

## ***Slipstreaming the Cyborg***

CTHEORY Interview with Christina McPhee May 2005 online [CTHEORY](#)

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### **Christina McPhee in conversation with Francesca De Nicolò**

*Christina McPhee (Los Angeles) engages the sense of place within an art that extends the semiotics of new media into layers of time, memory and sublimity. Her installations, often at architectural scale, instantiate artifacts of memory within the landscape of their own echoes. She develops technologically nuanced topographies in net art, sound, video, performance, painting and photography. [christinamcpee.net](#), [naxsmash.net](#), and [carrizoparkfielddiaries.net](#).*

*Francesca De Nicolò (Rome) is an art historian, independent curator and art critic. She studied contemporary art with Jolanda Nigro Covre and Silvia Bordini at the University of Rome; and is finishing research with Enrico Crispolti and Luca Quattrocchi of the University of Siena, on postorganic aesthetics and its connection with the net. She has been assistant at the GCAMC of Rome and assistant curator at the British School of Rome Contemporary Arts programme; she currently reviews art for Random, Exiwebart, Arte e Critica, Netartreview, Crudelia and Merzbau.*

**CTHEORY:** You have often described your new media work with the evocative term, 'slipstream,' In the parlance of internet service providers, 'slipstream' is an adjective, a verb and a noun, which refers to a fix or enhancement made to software without creating a new version number to identify the changes, for example, "a slipstream fix". When I look at your work online, I wonder about whether your presence, as the

artist, is like this kind of enhancement, as if, maybe, you imagine or are the fix that alters the software within the software. Does this implicate how you identify a psychic space or transactional relationship between your body, 'the machine' and new media? Can we imagine a relative space, or transitive condition? Does this condition admit a conscious or visible place for the identity of the artist, or is that identity sublimated in the machine?

**Christina McPhee:** Thinking about the poetics implied by "between your body and 'the machine'": -- one wonders if 'machines' could be imagined as distributive trace presences within a psychic architecture, even a voice-space, built from a breath inside the screen. Let's visualize a model of this breathing architecture; how can we imagine it as neither machine body nor human body, or maybe both, so that the space is as much a transitive verb as a nameable location. Here's where the visualization of 'slipstream' becomes especially useful: apart from programming slang, the word also has an older meaning in aerodynamics. Slipstream denotes the area of negative pressure or suction that follows a very fast moving object, like an airplane propeller. Or, when you're in a small sports car on the freeway, you can 'slipstream' behind a large truck, which allows your small vehicle to be sucked into the slipstream of the larger vehicle -- at risk to your life. "Slipstream" can be a metonym, standing in for a complex set of associations, including machine repair, hallucination ( as in, a 'fix' ), sublimation of identity (forward suction into something ahead of you), minimal resistance, and air, wind or breath (intake, inhalation, suction).

**CTHEORY:** So does software 'slipstream' the artist?

**McPhee:** Sure, so you could say, as a metaphor, my body, my lungs, my voice are sucked into the slipstream of this air tunnel 'behind' the swiftly moving, apparently autonomous vehicle, of software. My presence is subsumed or minimized, but a new version of me is not released. Slipstream only works as a negative pressure area, or x. Like the poet Emily Dickinson, I ask the machine, or maybe, it asks me, "I'm nobody, are you nobody too?" Between the two of us is this moving space or breathing architecture. Then there's a meta level of metonymy: 'slipstreaming' as a verb describes a dynamic relationship between two co-variants, presence (consciousness of information, stored as human/machine memory) and aphasia (inability to speak or articulate memory). It's not that memory is lost, or recovered, off / on; instead, the stored memory is inarticulate within the suction of the stream -- it's there, but its voice is lost in the rush of air. I find, and I am speaking of my own human, physical memory, that the psychic space implied by 'slipstream' is both self-reflexive and not about the self -- somehow the self (artist) disappears in the flux, leaving only the traces of her presence in fleeting gestures and in fast-moving spaces that extend beyond the browser, as if there is a screen so vast it becomes a night city.

Naxsmash is a work, or series of net based projects, scenarios that try to disclose this kind of psychic topology, so that the 'slipstream' relationship between body and machine

generates this uncanny place, as if I am trying to describe what it is like inside the area of negative pressure, inside the stream/screen. Everything I have done as a painter and musician within new media has arisen from the process of trying to recover and release traumatic memory: the act of trying led to an act of generative fiction. Naxsmash comes from NAX, a performance video (2001). NAX involved a video shoot of an onsite ritualized action, in which very little happened apart from my selection of the site, my lying down in the dirt, and breathing. The place was someplace I had forgotten and then accidentally rediscovered. There had been childhood violence there. I remembered it; I thought to conquer it, by going to the place and confronting its mean space and narrow darkness. I thought that by breathing there in a gesture learned from photographs of Ana Mendieta that I should be able to remake the place or release its violent memory. The physical performance was a ritual theatre without audience. The video documents an act of breathing as if to contain and release traumatic memory from the site.

