

ART ATTACK



QUANTUM/CONCEPTUAL

Phyllis Baldino Explores Scientific Phenomenon

By Jessica Myers-Schechter

As part of MoMA's Documentary Fortnight, conceptual video artist Phyllis Baldino will screen and speak about her "ParaUniVersesVersesVerses," a single channel version of her installation exploring parallel universes on February 11th at 4:00 PM.

Artist Phyllis Baldino's witty video installations, as well as their more widely available single channel iterations, are inspired by the practice of science itself. Evoked from her keen interest in scientific phenomenon, Baldino focuses on the things we take for granted, asking us to question their functions and meanings.

Imposing a largely compartmentalized theory on the natural world, Baldino assembles found objects, takes them apart, reconstructs them or transforms their function. The resulting conceptual video meditations exploit her knack for juxtaposing her own scientific method with abstract and largely unquantifiable things-letting the viewer infer their own impressions from the spaces in between.

Like any artist, her process involves ruminating on her subject (in this case her fascination with scientific theory) and those parts of it that are open to interpretation. She then uses these ideas as a springboard to tackle abstract scientific concepts in her low-tech and straightforward fashion.

From fuzzy logic to particle acceleration to nanotechnology, Baldino delves into the world of scientific philosophy and emerges with a body of conceptual art practice that fuses video, installation, and performance.

Baldino met recently with **FRINGE** Magazine to talk about her work.

Jessica Myers-Schechter: Can you tell us a little about the version of "ParaUniVersesVersesVerses" you'll be screening at MOMA?

Phyllis Baldino: I've been working with the idea of parallel universes for a few years now and I've always been fascinated by the idea that there are parallel universes-other universes in which I'm sitting this way instead of that way, or my pants are blue instead of green-just slight alterations from the way we are now. The more choices you have the more universes there are.

The piece I'll be screening at the MoMA is actually quite simplistic. I set up my camera in different parts of my apartment and filmed myself performing various activities or scenarios that I call multi-verses. There are seven multi-verses across the screen. In one scenario I peeled an apple in my kitchen. Each time I filmed the action I changed the apple, the apple peeler, my watch, my shirt, my apron, the curtains on the wall, the fruit in the bowl, the color on the wall. I then overlapped all the footage and made them different opacities-so as you're watching the final version you see a ghost-like morphing of all those versions simultaneously. The setting and the actual frame are stationary and I'm the only thing that's moving. So there are all these universes that are happening simultaneously

But these are also linear



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processes. For example, when I'm peeling the apple I really am going from start to finish: I peel the entire apple.

This piece also exists as a single-channel installation. It is projected onto a free-standing dual vision screen that can be seen from both sides. Every now and then the multi-verse slices flip back and forth. This shift is subtle and plays with the attention of the viewer and of universe 'location.



JMS: What about the audio? There's an odd crunching sound that is reminiscent of grinding gears.

PB: The audio is actually all the audio: the sound from each of the permutations of each of the seven scenarios.

JMS: You've explored the idea of parallel universes in other pieces as well, haven't you?

PB: I did a piece called "19 Universes/My Brother." I divided the screen into 19 universes and in each my brother is playing guitar. Where his hand is on the neck and when he plays a riff, I follow his hand frame by frame so he has to move the other universes out of the way in order for us to see what this universe is playing. So it's really a flow of solos that he played. This piece was great to make but it required a different way of thinking. It's a very visual piece but the audio is essential as you go from one riff to another. I had to make the audio work first before I put the video in motion.

JMS: And there's a yet-to-be-exhibited installation you're working on now, as well.

PB: I just finished "Out Of Focus Universes." The odd thing about installation is that you yourself literally don't know how it's going to turn out until it's installed. So you have to live on faith a little bit.

The first component of this piece is the sculptures on the wall (inspired from the video footage (channel one) of people in Central Park shot from a high rise). I wanted to make out-of-focus sculptures, so I decided to use netting. The pieces are made of many layers of different colored netting to create a ghost-like blurry look. Depending on the exhibition space, my ideal would be that when you first walk in the gallery these pieces are the first things you see. The next room you go into would be the first channel.

