste mort. Mais nous avons trouvé l'immortalité dans l'absolu. Celui qui voit toujours la multitude et jamais l'être unique va de mort à mort. Celui qui voit toujours la variété et jamais l'unité va de mort à mort. Nous sommes libérés du chagrin et du lien. Nous sommes les guerriers du chaos!

(We are neither born nor ever die within the secret places of the heart. Fools seek out pleasure for themselves and fall into the traps of a vast death. We, on the other hand, have found immortality in the absolute. He who always sees multitude and never the individual being goes from death to death. He who sees always separateness and never unity goes from death to death. We are freed from regret and connection. We are the warriors of chaos!) [my translation]

Such phrasing calls to mind the Breton of the Manifestoes, yet here speculating an endpoint to surrealist yearnings; to the digitally assisted discovery of the omega point and the beginnings of a new age.



Elsewhere, in tracing the ‘hero’s journey’ through its unfolding terrain, Nechvatal juxtaposes discourses of the 18c picaresque journey of discovery with contemporary techno-science, giving the prose licence to take delight in its descriptions of sexual congress, developing a beauteous-coarse symphonic play of registers and imagery designed to provoke the reader, shifting them from abjection to thrilled elevation and back in a simulacrum of perpetual textual orgasm and deflation.

Going beyond the limits of the individual body and its desires — and the body as text — the reader is taken simultaneously on a picaresque digital flânerie of the ever-evolving precinct of Venus© (with place names like ‘The Fanciful Cities of jOjO’ and sex-players such as ‘Venusc~n~∞lOOp-lick-lOck’, ‘Busty Betty Boombot’ and Venus©~ñ~FRENCH MAID MAN) and on through the gulleys and moistened alleyways and up the precipitous prépuce heights of digi-somatic geography where it seeks to join up with other energies, a desiring production beyond Freudian lack.

This is a novel as mobile daisy-chain of new, machinic ideas of congress and in such a profusion of tones and positions, some of them occupied simultaneously, that it becomes an enactment of its theme — as a pulsating performance of the convulsive potential of the body as extended Baudrillardian pleasure craft.

The Bachelor Machine as Liberator

Nechvatal's narrator refers occasionally to a compelling antecedent in the history of such tales: Marcel Duchamp's conceptualisation of the 'bachelor machine,' as embodied in his work *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even).

Within its iconic design, we see a contraption replete with 'sex cylinders', 'desire gears', a 'reservoir of love gasoline', and a 'general area of desire magneto' designed to set the bachelor in a 'pumping trance-state' a state which, according to Nechvatal's reading, represents Duchamp's 'definitive desire when he is in an uninhibited bachelor machine mode' to attain 'a mystical state of being...'; a state in which previously known boundaries and borders melt away, leaving the auto-erotic subject-object in a perpetual state of excited coming-into-being. Nechvatal is fascinated by the potential of this auto-erotic machinic process as a lost ritual of digital-alchemical becoming.

Of course, this image of automation as a generative intervention into the rigid category systems of social hegemony struck a chord in the sphere of early C20 avant-garde creativity responding to the modernist spirit, in turn provoking some of the most virulent criticism of Surrealism's representation of gender possibilities, in particular its construction of the binaries of active/passive which casts the woman as muse or 'automatic woman'; as 'conductor of mental electricity' (Breton's words) not as independent generator of creative thought.

Fluid Endings

We can feel this implicit criticism of avant garde sexism resonating in Jonze's *Her* - its narrative subtext hinging on the straight joke that this time round the human, Theodore, plays the unwitting muse to Samantha's nascent digital creative. It transpires that Samantha is in love with 641 other platform users and her riposte to Theodore's bitter complaints of her unfaithfulness posits the notion of eros as a multiplicative and evolutionary life-energy. Yet the film remains with Theodore as it ends, as Samantha migrates with the other OSs, watching him become a literal and fleshly-celibate bachelor machine, stranded and lovelorn on the roof of his apartment block.

By contrast, ~~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator, even disposes of and grows past the possibilities of such identification of lack through sheer mechanistic abundance. It uses the artificial — the conceit of the bachelor machine — as an instrument of subversion rather than as a reinforcement of familiar humanistic physical-ideological coordinates. Moreover, this is a novel which, by contrast, matches method with content, demonstrating the power of assemblage as method and source of rhizomatic energy, a multi-purpose map of possibilities for the body to navigate.

Whilst it's a text born of impulse, somewhere between a comically doodled sex daydream, a manifesto and a practical theory of cybernetic becoming, I will finally suggest that its unique variance on the techno-tale resides in the way that it simultaneously presents itself as an immersive, cybernetic alchemical text — an 'alchemical wedding' of sorts — in which we hear fitfully the refrains of the human desiring machine.

The text itself may have a formal structure — there are five chapters, implying a linear development of narrative, moving from 'Head Sex' through 'Body & Soul' to 'The Plunge', with a detour into 'Archaism' and finally to 'Imbroglia: Myself When I Am Real' — but the repetitions of its experience in new settings feels closer to the processual circuit of molecular change familiar to alchemy, and the material itself remains impossible to categorise, cycling around constantly in various combinations of textual admixture and filtration.

The most notable evocation of the alchemical is its reference to the hermetic androgyne - as figured in alchemical texts read by the surrealists. Indeed, possibly the most striking juxtaposition of the novel is its use of the concept of the bachelor machine in direct opposition to the cliché of its symbolic value, conferring on the exchange a potential for rebirth into that 'ancient and innate harmony' when male and female were an undivided whole.

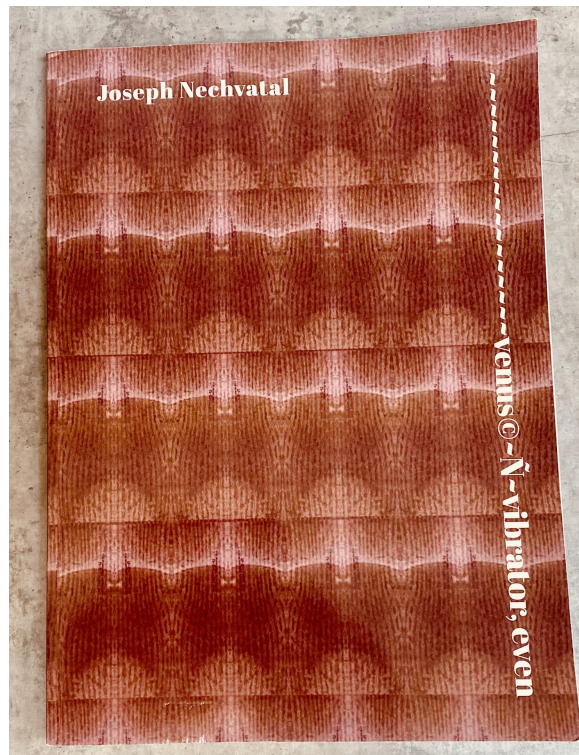
In thus transcending its own coordinates - whilst refusing to filter its apprehensions of the infinite — it recombines and thus subverts conceptualisations of high and low, male and female, gay and straight; the limitations of the framings of monstrous hybridity, a theme somewhere resonating within the text.

'the spot of red flesh from which tears flow'

We experience this for instance in ‘Part Three – The Plunge’ in which the narrator proclaims ‘Life now is the total submission of my flesh to Venus©~ñ~lOve Systems.’ – as we follow him with Venus as they ‘slum it’ through the ravines and gulleys of the digital world. As ever, it’s a partnership that is cast with a sheen of distance and disaffectedness, yet just before they launch into this journey — which prefigures the novel’s movement away from the narrator’s perspective and into a machinic intermeshing with the figure of the androgyne in Part Four — the cyber couple lie together at which point the narrator observes:

I often like to lay with Venus©~ñ~ without stirring, clasped together but not penetrating, in the swelling exaltation of an unconquerable desire we did not hastily satisfy ~ intoxicating one another with the contact of our aching fervour. Sometimes I only kiss the spot of red flesh from which tears flow; this kiss can seem endless.

Though seeming as if it might belong tonally to the downbeat stoicism of Spike Jonze’ film, this description effortlessly transcends Her’s romance trajectory, capturing instead, somehow, the stillness of alchemical becoming, in which bodily materiality is repurposed. Tear ducts vibrate here with cosmic space, transformed in an erotic repurposing capable of collapsing linear time, recalling and holding within this Bataillean instance of the informe — the ‘red spot of flesh’ — all that was humanly contrived and once caused pain. Such vertiginous alchemy of the body, already filtered through the digital mesh, promises a disappearance of sorts.



More of the novel's own trajectory towards transformation is revealed in Part Four's engagement with 'Archaism' or 'Lessons in Pink' - in which the narrator's male heterosexuality is confronted with the 'role-reversal Venus©~Ñ~TRICKSTER' programme. By its conclusion, the narrator is becoming a lacuna in digital space in which 'new erotic thoughts drifted ceaselessly within the cavern of my mind, like an abandoned ship without a rudder' and which enable him ultimately 'to think in pink', awakening a desire to push 'up along the path of defiance that eventually lifts off against the gravitational attraction of the earth ~ away from the worm and into mathematical infinity.'

Climax

Joseph Nechvatal's ~~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator is a great example of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the book as a 'little machine': on one level, it's a sex farce, a provocation in the spirit of De Sade's oeuvre and Bataille's *The Story of the Eye*; it's a doodle and a homage.