**CTHEORY:** This seems like some kind of private ritual action. But you recorded it, and you digitized it. So you're now not following the practice of Ana Mendieta. It seems to me, that her photographs of herself, lying in the dirt, in the sand, makes a kind of memoir. An attempt at a meaningful record. Maybe even like a monument to memory, or a momento mori. And yet I feel, this isn't happening in NAX, since you are interested in disappearance and loss of memory. Does Nax really tell a story, or imply that there is a story to tell?

**McPhee:** I don't think NAX was about storytelling at all. Memory is the recognition or storage of events; memoir is narration of memory. All I did was, practically nothing: an act almost negligent-- just breathing. Breath itself: breathing new life into something. New life -- birth -- where the performance happened, the place was beside a lake named for the Nativity. NAX is shorthand for Lake Nacimiento, California. Later, in the digital studio, in the edit, to name the movie file, I typed "nacimiento," then "nascent," then "nax". That stopped me. "X" marked the place, but where was it? Inside the edit, the performance had disappeared into pixels: oxygenated gesture was a digital object. No longer a place, NAX became nowhere else than inside the digital video edits, via erasure and inscription. Smashing the violence inside the digital edit performed memory in a realm that has no site: x is negative. Then, too, "x," factor spliced the sign of female inside the media space. I noticed a shift: what had happened to the feminine x, the spot where I was or am, the location of the subject? I was gone. The site was gone.

I felt that I had disappeared into the architecture of a place x, from whence, no longer visible, I could move freely, in terms of artistic and conceptual practice. (from (A)Nascent Memoire: The Naxsmash Project)

[naxsmash.net/public\\_html/texts/McPheeNaxsmash\\_files.htm](http://naxsmash.net/public_html/texts/McPheeNaxsmash_files.htm)

**CTHEORY:** So it seems that you are imagining an electronic topology as a negative pressure zone, an x zone that extends in infinite strands or skeins? I get the impression that the online screen provides you with a time-based medium that delivers a certain kind of

feeling, or atmosphere, of an indeterminate, maybe even infinite space, or an architectural topology that goes on and on in long time based strings. All that black background in Naxsmash makes me think of the black behind the scenes in paintings from the school of Caravaggio. Actions and events slip in and out of darkness, flickering in and out of the light. I sense drawings across a dynamic, breathing black field, a nightscape. But what I don't understand is how this night field connects with the breathing, slipstreaming metaphor you've been describing. Can you speak a bit about this breathing quality as, perhaps, a condition of immanence within a dark topology? Do you think that it is possible to speak about the concept of immanent body in your work?

**McPhee:** Well, in some ways, the incidents, such as quicktime movies, interactive links, texts, sounds emerge in Naxsmash [naxsmash.net](http://naxsmash.net) are drawing elements or traces across the dark topology, or maybe you could even call it a dark body, of the space of the work. The space 'behind' the screen in Naxsmash, as you say, has an atmosphere or quality of infinite extension, or of an architectural topology that might be going on and on indefinitely. It was because of this kind of state of unconditional extension, that I could imagine a slipstreaming state of being: the old subjective "I" of myself, the artist, disappears into the pixels, leaving traces like drawings or residue or debris. The traces are the visual and auditory incidents that, sort of, coalesce into narrative fragments in the various sections of Naxsmash -- Sonic Persephone, No Flight Zone, Slipstream Andromeda, Blood Ellipse, 47 Reds, and Avatarotica. By working in hypertext and animation for online work, work that could only exist in the oxygen of pixels could escape being covered over or suffocated. Inside the slipstream, the code, not authored by me, only slipstreamed by me, always worked the same way, each time, automatically, autonomically, a mechanism of disclosure and disappearance, of strange threads of sound, moving image fragments and text. Sometimes I call the naxsmash site "vox cyborg." Perhaps I am not really answering your question, but I guess what I am trying to describe, is an aesthetic of immanence. Immanence, in that I was able to suggest my body presence while hiding it. The subjective memory disappears, leaving a trace in these partial, or fragmentary identities and voices, Persephone and Andromeda. Just being able to create these immanent personae kept me from suicide.

