

SFMOMA OPEN SPACE - One on One: John Davis on *Unknown, Untitled*
(Six California mug shots)



Unknown Untitled [Six California mug shots on a card], 1872; photograph; albumen print, 9 1/8 in. x 4 7/16 in. (23.18 cm x 11.27 cm); Collection SFMOMA, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. William R. Fielder

MYTHOLOGY IN FACT

I was initially drawn to this work because it has no known author, reinforcing for me some questions about what constitutes a work of art, and the idea that authorship need not always be pre-requisite. As I thought about what to write, another phenomenon became apparent to me, how having no known author seemed to compound a lingering sense of menace imbued in the photographs. Not so much emanating from the subjects photographed, but from the fact that they likely had no say about being photographed, no ability to influence the ways their images would be used, and that they were subjects of a larger sociocultural project aimed at control. Weighing these elements together produced an ironic tension, especially when subjected to my contemporary and privileged gaze.

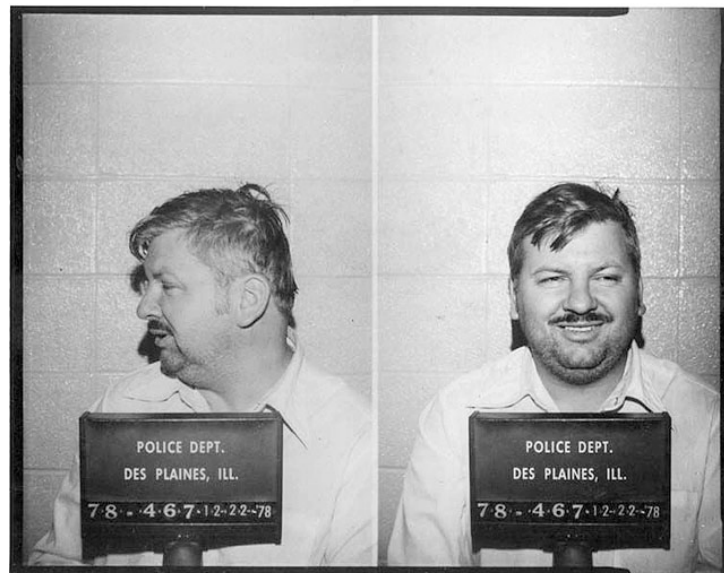
Photography's trickery remains irresistible to me, its highly convincing illusions perpetually compelling me to believe they somehow convey facts. As I further studied the images, some familiar questions emerged, and I found myself trying to reconcile 'the burden of representation' (as in [John Tagg's](#) book of the same title), with the more transcendent aspects of the artwork itself: the imprint of a hand-made binding, the beautiful patina and soft red numerals

alongside elegant cursive script, the aura of nostalgia, and the powerfully compelling appearance of defiance, innocence, fear, despair, and sadness on the faces of those photographed. Smitten with this base aesthetic appreciation, I found myself at odds with my spite for the insidious mechanisms of state control, and the uses of photography to that end (not to mention questions about how such loaded documents are assigned relevance in the sacred space of a museum of modern and contemporary art). How do the intersections between engaging these evidence records as artworks (let alone my impulses to indulge them on that front), and the recognition of them as clinical specimens for social regulation coalesce? John Tagg writes:

¹Power, then, is what is centrally at issue here: the forms and relations of power which are brought to bear on practices of representation or constitute their conditions of existence, but also the power effects which representational practices themselves engender - the interlacing of these power fields, but also their interference patterns, their differences, their irreducibility one to another.

As needlessly complicated as all that sounds, it's hard to ignore the implications in the evolution of photography as a scientific instrument for delivering articles of 'truth' in service to power.

Moreover, as I ponder the complex ways these photographs function in the context of fine art, I ask myself if an anonymously photographed mug shot like the one below might then also be collected, exhibited and considered an artifact for high culture?