The video installation consists of four channels. On a 7x9 ft. free-standing screen I'll show the primary universe (channel one.) The remaining three channels will be on smaller LCD monitors mounted onto walls throughout the gallery. They are the fictional details from the larger screen. I wrapped my friends in netting and took them to the park where I filmed them out of focus. Each detail is numbered-for example, Universe #569.2

JMS: The footage really looks like an amoeba morphing and the color constantly changes throughout the fictional excerpts. How did you achieve that effect?

PB: I did a residency at the Experimental Television Center in Owego, NY where they have all this great analog equipment. I had access to the Dave Jones Colorizer and the Wobulator, created by Nam June Paik. I used the Wobulator to create a ghost-like flowing image. It's the same image, but it's a ghost of the image-sort of oscillating next to itself.

JMS: Is there any significance to the number you assign each universe?

PB: There can be an infinite number of universes, so I just randomly assign them. I use decimals to make it even more precise. So it could be 238 or 459.2.

JMS: There's a sculptural element to this particular work that calls to mind some of your earlier videos, such as "The Gray Series" and "The Unknown Series (excerpts)." Can you talk a little about how sculptural objects figured in those pieces?

PB: My early videos were very much processed-oriented. And the first works I did were literally done in the first take. They were very much about me interacting with particular objects. The objects resulted from the videos. So the objects are sculptural and they exist as an object; the video was a process that created that object. So there are times when I show the video with or without the object, because it doesn't really matter. You can see it separately or you can see it with the object.

"The Gray Area Series" was inspired by Fuzzy Logic. The objects in those videos are what they are-and they are what they are not simultaneously. All of the titles follow the same format: for example, "Silver Screen/Not Silver Screen." It's the question of function. Sometimes I had to destroy an object to make it functional-literally. For example, there was an old cosmetic case I saw in a thrift store on sale for \$3. It was locked shut and could not be opened, so they sold it to me for \$2. I destroyed it with a jigsaw to make it functional ("Cosmetic/Not Cosmetic"). In another piece ("60's dress/object"), I reconstructed a chair on camera from start to finish. First I chopped it up off camera. I wore a 60's dress that matched the chair and then put it back together just enough so it kind of worked. I mixed up the pieces so I wouldn't know how it was supposed to be put back together. That particular piece has to be shown with its own monitor. That's just the nature of that work. But the other sculptural objects don't need to be seen with their video.



JMS: And "The Unknown Series (excerpts)"?

PB: I kept on finding all these objects that I didn't recognize, like parts of parts of things. So I created unknown personas to fit the unknown concept. I made a rule for myself that each piece had to be under a minute (the excerpt 'is' the piece). What happens before and after is unknown to me, and unknown to you. So you jump into an action and then it's over.

JMS: So then working with objects in conjunction with video installation wasn't a new concept for you.

PB: Well, I have a BFA in Sculpture. I only started doing video in 1993. (And, actually, in "Out of Focus Universes" I'm again incorporating sculptural elements in my installations.)

JMS: Why did you initially make the jump from sculpture to video?

PB: It was a combination of things. I was doing sculpture for so many years, but I felt like I was at a pivotal point, that something was going to happen-because I felt

unsatisfied with the work. I still do feel a connection with sculpture, but once I started doing video, it was literally like a second skin.

JMS: What kind of sculptures were you doing at the time?

PB: Found objects. I'd go to junkyards and find objects, then I'd alter them. So it was very much about taking something pre-existing in the world and then making it into something else.

JMS: Some of your work, like "ParaUniVersesVersesVerses" is available in single channel format through avenues such as Electronic Arts Intermix (www.eai.org), but others only exist in their original installation format. Can you talk about when this format makes sense and when it does not?



PB: This is going to sound really basic, but it's rare to have an installation actually shown enough to have many people see it-just logistically. The single channel version is obviously more accessible because it can be shown more often and be purchased through my distributor, Electronic Arts Intermix.

Still, I only create a single channel version when it makes sense for the piece. If it doesn't I just don't. It's intuitive.