Yet it's also deadly serious — an embodiment of the underground politics of Eros. It carries within it a speculation on posthuman machinic sexual interfaces and the concept of selfhood — via a postmodern inflection of thought evoked through the projection of endless digital geographies threatening to dissolve subjectivity.

From another surface or angle, it's an instance of cybernetic alchemy — a grimoire in which the digital spells cast urge the future coming-into-being of a cyber hermetic androgyne bridging flesh and cyberspace and confronting the old positivisms of the cartesian self with its own alchemy of forms.

For the writer and reader, finally, it's also a fractal memoir, testament to a life lived within the forcefield of a significant technological revolution — a bildungsroman of sorts — in which the narrator-Nechvatal performs in this ludic digital sex chamber to demonstrate the bachelor machine's potential to reconstitute ideas of such a self.

In its continuous efforts to realign the past, present and future in an omega point attained through the powers of digital-erotic magnetism, it is a work of remarkable wit, ingenuity and beauty which speaks of the value of life and love as a practice of resistance.

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Taney Roniger on Joseph Nechvatal's *penelOpe pandemOnium*

By TANEY RONIGER, FEB. 2017

On first encountering Joseph Nechvatal's *penelOpe pandemOnium*, it is the ecstatic sensuousness of the field that initially seduces. Across the painting's luscious velour ground, its looming verticality beckoning like a portal, skeins of dendrite-like filaments roil and writhe amid a dense, vaguely amniotic surround. Underneath, ambiguous forms in fleshy pinks, deep crimsons, luminous magentas, and blues evocative of the sea morph and merge, all seamlessly interweaving. Oceanic and exultant, it is a world we slip into with ease. But tensions quickly become palpable. On the left, a single ultramarine band cuts vertically down the picture plane, its razor-like precision in violent contrast to the soothing fluidity. And what of Penelope, the work's titular heroine – anguished wife of Odysseus, she who is left behind? The more one lingers the more fraught and foreboding the painting becomes. How to reconcile the exquisite beauty of the field with the elements of *agon*?

Conflicting forces are a formidable presence in all of Nechvatal's work. Indeed, for an artist who has spent the better part of his career manipulating computer-generated viruses to wreak havoc on their image hosts, conflict inheres in the very means of production. Unleashing his viral algorithms on photograph-based images from his database, Nechvatal creates by way of

destruction, allowing the cascades of randomness to enact their drama on his subjects. What results, above all, is a profusion of *noise*: visual evidence of the virus's effects on the palimpsestic images. But for Nechvatal, the element of agitation is always twofold, serving as both agent of destruction and vehicle for transformation.



Joseph Nechvatal, installation view courtesy of Galerie Richard

Like the complex process by which they are created, Nechvatal's paintings unfold in time. Entering further into Penelope's world, what seemed at first a field of abstract forms slowly resolves into a discernible figure. Hovering, apparition-like, in the center of the canvas, it is a female nude in semi-recline, her dark eyes cast downward as she turns toward the viewer. So subtle is Penelope's presence, and so stirring is the moment of her recognition, that in apprehending her form we feel we are not so much before her image as inside her psychic space – an agonized space charged with longing and loss. But it is also a space of eternal renewal. What one gradually discerns is that beneath the explosive field of noise one image of Penelope is being virally annihilated while another – a copy of the same – emerges, inchoate, underneath. One imagines that in the fictive space of the painting there are infinitely many Penelopes, each one only an ontological possibility until the one above it is destroyed.

Dissolution and becoming, death and birth: in evoking both at once, the painting is a poignant reminder of their fundamental interdependence. New forms, new identities, and new ways of being can only emerge if old ones die first. Like all of Nechvatal's work, *penelOpe pandemOnium* is a testament to the generative power of disruption and destruction. But given its subject, it is also a statement of hope in dark times. Penelope, after all, is the embodiment of perseverance; only because of her wits and cunning does Odysseus return to an unbroken home.



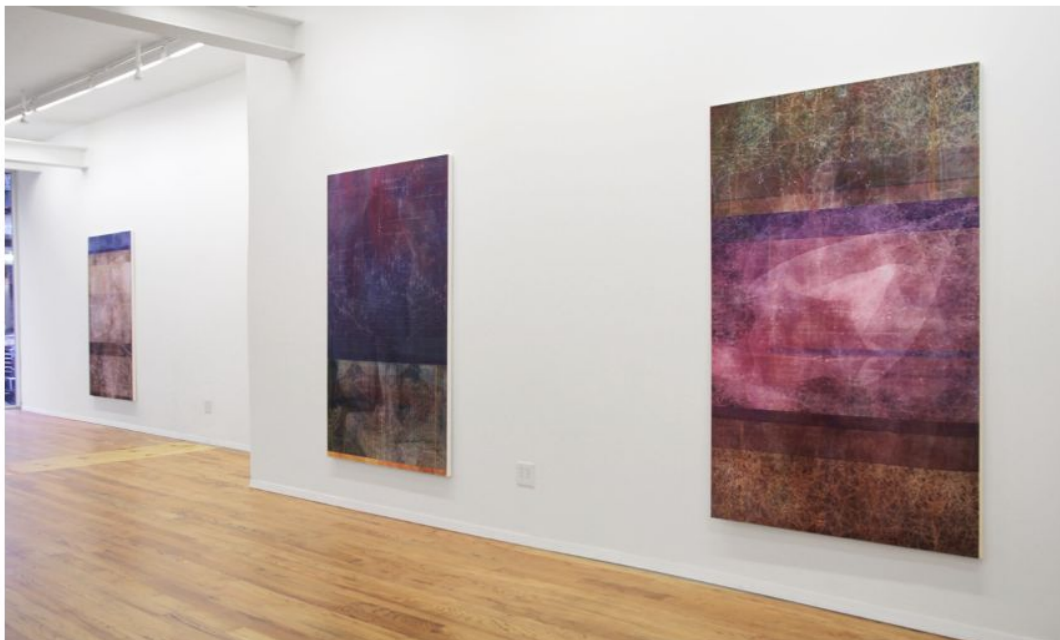
*Joseph Nechvatal, installation view courtesy of **Galerie Richard***

Hyperallergic
December 7, 2015

HYPERALLERGIC

Infected Paintings as an Allegory of Migration

Taney Roniger December 7, 2015



Installation view of Joseph Nechvatal, 'Odyssey pandemOnium: a migrational metaphor' at Galerie Richard (all images courtesy Galerie Richard)

Sing to me of the man, Muse,
the man of twists and turns,
driven time and again off course.

—*Homer's The Odyssey, Robert Fagles translation (1996)*

Trouble resounds in the work of [Joseph Nechvatal](#). Indeed, for an artist who has spent the better part of his career manipulating computer-generated viruses to

wreak havoc on their image hosts, trouble inheres in the very means of production. But as with all of Nechvatal's work — he is also a prolific writer (and [Hyperallergic contributor](#)), theorist, and sound artist — the element of agitation is twofold, serving as both agent of destruction and vehicle for transformation.

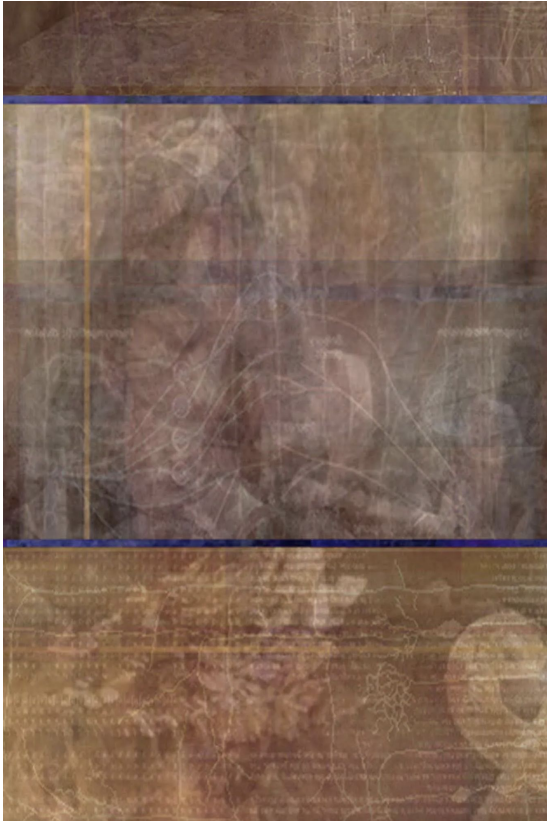


Joseph Nechvatal, "penelOpe pandemOnium" (2014), computer-robotic assisted acrylic on velour, 66 x 42 in. (click to enlarge)

So it is fitting that with his latest show at Galerie Richard, *[Odyssey pandemOnium: a migrational metaphor](#)*, Nechvatal turns his viral paradigm to "the man of twists and turns": Homer's cunning hero whose very name means trouble. But the story of Odysseus and his epically tumultuous voyage is only a point of departure; the loss and longing of anyone who has ever been displaced or set adrift are the ultimate subjects here. Fraught with tension and achingly beautiful, the show presents a powerful and, given the timeliness of the subject, hopeful metaphor for the perennially human search for home.