Mug shot of John Wayne Gacy Jr., 1978, Public Domain

Maybe, but most likely not, and if not, why? What makes this picture different from the California mug shots? Would exhibiting this be considered bad taste, kitschy, low brow? Is it because the horrific crimes [John Wayne Gacy](#) committed are still too tender in our collective conscious?

¹ *The Burden of Representation. Essays on Photographies and Histories.* London: Macmillan, 1988; and Amherst, Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988; republished in the United States by Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Does knowing what he did give the images a negative charge, make them profane and unworthy of our aesthetic or sentimental appreciation? What about one hundred years from now? Will the wry grin seem jocose instead of pathologically maniacal? Will irresistible aesthetic impulses and empathetic nostalgia lure us to a humane reading of Gacy, fostering a new mythology like the ones surrounding murderous mobsters from the U.S. prohibition era? I am not suggesting we weigh the gravity of Gacy's crimes against unknown crimes of forgotten individuals from the late 19th century, but rather, further the discussion about what constitutes art, and the mechanisms directly influencing our attachment and detachment of meaning to it. I suppose the central question is what are the preconditions that factor how we engage subject matter, as it gets mediated and filtered to us through institutions like SFMOMA?

One hundred and thirty eight years after the California mug shots were made, stripped from their original context and brought to bear in the halls of art and high culture, what history, what story, and what value do they contain? Liberated from the official filing cabinets that once housed them, are the subjects forgiven, free to be gazed upon as sentimentalized miscreants with stories to tell from another time? Less as demonstrable factual evidence used for social control (as aided by photography), now templates for our own constructed mythologies? How then does 'fact' become myth, and vice versa?

These are complicated questions, and well beyond the scope of this writing. In the end, I doubt most people really care about historical or contemporary mechanisms of state control, or the cloaked and decentralized powers that influence how we make sense of reality. It's definitely not until I engage in activities like this written commentary that such concerns play out in my own consciousness. I think it all comes down to human nature and the ways we express our desires culturally, how they find their way in and out of *all* our institutions, creating a continuum for the construction and deconstruction of meaning as it serves a necessary understanding of reality. In the end, it would seem, mythology is alive and well, it just depends on how we see the facts.

Game On

Organum makes you a better person

by John Davis

What if humans and their stuff could be miniaturized and injected into a person's body to perform life-saving operations, be extracted, and then brought back to regular size? I remember seeing the 1966 film *Fantastic Voyage* on TV as a kid, imagining myself inside my own body, fighting enemy pathogens and racing through my heart at breakneck speeds. Having abandoned that fantasy for more tenable daydreams, nothing much had sparked such reverie until my opportunity to play *Organum: The Game* (2005), part of the 050505 "Zoning and Grinding" Conference held in May by UC Berkeley's Center for New Media. Greg Niemeyer, one of eight artists, scientists, and scholars on the project and a UC Berkeley faculty member who received his MFA in 1997 from Stanford, is interested in the processes that transform data into bodies, or visual entities. The new interactive video installation realizes that interest by turning voice data into motion.

Partly conceived by the team of artists and scholars at the University of California, Berkeley known as Network Character, *Organum: The Game* challenges groups of players to navigate a virtual biological pathway with their voices, their improvised harmonics triggering various movements on a projected space. Simply put, the vocalizations are processed through a computer, which then transforms the signals into data, which in turn triggers movements of projected video images.