**CTHEORY:** I guess you could say then that you kept your body and mind alive through net-based media.

**McPhee:** True enough. Before access to multimedia authoring tools, during the nineties, I would carry out large performative drawings, layering precisely drawn fragments of doorways, stairways, and choreographic movements of dancers in archaeological ruins from sites in the American southwest. I left large areas blank, as if the viewer could fill it in, or in a way, because the openness of the empty space was a place of refuge. The drawings were both precise in execution and ambiguous as representations -- they gestured at something immanent and undisclosed. Pushing towards greater and greater articulation, I was trying to see something that I could not see. I would add more and more detail until a breaking point would happen. I could not bear too much information. I would

smother the delicate drawings and clear traces with dark slashes of paint, like cuts of a machete. Painting's immediacy and fluency led me to a wall. The painting surface was like a wall behind which were insupportable memoirs of sexual violence. I could not go there and yet if I did not I could not become coherent as a subject. I could only allow limited glimpses of color and drawing to survive. Some of these are at <http://www.naxsmash.net/inscapes/> in the archive section (in Flash). Lost drawings, ten years of work, turned into dead zones where the animated trace -- the cognitive, the aware -- disappeared under suffocating materials. A drive to survive kept me alive, but killed painting until I could figure out a way to paint inside electronic media, where I could disappear into the pixels and live behind the wall of paint, now a screen.

**CTHEORY:** Still, in terms of electronic media, are you actually talking about the net, or electronic interactive installation? Does it matter which?

**McPhee:** Really both were useful, in the sense that taking NAX video performance and turning it, itself, into an online performative interactive work, made it an impersonal, or subpersonal, open work, in the sense of Umberto Eco, I could actually continue to survive as a body. Immanently, you could say: "The machine has an organic back." (Fernandez Galiano) Thus the = 'cyborg' body arose naturally out of my suicidal dilemma: an 'I/not I' appears as a transference -- a projection into and out of the screen world, while remaining in a sense, trapped behind or inside the screen. By being able to 'breathe' through the multimedia authoring tools, I started to make still transparent works for Naxsmash, but I did not want to fix them to the wall, because they might revert to being read as obscuring veils. So I printed them in transparent scrims and made performance installations of them. I performed inside a 'forest' of scrims, by shooting video of my own performance through the scrims, and then drawing on the scrims from the back sides, so that the projection of my drawing gestures would cut through the performance space, and onto the audience and onto the walls of the club or gallery. I performed first at Moonbase Gallery, Vancouver in 2001 with the show Digitalis 1, then at California Museum of Photography UC Riverside [www.cmp.ucr.edu/photography/impromptu/mcphee.html](http://www.cmp.ucr.edu/photography/impromptu/mcphee.html) in 2002, and later to the San Francisco Performance Cinema Symposium and to RMIT Melbourne DAC : Streaming Worlds in 2003. At Selectmedia 03, Chicago, I was surrounded by an indifferent and occasionally hostile club crowd. People came up and tried to make me break concentration. The performance [www.christinamcphee.net/performanceinstallation/ selectmediaperformance.htm](http://www.christinamcphee.net/performanceinstallation/selectmediaperformance.htm)) became an act of resistance.

**CTHEORY:** Resistance, that's interesting, your personae in Naxsmash always seems to elude definitive identification. In the Naxsmash digital print suite, there appear fragments of a woman's body -- most of the shots, are they shots of you? You look like you're tied up, in a sadomasochistic way, with red ropes. Are you showing your body as a cyborg condition?

**McPhee:** Maybe. It did seem like the act of publishing the redropes images, ironically,

opened up the problematic of suicide and erasure into a public realm, by creating a digital performance online, thereby exposing that obsession to the public space of the net. And of course that leads quickly, in my imagination at any rate, to a consideration of obsessional topologies. Places of slippage, where things are about to happen, or haven't just happened yet: where you are waiting for something: a Piranesian 'Carcieri'-like space.

**CTHEORY:** A prison, but you talk about things breaking open, or breaking apart. How does this relate to the cyborg? Is her body continuously falling apart?

**McPhee:** Yes, I think that the slipstreaming implies a constant fragmenting into strands or skeins. And then you ask yourself, how can I trace or map these? Is there a correlation to a topology outside the self, outside the psychic architecture?

**CTHEORY:** So you move into landscape.

**McPhee:** Yes. Certainly with the cyborg, there's no-one there, only a set of instructions or a data-body. In fact, experiencing a significant earthquake (6.5) (the San Simeon quake of December 23, 2003) suggested a new direction. I shot images of the destruction and began a suite of images that dealt with the presence/absence of memory, again trying to embody memory through the bitmap. I also integrated these as stills within video footage shot at the media circus surrounding the disaster, and contrasted them to the silence and emptiness (the 'open' phenomenology) of Soda Lake, a sheer white dry lakebed near the San Andreas Fault. This became the digital short, SALT. In Salt, [www.christinamcphree.net/slipcity/texts/salt.html](http://www.christinamcphree.net/slipcity/texts/salt.html), a cyborg like antagonist, a dark silhouette against the white lake, seems to tantalize and retreat. SALT explored the problem of memory, how it is not encoded perfectly into the body, but is subject to slippage. And inside a deserted landscape.