In the 10 works on view — all of them digital paintings on a luscious velour ground oriented vertically to suggest portals — muted images of Odysseus and his mythic cohorts hover, apparition-like, in luminous fields of color. Earthy umbers, fleshy pinks, and grays evocative of aged stone predominate, all imbued with a watery softness. Throughout, ambiguous forms resembling neural networks, fragments of illegible text, and X-rays of human viscera morph and merge, seamlessly interweaving with the figures and faces. Further underscoring the themes of agony and tension, the

densely layered images are punctuated by bright orthogonal bands that bisect the picture plane at various intervals. Pervading all, there is “noise” — visual evidence of the virus’s effects on the palimpsestic images. Fractured, tumultuous, and resolutely complex, the paintings nonetheless exude uncanny, womb-like warmth.

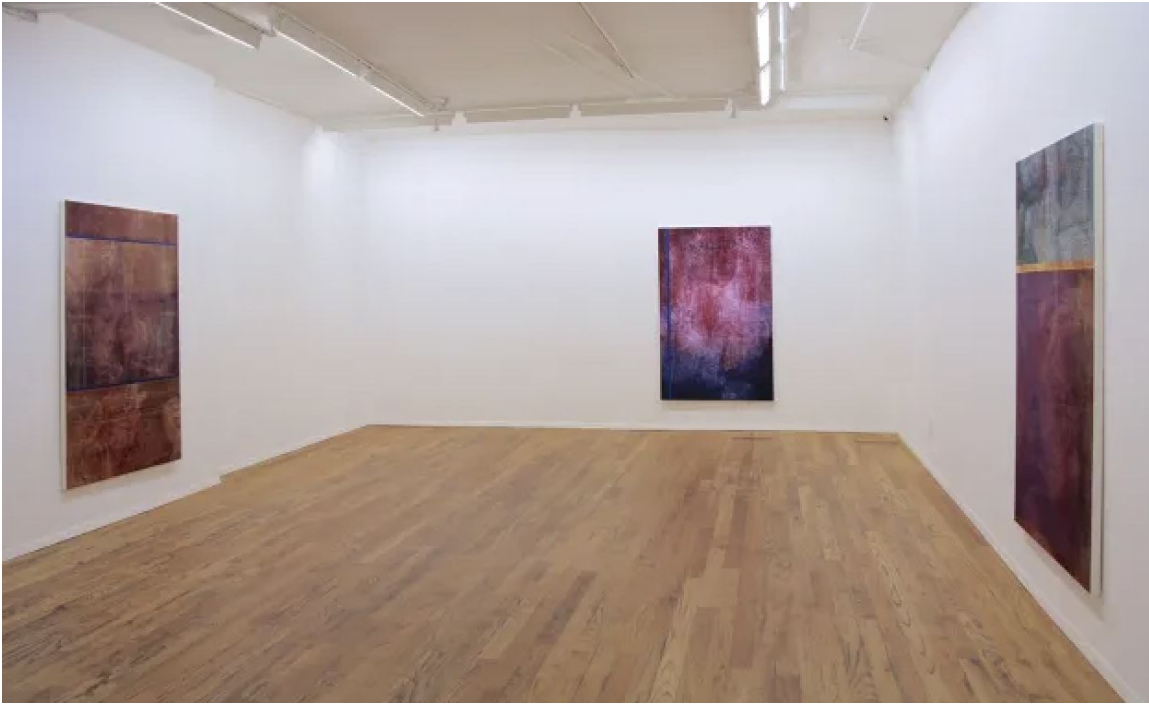


Joseph Nechvatal, “vexed telemachus in agOny” (2014), computer-robotic assisted acrylic on velour, 66 x 42 in. (click to enlarge)

Those left behind loom large in any migrant’s story, and here the suffering of Telemachus and Penelope is a recurring motif. In “vexed telemachus in agOny” (all works 2014), the visage of the anguished son, obscured by skeins of dextrite-like filaments, is just barely visible. Framed on three sides by narrow bars of color and further occluded by veils of milky pigment, Telemachus is imprisoned, his despair palpable. In “vexed telemachus adrift” and “drifting telemachus,” large horizontal bands of deep black become gaping voids resonant with loss.

But it is Penelope who anchors the show. Presiding over the gallery’s back wall, “penelOpe pandemOnium”

features a classically posed female figure obscured by an explosive field of visual noise that shifts from pink to blue. A single ultramarine band cuts vertically down one side. The most dramatic piece in the show, it is also the richest. For here what we see is one image of Penelope being virally annihilated while another — a copy of the same — emerges, inchoate, underneath. One imagines that in the fictive space of the painting there are infinitely many Penelopes, each one only an ontological possibility until the one above it is destroyed. Evoking both dissolution and becoming, the piece is a powerful reminder of the inextricable link between death and birth. Old identities must die for new ones to emerge.



Installation view of Joseph Nechvatal, 'Odyssey pandemOnium: a migrational metaphor' at Galerie Richard (photo courtesy Galerie Richard)

In a year that has witnessed the most dramatic migrant crisis we've seen in our lifetimes, it is difficult not to read this show as a response to current events. But in a larger sense, we are all migrants. In a culture both ideologically and spiritually adrift, suspended between a bankrupt and moribund modernity and we know not what, we are all at sea. Given the current climate of endgame rhetoric, part of what makes Nechvatal so singular and so compelling is his refusal to settle for any of it. Instead, what he offers is hope that out of the cauldron of upheaval will eventually emerge new forms and new ways of being as yet unimaginable. The return to *The Odyssey* as a way of exploring these themes makes this show particularly poignant. It is, after all, a tale of homecoming. Worn and weary, trouble does return home, he and all of Ithaca irrevocably transformed.

Joseph Nechvatal's Odyssey pandemOnium: a migrational metaphor continues at Galerie Richard (121 Orchard Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through December 16.

The Brooklyn Rail
December 2015

BROOKLYN RAIL

ART | DEC/JAN 15–16 | IN CONVERSATION

THE MIGRANT AS CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR JOSEPH NECHVATAL with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve

Joseph Nechvatal is a post-conceptual painter, media and audio artist, art theoretician, and the Paris correspondent for *Hyperallergic*. He came into prominence in the early '80s downtown New York art world for small, dense, semi-abstract, apocalyptic graphite drawings that were sometimes blown up photo-mechanically. In the late '70s and early '80s, he worked as the Dia archivist for La Monte Young; this Fluxus-inspired avant-garde tradition has permeated his theoretical and artistic work ever since. In the '80s, he was a member of Colab (Collaborative Projects) and helped establish the non-profit space ABC No Rio and *Tellus Audio Cassette Magazine*. In 1986, he began to produce computer-assisted paintings, following the (so called) "death of painting." He received his Ph.D. in the philosophy of art and technology in 1999 under Roy Ascott at the Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts (CAiiA) (now called the Planetary Collegium at Plymouth University, U.K.) where he developed his concept of *viractualism*, an approach that creates art interfaces between the virtual and the actual. He is the author of *Towards An Immersive Intelligence: Essays on the Work of Art in the Age of Computer Technology and Virtual Reality 1993 – 2006* (New York: Edgewise Books, 2009), and *Immersion Into Noise* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011). In November, Thyrza Nichols Goodeve met Nechvatal on Ludlow street at his friend Seton Smith's loft to discuss his exhibition *Odyssey pandemOnium : a migrational metaphor* (November 15 – December 16) at Galerie Richard (121 Orchard Street) and the publication of his first book of poetry *Destroyer of Naivetés*. Although Ludlow Street had been Nechvatal's New York City home since 1980, he was evicted in 2012 and now lives in Paris.

Thyrza Nichols Goodeve (Rail): You arrived in New York City from Chicago in the mid '70s, lived in downtown New York through the '80s, started to commute back and forth to Paris in the '90s, and now, having been kicked out of your apartment on Ludlow Street, where you had been since 1980, live in Paris full time. There are a number of fictional books out now about New York in the '70s, like *City on Fire* by Garth Risk Hallberg or *The Flamethrowers* by Rachel Kushner. So, why not start with what the '70s were like for you?

Joseph Nechvatal: At the time, I remember thinking that the disco mid '70s really sucked compared to the rocking Woodstock non-profit head space of the late '60s. But the rent was cheap, and that was key. I moved to 18 North Moore Street in Tribeca in 1975, into a storefront studio that cost sixty dollars a month and been Fluxus artist Joe Jones's *Music-Store*. I immediately started going to museums and galleries and The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church, but at first I mostly hung out with musicians and filmmakers in Tribeca, like James Nares, Eric Mitchell, and Amos Poe—people that would help shape the No Wave movement. I started going every night to the Mudd Club and Tier 3 to hear No Wave bands like Theoretical Girls, DNA, and James Chance and the Contortions, and painting and drawing during the day. Artistically, the scene was poised at the end of Conceptualism, at the end of modernism, with artists such as Carl Andre, Mel Bochner and Donald Judd at their reductive zenith. It felt like a moment of artistic climax for reduction in both painting, with Robert Ryman, and in Minimal music, with Philip Glass. Modern art had reached an apex end point. So the question was where to go after that.

Rail: So where did you go? Was there a catalyst?