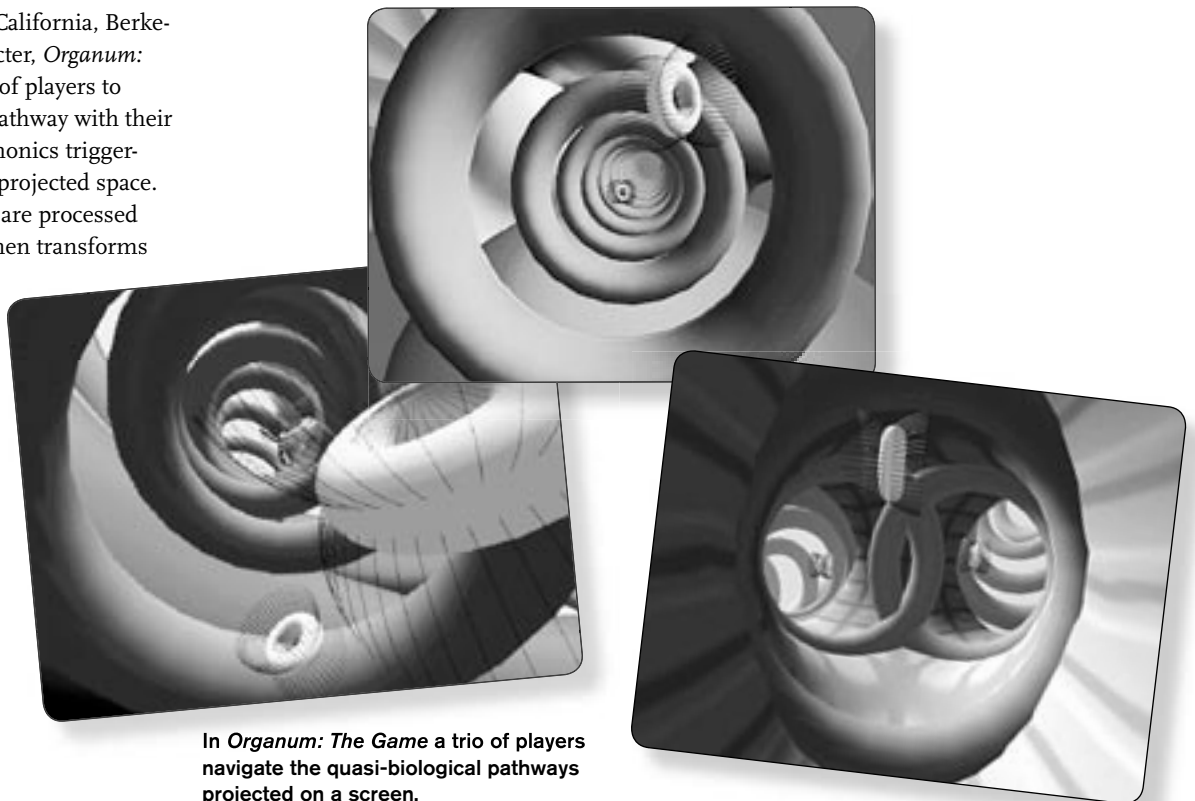
When I played the game with two other participants, we stood before a series of microphones placed about eight feet in front of a standard classroom-sized projection screen. Speakers had been placed on either side. A host of computer and audio

equipment flanked the installation, giving it the look and feel of a laboratory. To play *Organum*, we were told to make sounds into the microphones. These sounds would control either left to right, backward and forward, or up and down motion through a three-dimensional computer-generated vortex on the screen. The kinds of sounds we made didn't matter; we just needed to combine them to achieve smooth navigation through the visuals.

In total, the game has three levels, or stages, each with corresponding blue, yellow, and pink colors, each needing to be passed through before moving to the next. Niemeyer described the vortex itself as traveling "from lung to tongue," a loose description for our virtual journey, which actually began in the blue mouth stage, moving up through the middle yellow stage, and finally, if successful, the pink lung stage. No other instructions were provided, and we were encouraged to

intuit our own strategy as we progressed.

Our "lung-to-tongue" journey appeared as gray 3-D coiled tunnels designed to emulate the membranes of human biological pathways, much like an esophageal track. It was as if we were looking through a coiled spring, outside which we could see the colored environment representing our current level. Once the game began, each person's vocalizations served as a hand on a joystick. The movements' trajectory and speed depended on the frequency, volume, pitch, and timbre each player produced. Seemingly simple at first—until I realized that my voice not only controlled my own movements, but also acted in synthesis with the voice-movements of the other players, who, like me, had little or no idea what utterances would encourage successful forward motion. In addition, a series of "pathogens" appeared along the way, which players had to try to destroy by running them



In *Organum: The Game* a trio of players navigate the quasi-biological pathways projected on a screen.