A piece that works as both installation and single channel is "In the Present" which was originally a two-channel installation at the Lauren Wittels Gallery. At the time I was reading a lot about memory: what you remember, why you remember it, as well as present time memory and how that works. Years ago William James stated that our sense of present time was between 3 and 12 seconds and everything else was constructed memory. So I decided to take that literally and to play with the idea. So I bought all new objects and I altered them in that time frame (i.e. 3 to 12 seconds) only. And then I would alter them again and again. So what you see or what you don't see depends on what you remember. Present time gets confused with past time and memory.

In the installation I projected two images on opposite walls right across from each other. There are 25 scenarios per side for a total of 50.

The single channel version was also a part of "Rooms With A View: Environments For Video" at the Guggenheim Soho. This was a group show curated by John G. Hanhardt and Nancy Spector. They invited artists to create environments for video and then they put single-channel videos within the environments.

In the two-channel version of "In The Present" in between each of the 25 scenarios I put in white light for the "present time" time frame (randomly 3 to 12 seconds each). In the single channel version there's the same white between each piece, but it's not the same experience you have as you do when you're in the installation space with two images juxtaposed.

JMS: Which pieces did you feel couldn't be converted to single channel?

PB: "The Gray Band" which is part of the "Gray Area Series". I bought used instruments: a bass, a guitar, a microphone, and a clarinet. I basically destroyed them-took them apart and threw away pieces that were nonfunctional, I sawed off parts of the guitar and bass that weren't needed. I then had some musicians-Dez Cadena (the lead singer of Black Flag before Henry Rollins), Tom Watson (of Red Krayola), Mike Watt (of Minutemen and firehose), and Lynn Johnston (of Cruel Frederick)-put the instruments back together on camera in the first and only take. Then I had them play one song: "I will survive" by Gloria Gaynor. So the instruments and the band only exist for one song.

Also, "Out of Focus Universes" and "Baldino-Neutrino" exist as installations only.

JMS: You seem fascinated by perception.

PB: "Baldino-Neutrino" (2003) is about various aspects of perception. I read an article about this experiment at CERN (European Organization for Nuclear Research), the world's largest particle physics laboratory. In the experiment, they plan to shoot a beam of neutrinos from the SPS tunnel at CERN in Geneva and have them land inside a particle detector in Gran Sasso, Italy. It's so abstract it almost seems unbelievable. The neutrinos will travel 454 miles through the earth and land at a detector. The entire time travel will take 2.5 milliseconds. The first of these experiments will finally happen in July of this year, after many years in the making.

I couldn't stop thinking about this. I knew I wanted to do a piece, but didn't know how I'd get access to the accelerator. Luckily, I knew someone who knew someone: Lee Smolin is a physicist at a place called The Perimeter Institute For Theoretical Physics. He's in a piece I did called "about symmetry symmetry about" in which he talks about super symmetry and particle physics in relation to symmetry. Still, it took me a year just to get CERN to agree to grant me access. I filmed inside the tunnel and then I mounted my camera onto a rented car and drove-as a human neutrino-from Geneva to Gran Sasso. In the studio I sped up the footage. The piece is long-about 80 minutes-but its 500 frames per second. That was the speed that felt right to me-it was a visceral feeling.

I also did a two-channel installation called "16 minutes lost". In James Gleick's book *Faster: The Acceleration Of Just About Everything*, he said that we spend about 16 minutes a day looking for lost things. So I carried my camera around with me for 8 months and I filmed people trying to find things that they'd lost. The two-channels are projected directly into a corner, each image is 5 feet high by 7 feet long. The bottom of the projections are only about 20 inches from the floor. I wanted to keep it on a human scale. As soon as you enter the corner, you're overwhelmed by it.

Some of Phyllis Baldino's videos are available in single channel at Electronic Arts Intermix (www.eai.org), a leading nonprofit resource for video art and interactive media.

She will introduce and discuss "ParaUniVersesVersesVerses" at a special screening at **MOMA's Documentary Fortnight** on Saturday, February 11, 2006 at 4:00 PM.