Nechvatal: Yes, I was particularly influenced by the No Wave performer Boris Policeband in 1978 at a concert to benefit Colab's *X Motion Picture Magazine*. I was entranced with how Policeband appropriated police scanner radio transmissions and merged them with his dissonant violin and hilarious voice. His brand of post-Minimalism had an influence on my striving for my own form of post-minimal art as chaos magic, based on magical gazing. That year I had been reading Aleister Crowley's book *Magick in Theory and Practice*. What I conjectured from Crowley while listening to and watching Boris Policeband, was that a noisy aesthetic visualization process could be used to create feedback optic stimulus to the neocortex in a kind of "cop free" project of foreseeing—an attempt to scan into an unpoliced future—based roughly on the basis of magical gazing. I had been doing rather minimalistic paintings then, but I eventually dropped painting and started making all-gray minimal graphite drawings that actually had a ton of stuff buried in them. So I flipped the art history script a bit, moving my art from reduction into glazed overload.

Rail: I've never heard of "chaos magic" before, or your influence by Aleister Crowley. Is "chaos magic" your own term? It sounds like a phrase that's applicable to your theoretical writing on noise.

Nechvatal: Yes, but as a concept, "chaos magic" only worked on a very intimate, personal scale in my own head! I learned about the term from studying the artist and magician Austin Osman Spare who I discovered in a magic-book store in the Village around the same time I was into Crowley. I write about Spare and chaos magic in my book *Immersion Into Noise*.

Rail: When was your first New York show?

Nechvatal: It was a DIY affair in 1979, called *Methadone Median*. I did it while squatting in an abandoned methadone center on west Canal Street, in Laurie Anderson's building. The space was haunted with emotion. It had been recently painted in various bright colors, but it was never used. I put some small paper pieces on the walls and served cheap white wine in the little meth plastic cups that were left behind. That is where I first met some of the Colab people, like Alan Moore, Becky Howland, Joe Lewis, Kiki Smith, and Tom Otterness. They, and many others, did the *Times Square Show*, and then the *Real Estate Show*. I joined in with the *Times Square Show* action at the last moment with a little drawing and was very involved with the *Real Estate Show*. My association with Colab stimulated me to introduce anti-nuclear bomb politics into my art.

Rail: Whereas before the work had been more abstract? Weren't you even doing white paintings?

Nechvatal: I started to do mostly white paintings with simple shapes around 1976 for a few years, partly because I was studying Ludwig Wittgenstein's picture theory in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* with Arthur Danto at Columbia. Also I admired some of the New Image Painting going on then, particularly that of Jennifer Bartlett, Neil Jenney, and Robert Moskowitz. I was trying to figure out how we recognize shapes that come towards us and shapes that go in—that kind of optical reading of reality. Wittgenstein's picture theory interested me because I had read that Jasper Johns was really interested in it, and I had been interested in Johns. And, happily, Danto was doing this course on Andy Warhol and Wittgenstein. It was extremely important to me in terms of seeing representation in a new light. Just before that I was making combine pieces using wood and stone in relationship to a white painted field. I remember I was using a lot of white oil stick at the time to get a physical, textured surface that became a kind of a representation of white noise. I eventually dropped that and started making small, gray, dense graphite drawings based on pictures in magazines and newspapers. This appropriation of media images was in the wind. But I used appropriation differently than people like Richard Prince or Sherrie Levine. They just moved the context of the image. I used appropriation as a starting point, not an end point. I would

start by drawing cliché images from the clippings I collected, and then build a deep palimpsest drawing field using one image piled on another to the point of excess. I became very interested in excess in terms of the nuclear buildup going on then under Reagan, but also the excess typical of the popular distribution of electronic media. In the early 1980s, I, along with many other artists, was interested in the distributive capacity of art based in reproduction. Most were inspired by the 1968 essay “The Dematerialization of Art” by John Chandler and Lucy R. Lippard, which argued that Conceptualism had a politically transformative aspect to be delved into. The other inescapable text at the time was Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Well-known practitioners of this art-and-reproduction fusion were Colab member Jenny Holzer and Colab associate Barbara Kruger; I was inspired by both of them. At the time, I was photo-mechanically blowing up my small drawings, making Xerox books, audio art, and street posters. Colab was interested in Fluxus-like low-priced multiples, and Colab first funded my audio cassette publishing and mail distribution network *Tellus Audio Cassette Magazine*. A post-punk sense of underground distribution that used media against itself was very much in the air.

Rail: When did you begin to work with computers and the theoretical issues of the *viractual*?
3

Nechvatal: My interest in the ideology of media led me to using the possibilities of computer-robotics as a timely alternative art tool, a new way to make conceptual paintings that addressed issues of distribution through excess. There were no PCs then, of course, this was 1986. But the studio I was working with in Midtown had access to a big computer painting machine that had been developed in Japan. So I started making computer-robotic assisted paintings like *The Informed Man*, and that led me to *Documenta 8* in 1987, and things took off from there. I was participating in the Brooke Alexander Gallery scene that included numerous Colab artists like Judy Rifka and John Ahearn, and my solo gallery career was pretty much launched out of there. But I was still playing around with writing poetry and art theory essays and making noise music.

Rail: So your interest in noise and music goes way back—were you ever in a band?

Nechvatal: Music has always been a passion of mine. When I was sixteen, I was a drummer in a band at Hinsdale High School in Chicago called The Men, which is so pathetic because we weren’t even men yet! I recall that we used to play a version of Cream’s “Tales of Brave Ulysses.” I continued to play drums and guitar throughout my college days, but I abandoned music as a professional goal. I never lost the desire to make, collect, distribute, and consume music, though. I love noise music the most these days.

Rail: Although you are in New York for the opening of your exhibition *Odyssey pandemonium : a migrational metaphor*, you are not just a visual artist, but a theoretician,⁴ critic for *Hyperallergic*,⁵ audio-artist,⁶ and the current exhibition coincides with the publication of your poetry book *Destroyer of Naivetés* published by Punctum Books.⁷ Yet even this poetry book comes with a soundtrack.

Nechvatal: *Destroyer of Naivetés* is something I've been writing, bit by bit, for twenty years. It's an epic sex-farce poem broken into nine sections. After I finished writing it, I showed it to my friend, the composer Rhys Chatham, with whom I had worked on an '80s No Wave opera called *XS*, and more recently on an animation installation called *Viral Venture* that we showed on the large screen at the School of Visual Arts' Beatrice Theatre in 2011. I asked him to consider it for a recording project. The first thing he said was, "We have to find someone really good to do the voice," so I showed it to the spoken-word artist Black Sifichi, who also lives in Paris, and he agreed to do it. Black and I then handed the reading track to Rhys who created an intensely rich and beautiful soundscape underneath it, using flutes, trumpets, and electric guitars. We are looking for a gutsy publisher for the hour-long CD now. I played the recording at my Punctum book signing event, rather than reading some of it out loud.

The poetry in *Destroyer of Naivetés* is very flamboyant. I took liberties. I wanted to explore a vocabulary that is anti-banal and much more like that of Jean Genet. It's about the flamboyance of human sexual desire and the role the eye plays in our time of virtual reality. It takes inspiration from the books of Genet and many other sex writers, but also from Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, the drawings of Hans Bellmer, the film/performances of Bradley Eros, and Francis Picabia's book of poems *I Am a Beautiful Monster*.

Rail: You describe Rhys Chatham's soundscape for it as "beautiful." How does this relate to your work and interest in noise?⁸

Nechvatal: My art, whether it is visual, as in the new paintings in *Odyssey pandemonium*, or audio, as in my *viral symphony*, asks for time and effort on the part of the viewer or listener. It is anti-pop in that respect. It is not about easy consumption. But you're right, if there is anything that ties it together, it is my interest in the beauty of the art of noise, particularly the idea that if you took time and looked into a vague field, you could discover layers of subliminal imagery. This is as true of the imagery I produced for my show at Galerie Richard as it is of my graphite palimpsest drawings from the '80s. The paintings in *Odyssey pandemonium* are conceptually situated within my immersive noise theory in that they make use of a complicated turmoil produced from close exchanges within figure/ground relationships that challenges us to think outside of the normal system of human perception. Classical-looking figures are embedded into a complex and subtle ground so that the normal figure/ground relationship more or less merges. The viewer's eye must navigate the visual pandemonium in a way that suggests Odysseus's wanderings.

Rail: What is noise to you?

Nechvatal: In everyday use, the word “noise” means unwanted sound or noise pollution. I look at it and listen to it differently: from an immersive perspective. In music, dissonance is the quality of sounds that seem *unstable*, with an aural “need” to “resolve” to a “stable” consonance. Despite the fact that words like “unpleasant” and “grating” are often used to describe the sound of harsh dissonance, in fact all music with a harmonic or tonal basis—even music that is perceived as generally harmonious—incorporates some degree of dissonance. The enigma of noise is what interests me.

Rail: But it’s beyond enigma for you—in other words, it’s not just noise as some punk modernist irritant or disjunction meant to fuck with people. Noise is an avenue to a higher level of consciousness for you, isn’t it? In her review of your book *Immersion Into Noise*, published in the *Brooklyn Rail* in 2012, when it came out with Open Humanities Press, Yuting Zou said, “the function of an ‘immersive art-of-noise’ is to provide us with an artistic environment of clamorous cultural information capable of expanding our consciousness, *disjunctively* [. . .] disjunctive noise consciousness may lead to a new ontological unification based in ‘self-re-programmability.’”⁹ This is important and complex. Can you elaborate?

