



# Between Light and Nowhere

On the Video Art of Rainer Kohlberger

BY BLAKE WILLIAMS

“Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world. This is an error of the intellect as inevitable as that error of the eye which lets us fancy that on the horizon heaven and earth meet.”

—Arthur Schopenhauer, *Studies in Pessimism*

“You can’t choose between life and death when we’re dealing with what is in between.”

—Tangina Barrons (Zelda Rubinstein),  
*Poltergeist* (1982)

Writing in *Millennium Film Journal* in 2014, cultural critic Ara Osterweil proposed that American artist James Turrell’s career-long Light and Space project is not only kindred with experimental film, but could rescue the cinema from mounting fears of its impending extinction and bury the theoretical obsessions with medium specificity that have obscured its redemptive potential. Divorced from market-dictated determinations, his work extricates us from a social world that Jonathan Crary describes as “non-stop,” conformed to the mechanical modes of production demanded by 21st-century capitalism. In such a domain, “distinctions between day and night, between light and dark, between action and repose” can no longer be undermined. Once again, we truly *see*. Turrell, though, doesn’t use a camera or any other cinema apparatus to produce or present his work; rather, he needs nothing more than natural and artificial luminance and the architecture

that contains it. Reflecting on the artist's PSI installation, *Meeting* (1980-86)—a room with a geometric opening in its ceiling to frame the exposed sky for viewers' contemplation, characteristic of his signature Skyspace works—Osterweil details how the piece not only offers a meditational, cosmic experience but also the ability to “re-frame the ordinary world, [thus restoring] it to perceptibility,” an effect she compares to that offered by the Lumières' early *actualités*. The sky is the image *and* the object in *Meeting*, and so fulfills cinema's expanded perceptual potential without abandoning Bazin's core fantasies for the medium.

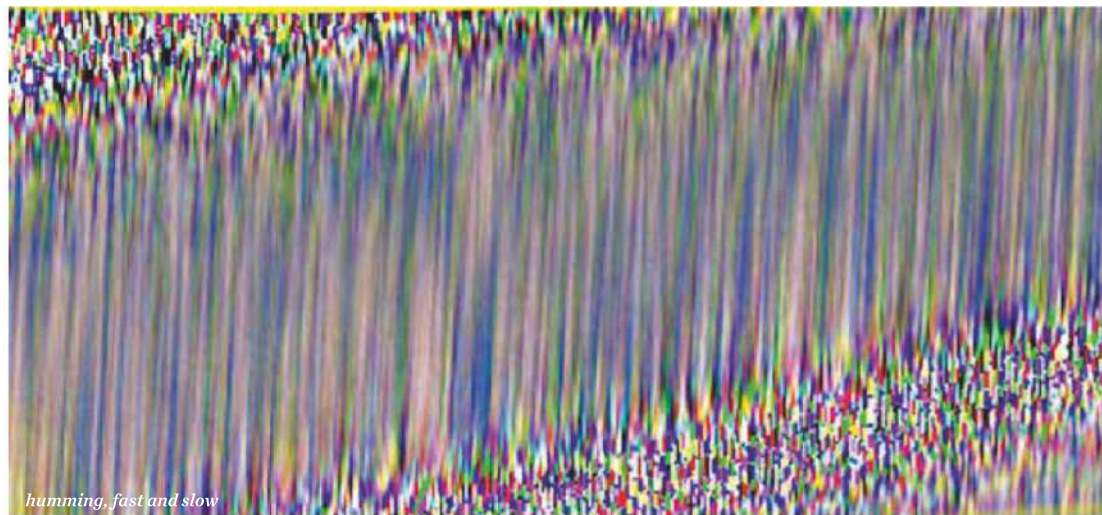
What we have, then, is a line: one of infinite trajectories that could have been mapped out to unite the past and future of cinema, from Turrell to the Lumières and straight on back to Plato. It passes through the first panoptic scope of Cinerama displays, and Dwinell Grant's *Color Sequence* (1943), and the monochromatic reverie that is Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993), while piercing through Stan Brakhage's retinal odysseys, the colourful stroboscopes of Paul Sharits, and certain Peter Kubelka and Tony Conrad flicks along the way. Eventually this line reaches the present, and if lengthened onward into eternity—from *Meeting* to the end of images—somewhere between Turrell and the hypothetically imminent technological singularity lies the work of Austrian-born, Berlin-based multimedia artist Rainer Kohlberger, one of the most exciting image creators to emerge in the 2010s.