**CTHEORY:** How does your new work, Carrizo-Parkfield Diaries, explore memory differently than Naxsmash? Are we still in the realm of the cyborg body? What is being remembered here? I understand you are working with near real time, live data streams from a USGS site. Is data an objective entity, that's being somehow transformed into a subjective presence? Does the truth of the data, or relative truth, matter to you?

**McPhee:** The Carrizo-Parkfield Diaries interpolate live and archived seismic and geomorphologic data through digital photographic, video and sonic installation; large scale digital photographic prints, digital video, locative and electronic audio; and online time based interactive art. I made very large digital chromogenic prints from documentary medium format and digital photography, digital video, and drawings made on-site at seismically active zones in central California -- Carrizo Plains, where the San Andreas Fault is most visible, and Parkfield, a continuously active seismic landscape, where a recent 6.0 quake yields a rich archive of geologic data. I incorporate layers of field observation within a dream-like sequence of abstract images, where passages of linear structures and shadowed mass allude to ruins and debris in the wake of recent

tremors. By means of architectural scale, at 72 to 92 inches, each print is like a page torn from a cinematic notebook -- film stills from an event-scene that has almost materialized, laced with traces from geomorphologic maps. At [carrizoparkfielddiaries.net](http://carrizoparkfielddiaries.net), Flash animations trigger from a selective crashing of online live data against archived data from the recent 6.0 quake at Parkfield. [christinamcphée.net/cpdstrikeslip.html](http://christinamcphée.net/cpdstrikeslip.html).

John Haber ([haberarts.com](http://haberarts.com)) wrote recently to me about "the tendency to forget that the metaphoric connection between the finished image and the original data does not flow naturally, not because the work itself isn't an adequate model or metaphor of phenomena (art as landscape, art as commerce), but because the original data themselves did not have a phenomenological relationship to such things, but only arose in the context of a methodology, model or metaphor." To me this point seems particularly salient -- that the data is 'real' only insofar as it is known to be conditionally related to something outside data, nature itself. Similarly, the cyborg landscape and the cyborg identity are conditional. They relate as an indication of real things and real subjects outside the slipstream, but inside the vortex of the negative x space of media and information arts, they can only exist in strange self referential loops.

**CTHEORY:** This sounds like a contradiction: on the one hand, you're saying that there is no objectivity to the data scape, and on the other hand, you're claiming some kind of metaphoric truth be inscribed between geologic and human traumatic memory.

**McPhee:** No, it's not that kind of direct linking. Again, think of the conditional situation: it's really more a matter of allusion, and ellipse, and syntax. To speak of the immanent body in my practice, is to allude to the problem of physical memory, how trauma and suffering is imprinted or inscribed in the brain and the body of real people, in real places, like the debris or archaeology of violence, buried in the 'code' of the body itself.

**CTHEORY:** To give the body space in which to be able to breathe...

**McPhee:** Right, I am slipstreaming, moving in and out of an immanent body through the live data of the net, through installation, through performance, and even through still composite images like the large C prints, whose dark depths have such a shiny mirrored surface that they reflect on each other in an endless Piranesian array. Just to make this work as installation in still form brings me back to the problem of layered drawings: but now I have not erased them. [www.christinamcphée.net/carrizoparkfielddiaries/transportinstallation1/84x40in.htm](http://www.christinamcphée.net/carrizoparkfielddiaries/transportinstallation1/84x40in.htm).

**CTHEORY:** I suspect that you must be fascinated by the condition of border and border space, then, particularly in relationship to your physical memory and your body. Do you, yourself, feel like a border?

**McPhee:** Thinking about this question raises another, what is border? or border space? My current landscape based work conflates human traumatic and geologic memory as a single

'seismic' memory. The border is fluid, or semipermeable. In poetic terms, aftershock is inevitable. Our minds are tuned to anticipate the next disaster. Destabilized, continuously, we look to data, delivered by our instrumentations, to surveille the geologic conditions, in hopes of saving ourselves from the next violent destruction of our city. Our city becomes our body, and is already a cyborg border space itself.