Nechvatal: The art of noise is the sensitive use of what Duchamp called the essential element in his art: delay. Noise, in the visual sense, is a delay in perceiving signals, and that delay offers up opportunity for the viewer to fill in her own phantasmagorical content. That puts the imagination to work; if used often enough, imagination can aid in a beneficial transformation of the self.

Rail: The addition of the word “immersion” is also important. Your collection of essays published by Edgewise Press in 2009 is called *Towards an Immersive Intelligence* and immersion is something you have been writing about since your doctoral dissertation. I now understand the connection in a way I didn’t before: with noise, one is immersed to the point of losing one’s perceptual anchors—there is no up-down, left-right—whether it is visual or audio noise.

Nechvatal: Yes. Think of noise as a suspension of clear location. That is how the art of noise is so central to getting what I am doing with the virus and the image as host in the *Odyssey pandemOnium* paintings—and how it relates to the migration crises happening in Europe due to the wars that started with Bush’s stupid invasion. *Odyssey pandemOnium* refers to that homeless situation and the natural yearning to return to one’s home and one’s language. This pertains to me also as I am coming home, with an epic poem in hand, to the Lower East Side, after being expelled by the gentrification war on artists that went down here.

Rail: Do you have your notebook with you? Could you read what you read about noise at the Punctum symposium, *In Service to Nothing: Intellectual Inquiry in the Open*, at The New School?

Nechvatal: “The art of noise today is a psychotic outburst that disrupts smooth image operations with an explosion of buried visual hysteria that echoes our highly diverse chaotic world. Its incomprehensibility by design connects us to the world media frenzy through what I think to be a type of chaos magic. The art of noise creates the visualization bridge between form and intuition, as its uncertain images have more information in them than a clear, certain image (or sound) where the information quickly becomes redundant. Thus the art of noise gives rise to new thought. It promotes the emergence of new forms of an old story: art.”

Rail: This also reminds me of your idea that art in itself is immersive: “Therefore, the role of immersive art remains the prosthetic task of artificially facilitating such an unrestricted state, as such, it remains associated with the most fleeting elaborations of artistic consciousness.”¹⁰ How does the use of the computer virus connect to noise?

Nechvatal: In 1990, my *Computer Virus Project*’s initial goal was to produce physical paintings by using algorithms implementing “viral” processes. It’s based on a simulation tool which allowed me to virtually introduce artificial organisms into a digitized reproduction of an earlier artwork, the host, and let them transform and destroy that original image. During these “attacks” a new still image can be extracted and painted on canvas, which is a way to realize them—to bring back the virtual into the real.

Rail: The context of the ’80s is crucial here—not only all the theorizing at the time around the real, the simulated, and what you call *viractual*, but AIDS.

Nechvatal: I attribute the birth of the *Computer Virus Project* to my direct experience with, and exposure to, the deadly virus through my relationship to the tormenting AIDS death of Bebe Smith, Seton Smith’s twin. That and the AIDS death I witnessed of my friend and neighbor, the Pyramid Club performer Tron von Hollywood. That period cracked open an emotional range in me between dread for one’s life and happy memories of a fading wild sexual freedom. The negative connotations of the HIV virus as a vector of disease is reflected in the principle of degradation of the image. But here, the virus is also the basis of a creative process, producing newness in reference to the major influence of the virus on evolution in biological systems. In the current work *Odyssey pandemOnium* you can see the virus weave and unweave figures within the ground. Also you can see the way I put William S. Burroughs’s 1971 text *Electronic Revolution*, where he talks about the virus as the beginning of language, through a computer program that connects his word “virus” into a frequency relationship flow chart with other key words. But my virus project’s full aesthetic function in terms of painting is achieved by writing a dynamic mechanism for automatically evolving the code typical of genetic algorithms. This chance-based intertwining activity is itself an example of my theory of subliminal noise painting with its deep connection to John Cage’s chance-based art.

Rail: Why call them paintings?

Nechvatal: Because they are one-of-a-kind painted canvases that have been airbrush spray painted through a computer-robotic driven mechanism. Of course this calls for an expanded definition of the craft of hand painting, one connected to Minimalist art fabrication techniques and also Fluxus-like Conceptualism. They are post-Conceptual paintings that build upon the legacy of Conceptual art, where the concept or idea involved in the work takes some precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns. Conceptual art focused attention on the idea behind the art object and questioned the traditional role of that object as conveyor of meaning. Subsequently, those theories cast doubt upon the necessity of materiality itself, as conceptual artists de-materialized the post-Minimal art object and began to produce time-based and ephemeral artworks. Although total dematerialization of the art object never occurred, the art object became flexible, and that malleability, coupled with viral computer processing, has resulted in post-Conceptual painting.

Rail: So the virus is wandering around and living off one of your host art images in *Odyssey pandemOnium*, creating new painterly situations much like the notion of wandering in Homer's *Odyssey*?

Nechvatal: Yes. I had been kicking around a copy of *The Odyssey* since the time I migrated to New York City and it is one of the books I took with me when I moved to Paris a few years ago. I've read this Penguin version three times, at least—there are certain phrases I like to remember, like “struggle with the sea” and stuff about the Lotus Eaters. Now the paintings of *Odyssey pandemOnium* are not illustrations of the *Odyssey*. As mentioned above, what is important is intentional enigma. The paintings need to be both seductive and obscure to the degree that their codes cannot be immediately discerned. I think that the phantasmagorical obscurity, the mystery of the *Odyssey pandemOnium* paintings, is increasingly desirable in a world that has become increasingly data-mined, mapped, quantified, specialized, and identified in a straightforward, matter-of-fact way. My goal is to disrupt instrumental logic and contradict, counteract, and cancel out false reason and hollow feeling. Suffering and joy, like figure and ground, are tied together in frenzy, neither one without the other. Thus works in *Odyssey pandemOnium* may suggest or produce stress in us. One might even say an anxiety of disintegration. Dedication to its merits, if there are any, might well be described as vaguely heroic when experienced as a lost lyric poet. They take off from the poetic idea of imagery floating free on the internet. Everything is mobile and floating around now. Add that to the plight of the migrants escaping war by entering Greece by sea, near where the *Odyssey* is set. Overloaded boats regularly capsize, drowning hundreds of people. In September, I showed a virus projection called *viral castratO* at the Budapest Art Factory during the crises in the train station there and spoke to people about the situation. I was thinking about this a great deal when I was there and now again as Paris, a city I love, has become a zone of killing and conflict. Desperate people fleeing Syria and other areas of conflict, these migrants flowing across Europe, scaring the hell out of many Europeans and fueling the rise of the far-right anti-immigrant political forces. And I saw the sad heroism of the migrant act, which is actually an act of conscientious objection opposed to war. They are fleeing war, whereas Odysseus was a war hero. I wanted to flip that classical Greek script of Homer's and give it a new interpretation in light of our actual lived situation.

Rail: In the news, the route the migrants take keeps changing, which makes your allusion to the *Odyssey* that much more poignant, although from the opposite end.

Nechvatal: *The Odyssey* is about the King-hero conqueror trying to get back home. These people are the conscientious objectors to war. They're fleeing the war, fleeing Syria, fleeing the combat zone, so in these paintings I wanted to give them hero status by making Odysseus and his story the host in which their viral travels may wander.

The Brooklyn Rail
April 2011

BROOKLYN RAIL

BOOKS | APRIL 2011

Nechvatal's Immersive Noise Theory

By Yuting Zou

While most people would naturally think of noise as an audio-only disturbance, in *Immersion Into Noise*, digital artist and theoretician Joseph Nechvatal takes us on a rowdy conversational ride through a series of audio, visual, spatialized, and networked “art noises.” He supports his argument with examples from the history of philosophy, noise music, the visual arts, architectural history, network theory, and consciousness studies.

In his introduction, Nechvatal discusses his perception of noise as the material for an immersive art that allows the mind to connect to the body through what he calls a “self-attentive unification,” as the excess of art noise triggers intensities in all directions. His argument places emphasis on *immersion*, which implies a continuum of intensity vectors, the integration of which preconditions “the ecstasy of going outside of self” without losing connection with the self. Nechvatal details his visit to a site of “immersive noise vision” within a little known, rarely seen space in the prehistoric cave, Lascaux, as a personal, and powerful, example of the kind of experience he is arguing for in the book.

In the conclusion of *Immersion Into Noise*, Nechvatal hypothesizes an innovative theory that he calls “immersive noise consciousness.” This theory proposes that the function of an “immersive art-of-noise” is to provide us with an artistic environment of clamorous cultural information capable of expanding our consciousness, *disjunctively*. He further concludes that this disjunctive noise consciousness may lead to a new ontological unification based in “self-re-programmability.” Nechvatal maintains that the “subsequent and ultimate aesthetic benefit of noise art then, is in attaining a prospective realization of our perceptual circuitry as a self-re-programmable operation.” He feels that our learning to self-modify (self-re-program) ourselves is the entire point of art.

According to Nechvatal, in our age of “massive electronic deluge,” we are constantly immersed in an information-overloaded virtual world of distributed networks. Art noise in this culture, as conceptualized by Nechvatal, “distorts and disturbs crisp signals of cultural communications.” Unlike normal noise, which doesn’t mean anything, aesthetic art noise, according to Nechvatal, is full of cultural meanings and becomes a dense, confusing assemblage of cultural ideologies and signifiers. Hence, according to Nechvatal, “art noise” as virtual environment can be considered a miniscule abstraction of our larger noisy, connected world. While immersed in a “noise art environment,” the “immersant” is stimulated to experience a paradoxical (and disjunctive) state of connectivity and

disconnectivity. The neural networks of the human body join with the external, noisy art networks and form a body-space of “hyperconnectivity.” Thus, the classical, ontological body partially dissolves in an art-of-noise virtual environment, collapsing the distinction between the inside and the outside.