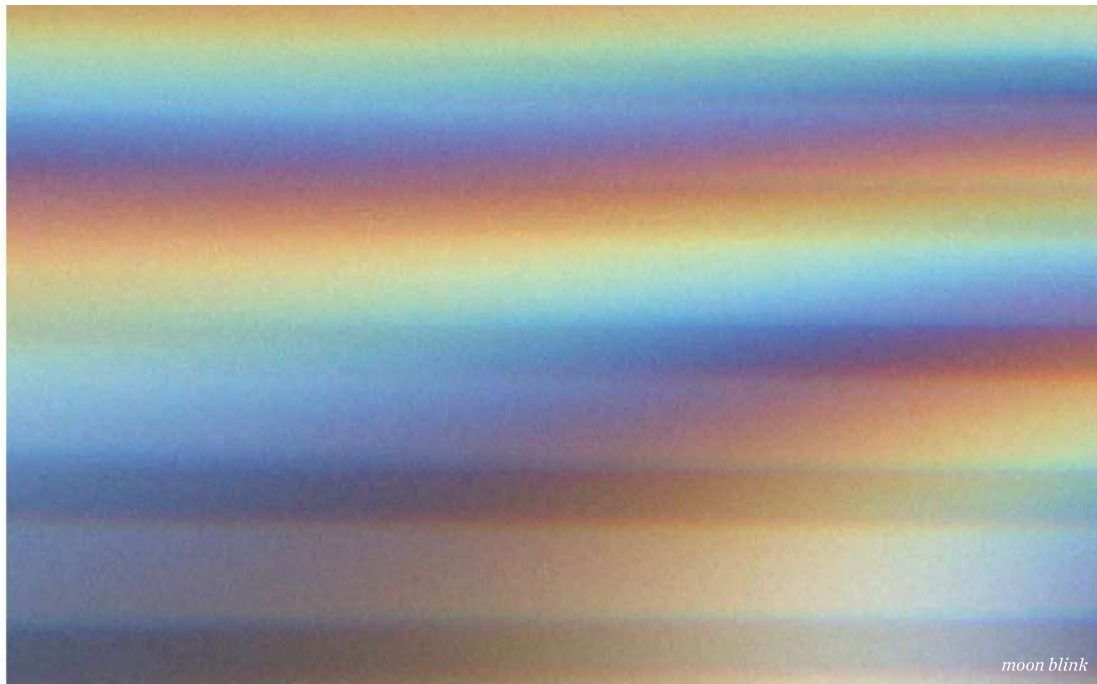
Like Turrell's, Kohlberger's is a practice described by light. Across a resumé comprising short videos, live audio-visual performances, iOS apps, album art, and large-scale installations, his anti-images sever us from anything material or spatial. Because of its angular, aggressively digital aesthetic and an extreme reliance on code, his output is tempting to discuss within the boundaries of Generative Art. Unlike most time-based media built exclusively from algorithms, though, Kohlberger's work mitigates the autonomy of his computational processes: he produces his pieces with dataflow programming (using the somewhat obscure vvvv toolkit for video synthesis, which he describes as an abstract version of

a modular synthesizer), a workflow that allows him to create feedback loops and manipulate code-generated images with pixel shaders in real time before creating his montage in an editing suite. This methodology, which he likens to the production of improvised music, creates an uncanny synthesis between machine formalism and his own impulses and intuition.

Kohlberger prefers to classify his process as noise. A fittingly open and paradoxical aesthetic principle, noise connotes both nothing and everything—chaotic absence *and* overwhelming presence. It is the unignorable trace of the distant (e.g., highway ambience), the unwanted (e.g., digital artifacts), and the broken (e.g., fading radio signals). It is (a)chromatic, technological, primal, aural, and optical—a cacophonous medium that precludes communication. When he recalls his infatuation with noise, Kohlberger often speaks of his childhood fascination with staring into old cathode ray-tube TV screens when the channel had lost its reception. “I turned it on anyways, looked into the ‘snow,’ and controlled the knobs to modulate the noise”—perhaps not inadvertently aligning his younger self with *Poltergeist*'s young Carol Anne Freeling, who likewise fancied a conflicted light: a harbinger of novelty and death, an icon of the sacred and the chthonic.

This ambivalence is manifested in two of Kohlberger's earliest and most stroboscopic short films, *humming, fast and slow* (2013) and *moon blink* (2015). Running nine and ten minutes, respectively, each film begins with a pure white screen, flattened and soft until minute vibrations and folds emerge on its surface. Moving in tandem with warbling, synthesized drones composed by Kohlberger in Ableton Live (according to him, always after he has finished composing the image), the whites become nebulous greys as darker tones quiver into the mix. In *humming*, this fluttering escalates quickly into a phasing effect, as the succeeding frames sweep through an array of horizontal white-to-black gradations. What initially evokes a dying fluorescent light bulb soon becomes a scrolling wave of monochromatic tones, moving rightward (unless *I blink*, in which case the movement may immediately transfer to





the opposite direction). The screen gets vertically segmented into neatly divided halves and then a multitude of narrower panels, its kinesthetic force disrupted and complicated as the partitions isolate the distinct illusions. Throughout this two-minute sequence, the screen space remains admirably flat, staving off perspectival intrusions even as my orientation in the room around me becomes perpetually heightened and deranged.