In [naxsmash.net/47reds/47redshift.html](http://naxsmash.net/47reds/47redshift.html), I imagine myself both watching a woman running through the streets of the city and being that woman myself, and that woman is the city - an 'illumination' of one of Italo Calvino's texts from Invisible Cities (cities+desire5).

One may have a vision of a city stretching between Los Angeles and San Francisco that cannot sustain itself except in the margins. Thus, a border space/ crossroads. The Carrizo Diaries start to touch on this... in their generative 'echoes' of an uncertain future; I tried to imagine structures of debris containing habitations -- thinking all the while of Constant's Babylon models (which I saw at the Documenta XII, Kassel, in 2002). [www.christinamcphree.net/carrizoparkfielddiaries/album/pages/debris.htm](http://www.christinamcphree.net/carrizoparkfielddiaries/album/pages/debris.htm).

The generative fictions that both distress and enchant my imagination are ones that, despite linguistic filtering through the machine language (large photoshop files, Final Cut Pro Video, Flash, PHP, java, in my practices) still assert some strange material presence that seems to beg to be recognized as human. I work at the image building until a strangeness of the images refuses the obvious gestures that these programs are designed to deliver.

Maybe a matrixial strategy is in the set of all possible interactions here: x = (christina)(photoshop) / documentary images.

**CTHEORY:** Do you mean that software has consciousness, on a really simple linguistic process level?

**McPhee:** I don't know about consciousness. Nonetheless, because I remediate the pages of my diary, my raw experience with the landscape, by forcing it into a syntax of a linguistically narrow architecture (the commercial tools), on the other side of the tunnel, the work 'comes out' as a kind of difference. Like, as if it's a queer condition -- refusing accommodation and disappearance, it asserts itself as Uncanny -- unheimlich.

**CTHEORY:** Does the commercial software dominate the content?

**McPhee:** Well, it is a moot point, that the software design -- the layers metaphor in Photoshop, for example -- influences, perhaps even co-authors the photographic image data. More interesting to me than the idea of domination, is the idea of occlusion and looking through -- partially inside -- the data landscape. In the Diaries, I pushed the images to the point that they became abstract vertical constructs, or abstract architectural arrays that suggest looking through, rather than over, the surface, yet the

layers cover and converge on one another, so that it's challenging to the viewer, to figure out what the diaries want to record. You are forced to rely on studying the internal contextual relations between different images and traces within the installation, to decode them into a narrative or subnarrative. In Carrizo-Parkfield I enjoy playing with the syntactical relationships between several very divergent kinds of visual representation. On one extreme margin of this project, is the raw experience of drawing, of making performance work in the dry lake bed, shooting film at dirt level, remembering Ana Mendieta, as in the 'carrizoclip' here [www.christinamcphree.net/cpdstrikedipslip.html](http://www.christinamcphree.net/cpdstrikedipslip.html).

On the other extreme margin, is the super slick dark pools of the installation prints, mirror like, apparently impassive, reflecting, in their surfaces, back to you, the observer, the witness, standing there. [www.christinamcphree.net/carrizoparkfielddiaries/transportinstallation1/pages/aftershocaccelsubtl1.jpg.htm](http://www.christinamcphree.net/carrizoparkfielddiaries/transportinstallation1/pages/aftershocaccelsubtl1.jpg.htm). There, where you stand, you absorb the distant place, Carrizo Plain, into the reflected image of your body in the mirrored wall. The Carrizo becomes abstracted to the point of disappearance.

**CTHEORY:** Where, then, is the cyborg landscape? Where is the border?

**McPhee:** You find it in the cat's cradle of impulses between the 'remembering' of the performance and documentation work and the 'forgetting' of the pseudo perfect mask of Photoshopped image. It seems to me that this condition, of being only able to remember part of the time, partially, 'through a glass darkly', is 'completely human centered.' I desire a strange (unheimlich) use of the mode of production (the commercial software) in service of a generative human space (fictional, fluid, resistant to categorization, escaping being tagged and identified). Using the radar to stay under the radar (a coyote trick).

**CTHEORY:** Does this mean that there is a political dimension to the project itself, insofar as it is born of resistance to being sublimated to forgetfulness, to amnesia and to totalizing technology? That it still insists on being some kind of 'diary', which suggests person -- subject -- aliveness outside the prison? Is this frightening?

**McPhee:** I've been thinking about this, a kind of witness to something we don't want to see or know. At Documenta XI, in 2002 the Italian artists group Multiplicity showed a harrowing installation of interviews and videos related to the deaths by drowning of immigrants from Asia to Italy on a Christmas night. "We say that it did not happen, we say that we did not know (Multiplicity, Solid Sea,) resonates at [naxsmash.net/noflightzone/texthtml/peregrine.html](http://naxsmash.net/noflightzone/texthtml/peregrine.html)) In the case of the Carrizo Parkfield Diaries, the fact that California's urban space stretches over completely unpredictable seismic terrain, over which we do not have control, and with which we must develop some kind of rapprochement and negotiation? In the fact that a totalizing media landscape is not possible, because life always (already) exists outside of whatever we might imagine

as 'landscape'?