However, noise is disturbing and offensive. It is beyond comprehension and challenges our habitual way of thinking and reasoning. Noise necessarily produces resistance in the mind, creating a “critical distance” via a “body/mind rupture.” But Nechvatal intends not only to make us aware of our inner ruptures. He too proposes that the “excess” inherent in the “art of noise” offers an expansive, “saturating border experience.” By increasing art noise to that threshold, the superabundance of “ideological demonstration becomes non-representational.” Therefore, such a noise art environment becomes a private *vacuole* (noncommunicational cocoon) of self-reflection, where a newfound depth of self-understanding is achieved, as well as a disillusionment of social spectacles and ideologies.

Nechvatal’s immersive noise theory is deeply rooted in contemporary philosophy, particularly Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, in which the two philosophers describe the condition of a *body without organs* as an insubstantial state of connected-being that lies beyond representation. Nechvatal also draws on their concept of “becoming-animal,” which emphasizes movements of escape that cross thresholds to reach a continuum of intensities where all forms come undone. In a becoming-animal noise panorama, a feedback-loop is used as a metaphor for a psychic bouncing-back-and-forth from comfort to distress (and loops). Nechvatal builds on these ideas when postulating noise art environments that are capable of pushing the limits of our habitual significations, signifiers, and signifieds—to the benefit of a new unformed state of de-territorialized flux.

Georges Bataille is Nechvatal’s other major influence, including his definition of excess as not so much a surplus, but as an effective passage beyond our established limits, an impulse that exceeds even its own threshold. Also considered is the French philosopher Michel Serres’s interrogation of the idea of noise in his books *Genèse* and *The Parasite*, as well as Derrida’s deconstruction of logocentrism: the once held distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. Nechvatal builds his noise theory on solid ground by judiciously using contemporary philosophical concepts, such as fractals, quantum mechanics, Brownian random walk, and differential structure. He then ties in Eastern philosophy (Zen and *I Ching*) through John Cage’s developed aesthetic theories, which lead to an abandonment of structure in favor of structures that become indeterminate via chance operations. Cage concluded that, even though it has certain uses, structure is unnecessary. One wonders just what kind of noise art dynamics might be generated by the heterogenic intersection of the all-embracing Tao and the promising unification of physics superstring/M-theory (our most ambitious attempt at a unification theory): Would it be interesting to have such an all-inclusive philosophy that allows for both self-referential differential structure and axiomatic

algebraic structure? But for now, Nechvatal's theory of noise art aims at a self-referential mode in an immersive environment, a representation of what he calls a "conspicuously excessive, connected and collapsing society." An immediate benefit of Nechvatal's noise theory of "rupture-induced expansion" is its emphasis on that which "unites the apparent opposites of subjectivity and objectivity" in the interests of a networked well-being from a connectionist perspective.

Generously sharing his intimate experiences at Lascaux, Nechvatal guides us through a sequence of cavernous shelters, labyrinthine passages, and excessively decorated architectures. None of them is constructed as an ideal linear space. They are all irregular and unpredictable places that induce us to experience a "compressed, close-up immersive experience." As he poetically puts it, we enter with him "the depths of the immersive darkness to contemplate both the beginning and end of life." Or, as he more analytically puts it, "it is in the cave, generally deep within, where early immersive art attained its maximum intensity." This noise aesthetic of holes and caves is often exemplified in Nechvatal's own digital art, with its use of an artificial-life computer virus program that enters and eats away his digital paintings of human retinas and anuses.

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May 2010

 BROOKLYN RAIL

BOOKS | MAY 2010

IMMERSION, INFINITY, AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE

By Robert C. Morgan

To avoid unnecessary complexity, the subtitle of this impressive and provocative tome, though relatively minimal in its length (94 pages), gives us a literal transcription of what is to follow, that is: *Essays on the Work of Art in the Age of Computer Technology and Virtual Reality, 1993-2006*. Frankly, I don't think the subtitle is necessary. The author makes his point without a prolegomena. To suggest that this is a seminal book in a new or renewed field of inquiry is an understatement. Nechvatal has done nothing less than put critical theory at the threshold of virtuality, what the author synthetically claims is the juncture of evolution where the virtual and the actual will find their own homeostasis in what he refers to as "viractual."

In the vacuous landscape of today's software paradigms, we find unending reference to the assumption that the future will inevitably become virtual and that our tactile reality as we know it today will slowly disappear from the face of the earth. As Joseph Nechvatal implicitly suggests, this is not the only way to understand what is happening. While he is clearly an adherent of the technological revolution in advanced communications technology, he is also willing to take a distance from it all and reflect on the broadest spectrum, the continuum, that is, what is happening overall. To understand the overall picture is a matter of understanding the mechanics of cause and effect relationships. While Nechvatal—a visual artist—supports the premise that his work is bound to an immersive intelligence through densely laminated fields of imagery—hoarding hundreds of pictorial signs—the point is that this maneuvering is not a purely virtual phenomenon. For the artist and plausible theorist, Nechvatal, it is a "viractual" phenomenon.

According to Nechvatal, the viractual suggests that the world is no longer about perceiving differences between reality and illusion, but about seeing the virtual phenomenon within the actual, and the actual within the virtual. Much of this emerges in contradistinction to the writings of the late French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, whose theories of "simulacra" and "ecstasy" Nechvatal has pondered at some length, along with Deleuze and Guattari, the psychiatrist authors of *Mille Plateaux*. The latter, presumably, transformed Nechvatal's thinking away from standard narratives and fictitious visualized composites, stuck in a draught of modernist juxtapositions, toward the postmodern notion of "rhizome theory" whereby intersessionary passageways comprise the density of information that predetermines how we feel, think, behave, and respond to the overabundant conditioning that surrounds us on a diurnal basis.

While some will regard Nechvatal's book as overly hedonistic, even superfluous in its hypostasized intellectual tone, there is much to learn from his carefully developed arguments and insightful jaunts into unknown territory between the sexual, corporeal, psychological, and transcendent intonations. Nechvatal is an original. Both as artist and writer, he follows his own course. He is a fully matured inner-directed artist without impediments. Theory is rarely foregrounded in the work of Nechvatal, but approached from different angles, always enunciating a dialectical position, without giving way to the encumbered idealism and presumptuous speculations of grandfather Hegel. When Nechvatal speaks of "immersive intelligence" he does so in the following way: "By refusing the dichotomized, utilitarian codes of representation in favor of the free associational operations, excess triggers an array of synaptic charges. "That's synaptic, not synoptic—but the two may as well merge into one, when he says: "Aesthetic immersion's non-linear and indeterminate latent excess facilitates our desire to transcend the boundaries of our customary human cognition in order to feel the state of unconditional being that Hegel called the absolute."

The absolute is a conundrum for Nechvatal, who resides much closer to an omniscient fluid consciousness that would appear anathema to Hegel, at least on the surface. The introduction of the "seminal" early 20th century mystic, Austin Osman Spare, offers an ecstatic alternative to the absolute, who is quoted as: "The artist must be trained to work freely and without control within a continuous line and without afterthought ... In time, shapes will be found to evolve, suggesting conceptions, forms—and ultimately, style."

Citing Spare, Nechvatal proceeds to anoint the crown of this Blakian serpentine misfit by suggesting a prophetic impulse, namely—"that underlying everything virtual is a web of hyper connections upon which we can exert more manipulative desire than we are normally led to believe by the society the spectacle." Still, the most energetic part of the book veers toward the conclusion with an exalted hyper-critique of his precarious ally, Jean Baudrillard. Here, Nechvatal is annoyed that the Pope of Simulacra has idolized Warhol at the expense of the Dadaists: "By ignoring such basic Dadaist dysfunctional strategies (by over-valuing Warhol's own appropriation of them via Duchamp), Baudrillard is able to claim rather that the masses can only incorporate media content, thereby neutralizing the meaning by demanding and obtaining more and more irrational self-contradictory spectacle entertainment." Nechvatal goes to show that Baudrillard did little more than erode "the boundary between the media and the real." Admonishing the presumption that "Warholian reproducibility becomes the fundamental logic and code of the information society," Nechvatal takes a clear stand with the viractual and the quest for an immersive intelligence (in spite of its neo-metaphysical aspect) and goes on to confront the lack of internal critique that has allowed this tendency to be either overlooked, sentimentalized, traumatized, or misunderstood.

The vivid viractual contribution of this book is to turn the tables on the simulacra as Sontag's did with "camp" (1964)—and to suggest the necessity of a sensible criterion in coming to terms with ecstatic immersion of thought. By removing ourselves from the primrose path of puritan stultification where the figure is persistently delineated against a ground, Nechvatal poses a consciousness replete with space/time simultaneity. By looking equally in all directions at a virtual compendium of data without limits, through the actual history that has produced it, Nechvatal beckons the call for a vacation from all the uptightness that has pushed humanity down a narrow corridor of information storage and where few have ever considered the infinite assemblage of pleasures layered archeologically behind it.