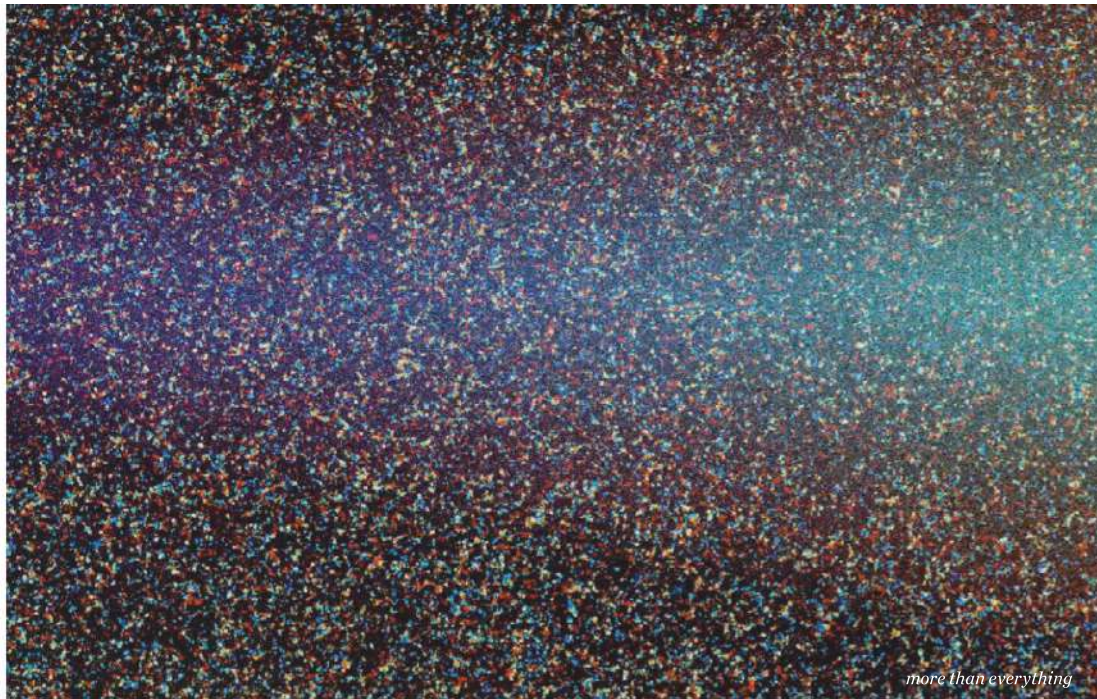
The horizontality of *humming* is answered by *moon blink*'s vertical experience. The bleached screen is rescued from its stability by a swell of bent shadows that make the screen appear as though it is either being pinched or pressed outward from behind. Rippling northward, the screen takes on the appearance of window blinds, an endless supply of invisible fingers grazing over them with intensifying force and speed. The effect here—one of the most vertiginous I've experienced from a moving-image artwork, live action or virtual—illustrates what media scholar Scott Richmond termed "proprioceptive aesthetics" (coined to wage war against modernism's intellectualizing principles, an argument that begins with Duchamp's dizzying *Anemic Cinema* [1926] and climaxes with a discussion of Conrad's hallucinatory *The Flicker* [1966]). In my encounter, the subject of my attention is neither the screen, its undulation, nor any other formal property; my concern, again, is with what is happening to my body, and the extent to which it is not possible for my mind to convince any part of me that the world *isn't* in fact ascending into some untold, binary ether.

What is most remarkable about these two films, however, is what they evolve into. Having wrecked our sensorimotor system, *humming* and *moon blink* proceed to meld our perceptual faculties with their technological infrastructure. The compound flickering, having hastened and strengthened into something rapturous, encourages our eyes to dissect the image into isolated components. Partitions fragment into ever-thinner bands, and white war-

bles into prismatic streaks—the screen now a crystal, anxious to show you precisely what it's made of. In the time between these digital figments becoming apparent and the films graduating into rich, saturated reveries of sandy starbursts, my faith in my eyes becomes tenuous. Does my vision, with this display before me, become a mirage? A glimpse of my optics' own insides? William Blake's immortal maxim, "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite," obtains an extra air of wisdom, while the distinction between a cleansing and a malfunction achieves new levels of obscurity.