Players become partners in a kind of improvisational performance art, as the crowd of curious onlookers balks nervously at the strange sounds emerging from people staring at 3-D images.

down. These obstacles make *Organum* feel like a video game, but more interestingly, add urgency to the sounds made by the players, who must quickly adapt to the fluid movements of the screen space.

Certain sounds emanate from the game, serving as positive or negative reinforcement cues to help players navigate the virtual terrain. These sounds are projected through the same speakers as the player's voices. For example, when players eliminate a pathogen, a soft positive squeak sound is emitted, or when players successfully navigate a membrane coil, a high-pitched encouraging "boing" sound is heard. Conversely, when a membrane wall is crashed into, or players get stuck in a jam, a deeper, less pleasant "boing" indicates a wrong move. These sounds offer the only cue for urging players to continue moving forward.

The game gets lively when you have to collaborate with strangers, transcending the

accepted social space to achieve a virtual one. Players become partners in a kind of improvisational performance art, as the crowd of curious onlookers balks nervously at the strange sounds emerging from people staring at 3-D images. As a bonus, while players become more comfortable with the ways their voices control movement, going beyond simple "left, left, left, right, right, right," they begin to develop a kind of music, and really start to *play* the game; they are strangers overcoming a visual puzzle, inventing and reinventing a temporal language that in turn has a visible and immediate effect.

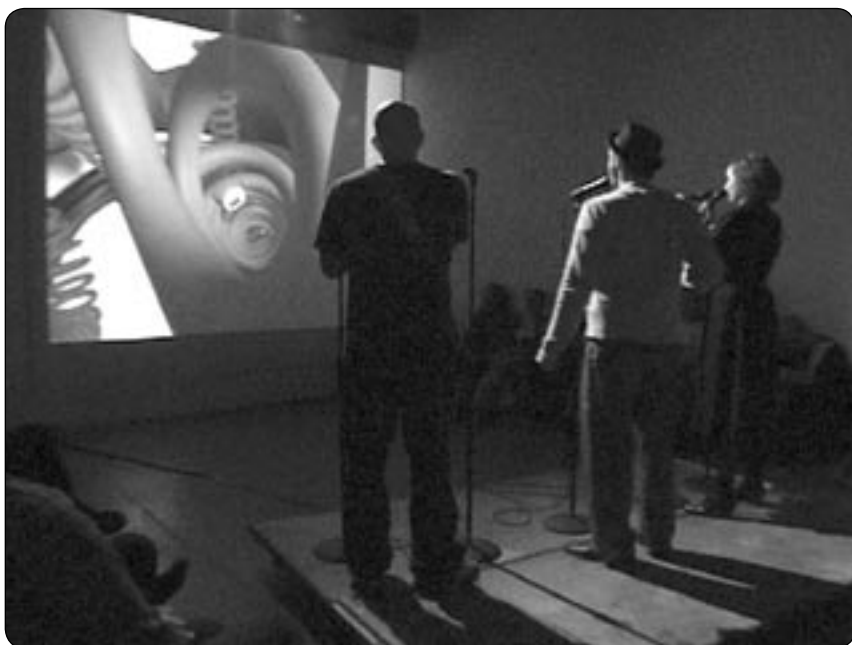
In medieval times, organum referred to the arrangement of vocal harmonies in liturgical music. Organum is literally defined as a set of tools or logical principles for use in scientific or philosophical investigation. In his rather massive 1620 project *The New Organon*, Francis Bacon called for a logical approach to scientific inquiry that had been largely dominated by speculation or fancy in its pursuit of truth. *Organum: The Game* coopts its title, evoking this history in a reference to the organic, the scientific, and the musical.