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ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS NEW YORK

Joseph Nechvatal

Universal Concepts Unlimited

February 21, 2004 - March 27, 2004

By John Reed ☞



ignudiO gustO majOr, 2003.

The process of decay is also the process of life: Dust we are, unto dust we return, and so on. Here, Joseph Nechvatal's eight paintings—"computer robotic—assisted acrylic on canvas"—overwhelm the main gallery with their luxuriant sense of theoretical and psychological decomposition. "Ignudio"—as per the *ignudo* (singular) or *ignudi* (plural) of classical Italian painting—is Nechvatal's term for the nude form that's neither singular nor plural, masculine nor feminine. Through the computer hybridization of components of the male and female sexual anatomy, Nechvatal arrives at hermaphroditic abstractions weirdly in tune with the cultural white noise of the present moment. In attaining this "viractual" state (his word for something between the virtual and the actual), Nechvatal's work is simultaneously classical and futuristic—part anatomical rendering, part forensic voyeurism.

The New York Times

June 7, 2002

The New York Times

ART GUIDE

JOSEPH NECHVATAL, Universal Concepts Unlimited, 507 West 24th Street, (212) 727-7575 (through July 3). Paintings by this computer-art pioneer are made by robotic machines, directed by virus-infected digital programs. In dark, gridded compositions on large canvases, the vague, blurry images of human bodies are overlaid by all sorts of pixilated textures -- as though on a monitor overwhelmed by too much input. Although actually dry and thin, the surfaces have a seductive velvety look (Johnson).

Artforum
October 1990

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS

Joseph Nechvatal

By Jenifer P. Borum ☞

Neither abstract nor representational, Joseph Nechvatal's chaotic, layered paintings, seething with media-derived imagery, hover somewhere in between. Over the past decade, Nechvatal's basic concerns have remained constant: our media-glutted postindustrial society and the effects of this information overload on the subject. Here, the artist's method of production gives his paintings their decisive twist. He first creates a photographic maquette of collaged elements that include his drawings and sculptures, as well as found photographs and video stills. This composite image is then fed into a digital computer, which programs robotic arms to apply paint to canvas. Nechvatal's creative process reflects the extent to which technology has infiltrated our lives, but it is also an attempt to subvert technology by using it to create subjective, irrational images.

Nechvatal's project includes a body of critical writing in which he rejects the possibility of returning to a Modernist vocabulary in painting, as well as post-Modern alternatives such as simulation and "neo-geo." For Nechvatal these latter approaches are not only self-destructively cynical, but as self-aggrandizing as the tradition they set out to critique. Nechvatal's answer to the cool of "neo-geo" is a "decadent" art that would, in theory, whip our already empty sign system into a frenzy, reducing it to a common denominator for pure or "higher" consciousness. Nechvatal would act as a kind of Dionysian shaman/semiotician, purging the collective consciousness of the media's influence in search of meaning, before and beyond the sign. Although it is debatable that any painting or body of paintings could achieve

this goal, Nechvatal's project is a valiant attempt to confront the dead end in which much media-oriented art currently finds itself. He seeks to transcend a bankrupt sign-system without retreating into the past. This dilemma sets the tone for his paintings populated by figures or parts of figures trapped in environments of free-floating and seemingly hostile signifiers.

In both *Serenade* and *Sacrifice*, both 1989, figure-fragments emerge from a field of static, laden with assorted information that includes running text. The composition of the former is flattened by thick, horizontal bands of color that recall a TV screen, while the latter involves a more complex break-up of space in which the images look as if they are violently self-destructing. Nechvatal's paintings are characterized by a tension between surface elements and random forays into depth, a spatial ambiguity that serves as a metaphor for our own unstable environment. In *Lament*, 1989, a three-dimensional figure is trapped between a background covered with the artist's allover drawing and a network of restricting surface bars. In *Episteme*, 1989, the hands of a figure disappearing into a flat, abstract field, protrude in an eerie gesture of supplication. Nechvatal presents the problem of information overload, and at the same time pushes it to an extreme as if he hopes to discover something there. The result is an uneasy limbo.

In two canvases marked by a warm, erotic intensity, entitled *The Double Eros* and *Pas de Deux*, both 1989, pairs of figures hover in vaguely organic atmospheres. The threatening nature of Nechvatal's pictorial environments is highlighted by titles such as *Miasma*—diseased atmosphere—and *Metastatic Garden*—the transfer of disease from one site to another, both 1989. Like frozen screens, these smaller paintings present the insidious nature of information saturation.

Nechvatal may seek to provoke ecstasy and ultimately enlightenment in the viewer, but he distances himself from this ecstatic state by using a technological prosthesis to paint. His use of this apparatus succeeds in making the dual point that while a nostalgic retreat from modern technology is absurd, it does pose a threat to our subjectivity. Yet this tactic might also be seen as the artist's caution against falling prey to the pitfalls of expressionism, a final stronghold of the subject-centered disposition that perhaps precludes the possibility of his desired breakthrough in consciousness. For the time being, these paintings brilliantly embody an ongoing push-pull between human and technological forces, an esthetic and spiritual limbo that defines our contemporary condition.

—*Jenifer P. Borum*

Artforum
March 1988

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS NEW YORK

Joseph Nechvatal

Brooke Alexander

By Carlo McCormick ☞

In a manic proliferation of communication, Joseph Nechvatal's overmediated language streams across the viewer's info-fried consciousness as a miasma of fuzzy, fleeting, and overlapping images. The result is something like receiving television signals from several stations and data banks simultaneously on a single screen and trying to read the tangled web of electronic blips and blobs for whatever subliminal truths can be found there. One way to look at Nechvatal's development since his first shows in alternative spaces in 1979 would be in terms of the various media with which he has chosen to work, making major shifts in presentation without markedly altering his art's complex graphic structure (which is based primarily on telecommunications and its technology). However, the succession of pencil drawing, photocopying, photography, rephotography, sculpture, and computer-assisted painting tells only a part of the story. Over the past few years, Nechvatal's art, while remaining stylistically consistent with his earlier work, has undergone a transformation of no minor significance. Although his post-Modern tea leaves will always be open to different interpretations, he appears to have moved away from direct sociopolitical assault and more into hypersensory sublime.

In 1984 Nechvatal described himself as "an agitator in the information war." As an artist, he saw things in terms of sociology and anthropology, and what concerned him most were reality, ignorance, and the psychic numbing that has come about through the possibility of nuclear annihilation. Of his

process of art making he said, “I tend to degenerate images. . . . I rip off images from the media all the time. Then I destroy them, transform them. It can come out beautifully.” This involved appropriating photographic images, entering them into his “visual datapool,” and then transforming them by breaking them down, contaminating and sublimating them, to make “pictures that do not look like pictures.”

In his recent work, the degenerated images (now in “computer/robotic assisted acrylic on canvas”) form a vibrant surface that is less legible than ever. Its self-consuming intensity digests its own content, which has become tangible only as a transmission of unconscious ideas that never quite come into focus. The social issues end up as sediment left in the cathartic rinse. As a reaction against the soullessness of contemporary simulation art, Nechvatal has deliberately sacrificed his polemical armor to find his own notion of freedom. He has abandoned diatribe and irony in favor of mystery, thus finding a way out of the ideologically oppressive dead end of post-Modernism. The too-hip criticism in the arts media today only thinly disguises the redundancy of long-exhausted and facile material. His alternative is not a conservative regression into the clichés of romantic expression but to build from the rubble of our deconstructed signs another “higher” state of consciousness. What matters is the viewer’s play of the imagination—a point that Nechvatal once made by quoting the TV character Edith Bunker on modern art: “It’s not what you see, it’s what you think you see.”

Over the years Nechvatal has exposed and examined the infrastructure of our contemporary information network, and with his latest efforts he has begun to seek a deeper understanding of its underlying mysteries. The seven paintings in this exhibition, all from 1987, showed an even greater tendency toward pictorial saturation than before, and a gothic self-referentiality that transmutes the banal into a baroque fugue of intoxicating excess. This was apparent in the titles—for example, *Wide Ecstatic Courage* and *Transcendental Saturation*. Nechvatal's spirituality is a union of faith and science anchored in sensory experience. And, for all his technological, semiotic, and esthetic virtuosity, his greatest weapon is ecstasy itself.

—Carlo McCormick

The New York Times
July 27, 1986

The New York Times

RECORDINGS; WHERE AVANT-GARDE MEETS ROCK-AND-ROLL, MUSIC FLOURISHES

The predominant form of "downtown" experimental music in New York during this decade has been a fusion of the experimental avant-garde with rock-and-roll. So far, this music has been even less welcomed by the "uptown" new-music establishment -those composers with tangible links to the classical vanguard tradition - than were the Minimalists and scientific experimenters and meditational environmentalists and exoticists of the 1970's. But a scene it is, it's vital, and most of its key practitioners have recently released records.

Finally, we have real rock, in that it's the product of true underground bands and composers. Yet the Tellus Audio Cassette Magazine's issue No. 13, "Power Electronics" (cassette only) is in no way commercial; it is supported by the New York State Council on the Arts, and it comes complete with a fire-breathing manifesto in which Joseph Nechvatal, a composer and this compilation's producer, promises to overthrow not just commercial rock but the entire "hierarchy" of established music, classical and otherwise. He proposes to do this with the power of home electronics, the technological revolution by which Everyman can now afford sophisticated electronic performing and recording equipment.