In the breakdown of certainty, boundlessness takes hold, spatial and temporal parameters lose their definition, and anything becomes indistinguishable from nothing and everything. The pinnacle of Kohlberger's project to date, the stereoscopic *more than everything* (2018), unabashedly confronts this notion. Purifying the core argument of Fabrice Aragno's split-screen trick shots in Godard's *Adieu au langage* (2014) into an elegant, virtual complement, *more than everything* amputates the biological binding between vision and embodiment, granting us access to a mode of perception that is otherwise impossible to experience in an able-bodied configuration of human sense organs. Over the course of 13 minutes and five hypnotic movements, the screen pulsates, flickers, atomizes, curls, and straightens into stripes, with each eye delivered unique channels of activity. As a digital glow brightens in the left eye, the glow in the right eye recedes, phasing at such a rate that the glow gains dimension and appears to spin off the screen. After the film's middle section lets our eyes wallow in a sea of rainbow white noise, shimmering like glitter from the disharmonious pairing of sharper and softer fields of matter, *more than everything* glides into a grand finale of Op-art mania, where the left channel's horizontal moiré sensations compete against the right's vertical threading. As the image settles on its cross-hatched





conclusion, we are left to linger on a moment unlike any other, as something within us—a little voluntarily, a little not—pushes and pulls scattered patches of the superimposition into dominance.

While *more than everything* shares the crisp, CGI matte of Kohlberger's early work, it arrived after he made a significant shift in his methodology. About three years ago, he decided to kill his imageless darlings and incorporate machine learning into his procedure. As opposed to the something-from-nothing approach that dataflow affords, this is a process that depends on both the input of data (in his case, video clips) and a waiting period; the machine, like an infant, digests new-to-it information, acquiring knowledge, intelligence, and awareness over training periods that tend to last several hours. The first of his pieces to utilize these new tools, *keep that dream burning* (2017), is also the first to incorporate language, albeit confined to an onscreen text that opens the film: "Here we are in the presence of a shimmering consciousness," the movie/machine announces. "A flicker of the soul is all that is needed. I believe coming here was the right thing to do." And with that, a shower of silvery noise fills the screen, spraying us with its arrival. Through extended exposure to the expansive visual noise, instances of algorithmic pareidolia (not at all unlike the surfaces of Google's DeepDream monstrosities) pull what resembles microbes (and then mountainous topographies, bustling bushes, and volcanic plumes) from its ashy vortex—a computer's gleeful show-and-tell moment, smothered in daydreams of space dust and fiery catastrophe.

Kohlberger's new piece, *it has to be lived once and dreamed twice*, expands on the phenomenological strangeness that results from this splicing of technological and organic impulses. A half-hour sci-fi essay on posthumanism, cinema, and artificial intelligence, the work all but announces itself as its generation's *La Jetée* (1962). Beneath a monotonous voiceover (written by Kohlberger

and spoken by British-German singer-songwriter Anika) that drowsily questions the nature—and the disappearance—of being and thought ("Something is not right..."), we find Kohlberger's most complex assortment of digital textures yet. Drawing from an image bank that the artist says was generated from approximately half of science-fiction cinema history, *it has to be lived* flips through channels of deeply crushed visual information, the frame a radioactive wasteland of scrolling zebra patterns and lo-fi grey goo. The effect is one of radical liminality, caught in transitions between form and formlessness, declaration and lyricism, foreshadowing and aftermath.

Integrating GANs (generative adversarial networks) into his arsenal for the first time here, Kohlberger was able to work from a database of images that pushed existing film clips to the edge of complete abstraction (*Frankenstein* [1931] and *The Terminator* [1984] are easy enough to identify, while everything else is glitched into illegibility) while also creating noise compositions that adopt veritably photographic traits. We see things we know we've seen but no longer recognize, and consider thoughts constructed from sentences that themselves know they cannot achieve clarity ("Everything we've received so far has been confusing or incomprehensible"). Short of generating images that might be determinably "real" or artificial, *it has to be lived* meets both sides halfway, documenting the afterlife of subjectivity from the perspective of sentient objects. Like the glitch aesthetic that these images have settled into, this is a promise of failure at the end of the age of the individual, presented with a fundamental ambivalence that is as frightening as it is pacifying. If everything we know and hold is destined for renewal and reprocessing, subject to boundless capacities to be reconfigured into anything, then who is to say it all won't be even better than before? For in an age where everything is an image, the sky may well be the limit.