**CTHEORY:** Could you say that you are definitively, a cyborg? Or are you a witness to the cyborg?

**McPhee:** I feel my body is like a border; but, no, it is not itself a cyborg, because it (I) exist in some kind of condition of alterity outside technology even though I experience its operational architecture from the inside, as if from the inside of my body, heart and brain. It's a strange condition, liberating and uncomfortable: but better than the old psychotropic condition of enslavement, when in former times (before I entered the media labyrinth) my mind was hostage to the repetitive, unpredictable onslaught of triggered memories of violence to my body. Now I may be lost in the borders of the labyrinth, but I have no longer lost my psychic self. I remember who and what I am while I move through the operational constructs of media. Thus I escape media. Perhaps (I) is simply this: the consciousness of a space beyond any formulation of 'landscape' or technology', that paradoxically resides inside my body. And anyway, I will die, and cyborgs don't. They are a conditional, or subjunctive tense within a larger grammar.

**CTHEORY:** If we are not cyborgs, then, let's go back to slipstreaming as the idea of 'fix'. Sounds a bit like a drug habit. Is new media like that, an insatiable addiction? Deliriously, do we hallucinate some 'interaction' with new media, as if this interaction is technopoetics outside of as well as inscribed on our own bodies? Is that an assumption, that 'new media' launches a trace or line towards some construction or Cartesian coordinate outside itself?

**McPhee:** I tend not to think of new media or operations with it as being something that exists *a priori*, with some kind of transcendent value as a super-tool or super-techne. Towards phase-like and phrase-like instantiations of artifice or artificial life, such as the code-driven visualities and sonorities of digital media, one feels the advance and retreat of some kind of metadata that works above a condition that we cannot see and cannot access (a sublime condition, such as, 'nature'). This semiotic movement of information poetically, metaphorically, across barrier, border or transgressive zone, is a constant obsession in my imaginative experience. The obsession seems to express itself in a lyrical and complex materialist poetics, such that the new media digital environment becomes a series of semiotic gestures, or linguistic moves, towards and away from seeing and knowing.

**CTHEORY:** Or towards and away from memory and remembering.

**McPhee:** The digitally marked moves are only partially legible: they only spell a partial sentence. Or, you could say, that the new media art environment is one of continuous decay and rebuilding, like an architectural topology or language-topology. Sometimes this flux seems to be instigated algorithmically, like Fluxus sentences. In some ways, this is how the online diaries, [carrizoparkfielddiaries.net](http://carrizoparkfielddiaries.net), work. Here, compiled hourly, live microseismic strong motion data from a southern California remote site, crash archived

seismic data from a recent quake in Parkfield, California.

**CTHEORY:** You've written that the live diaries' reach into the past changes the archive from a static resource into an unpredictable future array. How does that work? Is this a delirious use of new media -- where interaction isn't any more between viewer or user and the digital work, but rather, an interaction with data coming off the landscape? Interaction with the landscape through a series of strange mediations?

**McPhee:** Sindee Nakatani and I thought it would be interesting to crash databases of live and archived strong motion data from the geologic field stations at Parkfield, California, because, as our collaborative writer, Jeremy Hight, pointed out, it would be an intriguing model of the way our short term memory and immediate experiences in the present, crash into our memory and alter the data inside our heads, so that, in the end, memory, and memoir, generate themselves -- they are fictions. The the diaries consist of semi-random animations based on locative sound, electronic keyboard, textual memoir, and documentary video / photographic stills from the fault at Carrizo, while, subliminally, Parkfield 'appears' invisibly as the data feed. Hourly compilations of the latest seismic data are performed via a CRON job, which executes a retrieval script. This semi-real time data is parsed into an array which is then used to crash numerical strings into an array of archived data from the September 28, 2004 Parkfield quake. These crashes occur via action scripts written into each one of a series of Flash animation movies, which do simultaneous retrievals of data of the live and archived arrays.