With Niemeyer's emphasis on converting data into visual entities, *Organum: The Game* offers a host of interpretive possibilities rooted in technology, scientific inquiry, and new musical forms, as well as social theater. If there is a truth to be discovered in Niemeyer's game, it is that art can be both intellectually stimulating and fun, but more importantly, if you learn to work in harmony with others, you can overcome a variety of complex challenges, even if they are only virtual.

John Davis is an artist living in San Francisco.

Visit art.berkeley.edu/organum to learn more about *Organum: The Game*

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Three participants at New Langton Arts, where a version of *Organum* was on exhibit in April

Jeanne Liotta tinkers with light

by John Davis

The Poetics of Science

In practice, scholars, scientists, and artists tend to remain within their specialized areas. Sometimes unintentionally, they cross disciplines to gather information. Sometimes they meander for inspiration. Inevitably though, in the quest for knowledge or to expand creative possibilities, wandering beyond a chosen field becomes irresistible.

Notable “straddlers” have included scientist, engineer, and photographer Harold Edgerton whose exposures document moments beyond our visual perception; assemblage artist Joseph Cornell who made an art form out of cataloguing treasured artifacts; and avant-garde filmmaker and musicologist Harry Smith’s mystical-anthropologic communiqués.

Experimental filmmaker Jeanne Liotta is one such straddler. A New York-based artist whose works have screened at New York City’s Anthology Film Archives and who is a guest instructor at the San Francisco Art Institute this fall, Liotta has worked in performance, photography, music, and film. With roots in the New York No Wave punk scene of the ’80s, she collaborated with filmmaker Bradley Eros of the influential band Circle X, and with Jack Vengrow, a key figure in the New York street sculpture and multimedia performance movement known as the Rivington School.

In her filmmaking, Liotta borrows freely from philosophy, biology, and physics. The results are poetic assemblages of found and original footage, combining delicate hand-processing techniques and evocative soundscapes. In practical terms, she incorporates a variety of filmmaking techniques, including the photogram, for which objects and light are applied directly to film stock by hand. By no means limited or bound to specific processes, even ones that have yielded success, Liotta stays engaged by continuing to learn new means for expressing her ideas: “I like a steep learning curve and need new challenges to stay focused, interested, and on my toes.”



Muktikara (top) is named after the Sanskrit word for “gentle gazing brings liberation.” *Window* (bottom) looks out onto freeway traffic.

Muktikara (1999), Sanskrit for “gentle gazing brings liberation,” features observations of the natural world, and is an example of her work bridging art and science. In this silent black-and-white film, light and water mingle on a lake’s surface, as subtle shifts in perspective encourage reinvestigation of the material world. With *Muktikara*, she presents a

“Film is not a metaphor for something else, but is itself the thing.”

framework for learning to see the immaterial—that which exists beyond our perception.

Her 2001 video *Window*, which has been described as a music video meets stained glass, is largely composed of the surreal interplay between light and freeway traffic. Looking through a tinted window onto a freeway interchange, we see and hear traffic pass by unremarkably. A small iris in the window registers the traffic, emphasizing the mundane while manifesting slight shifts in its representation. In her recent project *Summer Solstice*, historical images of the sun from a science education film collide with a travelogue from Tunis, challenging notions of space, time, and the material world.

Liotta refers to herself as an observer and a chronic learner. “I am trying to observe, and then film what I am observing as a way to mirror how I am thinking and learning. Film is not a metaphor for something else, but is itself the thing.” In support of her theory, she cites Emerson, “Why not enjoy an original relation to the Universe?” Taking cues from scientists and poets, she is most comfortable discovering and applying new techniques. “I like the experience of discovery that lives inside that process. New discoveries will always be made, it [discovery] will never end. I started to realize that the more I looked the more I could see.” To punctuate her point, she quotes the famous philosopher-catcher Yogi Berra who once said, “You can see a lot just by looking.”

John Davis is a San Francisco-based artist who primarily works with video, film, sound, and photography. He wrote about the interactive media project Organum: The Game in the July/August issue of Release Print.