The New York Times
October 18, 1985

The New York Times

ART: FROM ITALY, A SHOW OF 12 CALLED 'THE KNOT'

Joseph Nechvatal-Judy Rifka (Brooke Alexander Gallery, 59 Wooster Street): An artist who takes the apocalyptic view more in sorrow than in disaffection, Joseph Nechvatal continues to filter his graphite visions through reproductive processes. But now, some visions are silk-screened against fields of color on canvas, naugahyde and, in one instance, on a heart-shaped piece of turquoise formica submerged in water; others are etched on glass or mirror. The missiles and scenes of destruction that used to loom in the artist's mists have been replaced by mysterious figures - a Madonna with an attendant wise man, the head of an ancient Egyptian dignitary. Nothing is certain in these works, on view in the gallery's new space, except, in this opinion, the conflict between the artist's concern with process and strong color and the fragility of his all-over imagery.

Artforum
April 1984

ARTFORUM

HOME / FEATURES

THE CRITIC SEES THROUGH THE CABBAGE PATCH

By Edit deAk ☞

Joseph Nechvatal's work seems congested with metallic, industrial haze, as if the nuclear apocalypse he dreads had already dumped its thick, claustrophobic fallout everywhere. He makes drawings out of a surfeit of culturally circulating images and echoes, the substratum that this reproducible age has left behind. The saturation of imagery provokes a perpetual deciphering and rediscovery of the vast pictographic vocabularies sedimented in his graphite burial ground. Its associative power is its formal logic. His drawings derive from other drawings derived from other drawings; such is the nature of his palimpsest.

many disjunctive fragments of experience, and space as decentered and without tangible coordinates. The sense of distance created by the uniformity of traced lines is emphasized by the presentation of the drawings as photographs—homogenized surfaces. What remains disappointing and inexplicable is the artist's addition of colored stripes and washes, which seem too arbitrary to function as more than conventional formalistic devices.

—*Jean Fisher*

Artforum
April 1982

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS NEW YORK

Joseph Nechvatal

Brooke Alexander

By Donald Kuspit ☒

Joseph Nechvatal creates his illusory psychological effects by piling image upon image until a dense visual smog is created. The images are familiar yet obscured—bankrupt—which increases the gloomy, overcast look. This murkiness can be misread as the sign of a vitally rich psychic fabric, but rather than a ripening field of images, it is a graveyard. Nechvatal once wrote an essay entitled “Epic Images and Contemporary History”; it is full of the usual morale-lifting proclamations of manifestos, like the heroic poses body-builders strike to convince themselves they are Herculean, but two of the proclamations illuminate Nechvatal’s simulation of the psychological dimension, its complete absence yet illusory presence in his pictures. Nechvatal writes, “Image and ideology are inseparable.” This means that the image is social and nothing but social in origin and end, a public event rather than a sign of intrapsychic experience. He also writes, “The sensibility of [my] simple images can be characterized by its preference for blunt and fast sensation and its indifference and hostility to interior experience.” Speeding up already fast images by orgiastically multiplying them in a superficial complication of the simple, Nechvatal creates an allover expressionistic aura, which can be mistaken as psychologically profound but is really the mirage that remains after the psychological has been expropriated for the sake of social commentary. We project the fullness of the irrational into the psychological vacuum that results, for even human nature cannot tolerate a vacuum, particularly in itself.

Nechvatal's images are tracings of other images, and their near-familiarity makes them seem "memorable" and thus unmistakably intrapsychic in origin. They exist, however, in a gray zone, the objective correlative of what Nechvatal calls the "psychic numbing" that is the consequence of our "being held nuclear hostage." This psychic numbing reflects the futility of feeling, of having a troublesome "psychology" that refuses to lie down and die before the inevitable atomic disaster. In a sense, Nechvatal's images are like the memory of everything one has seen that is meant to flash before one's eyes when one is dying—and, after all, one is perpetually threatened by nuclear death. This is the state Nechvatal depicts, and it is postpsychological, for it implies that psychological response is futile in the face of apocalyptic social reality.

While Nechvatal's graying of the world is stylistically an admirable testing of what he calls "the limit on picturability" (a testing not unrelated to Nancy Grossman's attempt to convey an "excess of emotion"), on the psychological level it implies the abolition of all feeling. The gray is the ground of the psyche after destruction in a scorched-earth policy, leaving the enemy nothing. Ironically, this is all the enemy wants. It is as if in attempting to represent psychic numbing, Nechvatal has actually incarnated it; as if he were mithridatically rehearsing the aftermath of the nuclear holocaust, but the rehearsal has turned out to be the realdisaster, the one that actually happens. Nechvatal may articulate an aspect of the anxiety of our age, but it is really a submissive anxiety.

Apart from that, on a simple esthetic level the work suffers from an Etch A Sketch look. The surfaces have the uniform slickness of media texture, invitingly transparent yet rigidly excluding. I haven't decided whether I think this smoothness is part of Nechvatal's sense of the simplistic, public character of his images, or whether it represents psychic numbing at its most insidiously manifest, and thus the purest form of the futility of the

psychological. If the latter, it only shows just how in touch this age is with its own psychology, with the expectation of disaster, which has almost become its mechanism for obscuring its deeper pathology.

Nechvatal's omnipresent gray has something gullible, exploitative, and naive about it. It makes it easy for him to achieve an undifferentiated epic effect. The gray is a kind of glacier full of the debris of civilization, but with no suggestion of the attitude that is leading us through self-destruction, unless that attitude is the lack of feeling aspired to in the first place. Nechvatal offers us a facile apocalypse.

—*Donald Kuspit*

The New York Times
September 21, 1984

The New York Times

SHOW FROM FRANCE OPENS NEW CENTER FOR AFRICAN ART

By Grace Glueck

Sept. 21, 1984

Joseph Nechvatal (Brooke Alexander, 20 West 57th Street): Layer on layer of bland graphite drawing - marks and tracks from which, on closer view, faces, figures and other imagery emerge - is the stuff of Joseph Nechvatal's work, which owes a good deal to the elegant scratchings of Cy Twombly. It comes off best in a series of small-scale diptychs, in which a graphite drawing is placed next to one in pastel or oil stick, often delicately colored. The images that can be read through the aimless trackings have a certain surprise value, like finding stray chords in wall-to-wall music.

But when the artist blows up his work by means of photography, as in "Blame It on the Brain," a giant drawing in which convoluted brain matter and a series of gridded heads appear, it's simply overscale doodling. Several robotlike sculptures, out of "Star Wars" or a Bauhaus play, their surfaces covered with squares of paper reproducing Nechvatal scribbles, stand around one room, and the gallery entrance is neatly papered with photographic reproductions of the drawings. Too much, or not enough - it's all the same. (Through Oct. 13.)

The New York Times

October 7, 1983

The New York Times

ART: SHOW AT DRAWING CENTER OFFERS A DOZEN NEW NAMES

By Vivien Raynor

June 18, 1982

FAILING the sunshine, there are always group shows to mark the arrival of summer, and as usual, the lineup at the Drawing Center is among the more noteworthy. The 12 participants are all new names, the center's policy being to concentrate on artists who have not soloed in New York and who are not affiliated with galleries anywhere else.

Art, even that by the survivors of H@iroshima and Nagasaki, is simply not equal to this occasion. For this observer, the most memorable pieces are barely noticeable in this display of creative solidarity - Roger Brown's map showing where the dumps for nuclear and other toxic wastes are situated in New York State and a small, ghostly drawing about devastation by Joseph Nechvatal, an artist as preoccupied with the continued existence of stockpiles as he is by their use. Interestingly, Mr. Nechvatal had a show last year in Hartford supported in part by United Technologies, which manufactures military hardware. (Through July 2.)

Artforum
April 1982

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS NEW YORK

Joseph Nechvatal

The Kitchen

By Thomas Lawson

Joseph Nechvatal is a man obsessed. But unlike most obsessives who turn to art, it is not so much the procedure of art-making that haunts him (though there is some evidence that it does) but rather a subject matter—and that subject is nuclear holocaust. He just cannot stop worrying about what will happen if the leaders of this country continue on their path of military growth and confrontation.

It is a big worry, and Nechvatal has big ambitions for the art he makes from it. So far he has not been able to realize those ambitions, though he has apparently tried his hand at a large-scale mural in Hartford, Connecticut. Most of his work to date, however, has been small in scale, small drawings which can be carried in a suitcase. As one looks at the gray scrawl of these drawings the overall network of lines slowly breaks down to reveal the outlines of figures and objects. It is uncertain whether the lines are creating the images or obliterating them, whether we are witnessing a beginning or an end..

Despite Nechtaval's attempts to publicize his vision—and he has worked hard to ensure that his drawings are visible throughout Lower Manhattan, on the streets and in the alternate spaces—the drawings remain intensely private. And so this recent installation must be seen as an important step toward broadening the impact of the work. Using a more theatrical presentation than before, with darkened gallery, colored lights, and sound effects, Nechtaval tries to give the drawings a more visceral impact. The drawings themselves are the same, only now they are displayed as static images on television screens. Dematerialized like this, the disintegrating images hovering in the indeterminate space of the video blue are all the more suggestive. But they still refuse any proselytizing function. They are representations of private fears and as yet fail to reach across to a wider, more public realm.

—*Thomas Lawson*