**CTHEORY:** What are the numbers that seem to log in, in between Flash presentations?

**McPhee:** Those number strings form from the crashing of the two databases -- near live versus archived -- and these strings, in turn, make random selections of Flash movies from our project folder; each movie presents in a randomized way, so that no sequence is ever the same, while the sequences as a formal looping resemble the obsessive return, or metanoia, of traumatic memory. Every once in a while, the browser gets stuck and you have to reset, and then the project continues; but meanwhile, as always, live data is being captured and compiled from the remote site, which I found on a US Geological Survey public folder on a server. In essence, there is interactivity within a new media context, or semiotics: but not with the human 'user' in the classic sense (point and click). The interactivity is with the datastream coming from instrumentation on the remote site, recording micro increments of ground motion changes, in velocity, acceleration, and other parameters.

**CTHEORY:** Even so, there is no interactivity with nature itself, rather with the 'material' of data compilations coming off the desert site.

**McPhee:** It's exciting to me to think that the piece is driven by a sublime source outside new media, and thus outside ourselves, and that this source remains and endures as an emitter of seismic information, that then records as the earth's own diary, or memoir. Thus the idea of nature as being in completely co-subjective status with ourselves is

suggested. To me the beauty of new media techne relates to its usefulness as a tool for gesturing towards sublimity, i e. what can only be know in part, if at all.

**CTHEORY:** Are the Diaries a closed book, or are you thinking of their implications outside the installation, and, perhaps, outside the world of seismic data? Are they extensive, like the slipstream? Are they pulling you into new lines of research?

**McPhee:** One of the most interesting things about installing the Carrizo Parkfield Diaries in LA, was to realize that it would be great to deconstruct the installation and reassemble it in different ways, depending on the architectural conditions of the next space. This is a transitional strategy while I begin a close study of another series of urban and rural sites in southern California. Currently, I am pulling out fragments of the prints as stills and then inserting the stills into video footage that I have shot while walking through dense urban spaces in London, Berlin and Los Angeles. I am recycling the fragments as if they are memory fragments that carry the data of the seismic trauma into a displaced, dream like context. The new context is the nomadic journey through the city. Carrizo Parkfield Diaries flows out of a slightly earlier project , generally called Merz\_city, in honor of Kurt Schwitters. In Merz\_city, there continues to be an aesthetic of breakdown and waiting within a flux, so that there's an edgy anticipation, exaggerating the quality of the numinous and fleeting presence of persons unknown. One is moving through the city, lost in one's own thoughts, and the mind flickers between the inner obsessive realm of fragments of aftershock (the Carrizo stills), patches of darkness or confusion, and intense, near chaotic activity that one perceives in the ephemeral fleeting intensity of the street. Schwitters was concerned with the idea of sublation, or the continuous negation and simultaneous preservation of image. Like a continuously augmented and expiring drawing, merz\_city both exposes and erases an imaginary heterogeneous city that draws you in and leaves you out, on the edge of falling; a city preoccupied with its own obliteration and simultaneous performance.

**CTHEORY:** Tell me about your relationship with sound and music and about the movement or artists that you think of in your works?

**McPhee:** My musical education was through private lessons, never in formal professional training. Restricted from watching television or going to movies when I was very young, my desires for art practice were poured into music, landscape, and books. What I couldn't see seemed to be the important thing. Visual art, like film, could somehow bring the invisible into the visible, even if randomly, or in glimpses. I am sure that the exile from California had something to do with this thirst for things not immediately at hand, but that I could make, somehow, by improvisation on the keyboard, or by drawing out on the prairie. I dreamed of connecting dots into great complexes of sound and visual incident, like film, but not really with narrative. Music, especially of Bach, made me visualize synaesthetic structures, like great strange castles in the air.

**CTHEORY:** You mentioned Fluxus earlier with regard to setting up data interpolations as a

set of randomized instructions. I would imagine you are influenced by the work of John Cage.

**McPhee:** Certainly, Cage has inspired strategies in the sound project, Slipstreamkonza ([www.christinamcphree.net/slipkonza/autochamber.html](http://www.christinamcphree.net/slipkonza/autochamber.html)), with some insights from Henry Warwick (2004). Intuitive, almost randomized recirculation and improvisation of long-remembered bits and pieces, motifs, credenzas, mini-arpeggios, descending minor fifths, little blues riffs, move best through my hands, and short circuit the visual brain while playing.

**CTHEORY:** How does sound function in your works? You speak of the cyborg as a neural topology in some of your writings. Is sound a part of this experience?

**McPhee:** In my own brain it seems that the fear-centers of the mind (the amygdalas) are overridden with something like an endorphin or tension release through the formal figuration that seems to attend improvisational performance, and, later, transmutes and transforms multimedia formal conditions -- like a subterranean stream below the level of the visual in my multimedia works. Perhaps the music structures, as complex as they are, carry out a kind of mathematical coherence or temporal architecture, or armature, over which the visual absences and presences with which one can develop narrative and formal sequences, can be suspended. I also have noticed, that when reacting to traumatic memory, the first thing that shuts down is my voice (words), the second, visual thinking, and the third, or very last, is music and sound. The sound patterns remain a powerful neurological pathway for remaining conscious and integrated emotionally and cognitively even when I cannot understand what is happening around me, or when experiencing paralyzing fear and mental shutdown, in other modes of thought. Perhaps there is a deep impression in my hands and heart, arising from childhood hours at the piano, that there is an integrative principle in the cosmos that leaks out via music to the human level.

**CTHEORY:** How did you become involved with electronic composition?

**McPhee:** The pathways into sound for me came totally through the medium of digital transformation of analog material and memories of sounds in childhood at the piano. I was messing around a lot with an old (circa 1995) Yamaha Clavinova and finding that the musical ideas of my childhood experience came flooding back into consciousness. It was as if a lost part of my mind and soul had come back to me. As soon as I realized there were no digital rules, no performance agenda, no audience, I started to play improvisations that flowed out of a thousand memory fragments of Bartok, Ravel, Stravinsky, and Shostakovich, the doric mode, perhaps, set to move up and through lines of Kansas City blues. The acoustic pleasures of improvisation led directly into digital files that became fodder for editing and montaging into stranger and shorter passages until there were only intense distillations of electronic electroacoustical distortions left like ruins touched here and there by lines of architectural melody. So for me this work is like mining the gold of the intense sense of the present cached within the past I

remember from childhood at the piano. Sound art is a mode of super awareness as if one is singing in the interstitial spaces between one present moment and the next present moment: a hyper now.

**CTHEORY:** You've written, on the soundtoys site, [www.soundtoys.net/a/index.php](http://www.soundtoys.net/a/index.php) about how you find that transpositions of image and sound delivery on the net create thresholds between what's behind the screen and what is physically live, between virtual and so called real. Why does this happen, in your view? What's so special about sound?

**McPhee:** For reasons I do not understand, it seems that sound reaches past the barriers of memory and, like Orpheus, hears the material of dreams of the underground and reports the sound in an awakened, live state.

**CTHEORY:** Is this too a kind of slipstreaming, in which you are slipstreaming behind the 'bid data' fields of seismic activity? Are the media effects reports from the underground, or reports from a subliminal source?

**McPhee:** Off and on since 2001, I've been working on Slipstreamkonza, a sonic topology in net and physical installation. Slipstreamkonza makes a space in which near live compilations of carbon photosynthesis from microclimatologic instrumentation at the remote site, in a dynamic database, generate a series of slipped, discontinuous flows of data into animation via capture and transformation of compressed diurnal/nocturnal and seasonal cycles of the tall grass prairie. Slipstreamkonza's design flows photosynthetic data from microclimate measurements on the tall grass prairie via the net, into compilations, that in turn trigger sound from micro ambient conditions at the prairie site, literally at grass roots level. The installation could express the breathing of the prairie in the middle of urban life, so that the live landscape 'voices' itself telematically. North of Konza, as a kid I rambled through fields and scrubby creekbeds -- a Turnerian landscape delivering absence and presence, there and not there, like the flow of invisible breathing. I am interested in the way net-based data-driven environments can emulate a remote presence, much like the ephemera of childhood. The sonic topology performs through play on and through the carbon data, so that data and the net sound are in a musical self-reflexive loop, remediating, through a flexible action-scripted Flash interface, photosynthesis. The sound becomes a performance field, whose shapes and dynamics flow from coupling to numeric expressions arising from landscape itself.

**CTHEORY:** In the end you are in love with the cyborg landscape, the technological landscape. You seem to want to remediate a sense of place through performance of the data. Global media is often said to obliterate the local. Yet, here you describe a situation in which the specificity and ephemerality of algorithmic triggers from the landscape itself brings the remote location into intimate presence.

[christinamcphree.net/slipkonza/SlipstreamKonzaSemiotics.htm](http://christinamcphree.net/slipkonza/SlipstreamKonzaSemiotics.htm)

**McPhee:** The prairie is, in my physical memory, a place of aftershock (the site of sexual trauma and emotional violence), and, at the same time, extremely beautiful in its spatial

austerity, abundant absences, and proliferant grasses reaching to heaven. My hope is that somehow by creating a negotiation with that landscape through sound will permit a cognitive reformulation of that landscape: landscape becomes art through the winnowing of the grasses of trauma, not to bury the human under ground alive, in a temporary seasonal death like Persephone, but to release the data of the prairie into an aesthetic of sound that reflects a larger semiotic structure that can support and release a metaphor of life.

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