

YOUR

DIVIDED

ATTENTION

AMBIENT MEDIA ART AND LOOKING SIDWAYS

BY BRETT PHARES

*Looking sideways, always sideways, rejecting fixity of attention, drifting from the object to the context, escaping from the source of habit, from the customary seems to have become impossible. The perceived world ceases to be deemed worthy of interest...*¹ -Paul Virilio

The world floods our senses, and if it weren't for a set of natural neurological processes, we would lie paralyzed in a house of mirrors, mesmerized by the stimuli surrounding us.² Ironically, the same brain processes that allow us to get on with our daily life also make us blind to much of what goes on in the world. Add to this the increased narcissistic tendencies brought on by an incessant media environment easily customized to our idiosyncratic angles onto the world, and a growing tendency to migrate to like-minded social communities (both physical and virtual), a problem emerges in our individual and collective abilities to attend to the world as it is. The projects included in this monograph disrupt the innate masking off of different parts of the everyday with what I identify as ambient media art (AMA). AMA pre-empts the neurological processes that shape our attention, to overcome "our right to blindness"³ with something more provocative or poetic, in order to unlock and prompt fruitful opportunities towards individual growth and social discourse.

*The defining issue of our time is not the Iraq war, it is not the "global war on terror." It is not our inability (or unwillingness) to ensure that all Americans have access to affordable health care. Nor is it immigration, outsourcing, or growing income inequality. It is not education, it is not global warming, and it is not Social Security. The defining issue of our time is the media.*⁴ -Jamison Foser

It is clear that our relationship to media has become highly problematic. We have gone from three main television networks and a handful of newspaper outlets that looked and sounded much the same, to hundreds of cable access programs, thousands of reputable news web sites around the world and a billion blogs, representing more opportunities in accessing the kinds of information we want to see. Yet, in spite of 24/7 media serving up what you want, the way you want it, we are compelled towards a more narrow band of learning and comprehension. In her research on "Shout TV," University of Pennsylvania Professor Diana Mutz shows that the emotion generated by "in-your-face" television impairs our cognitive abilities. In spite of this, we do not walk away informed, only entertained. The real and more immediate problem of "Shout TV" and the polarization of the U.S.,⁵ is that we no longer engage each other for opposing perspectives, we "surround ourselves with ourselves."⁶

"With a huge range of media choices today," Dr. Mutz continues, "Americans can self-select what they want to hear, reinforcing their beliefs rather than broadening them with differing viewpoints."⁷ More has become less. That "serious" news, delivered through talk show formats, has evolved into the latest media spectacle, shouldn't come as a surprise. That this spectacle generates a forum for learning but for entertainment, where we are reassured by pundits spouting off without opinions and condemning those that don't, shouldn't surprise either. What should surprise is that we are now headed into mass narcissism, one enabled not just by media outlets, but by natural processes each of us possess, known as Neural Darwinism.⁸

Neural Darwinism explains human intelligence and consciousness through a combination of Darwin's theory of natural selection and the evolution of neural states. Gerald Edelman, Nobel Prize-winner and a leading neuro-biologist, has a fairly simple way to think about this process: "Neurons that fire together wire together."⁹ The more we become interested in a particular subject, the more we want to know more about it. Makes sense. What this also means is that our neurons not stimulated or strengthened by our individual interests or environment will die off, go dark. This process is likened to a "pruning" of sense experience, and neurons contribute to the strengthening or killing off of its family, or neuronal clusters. This process of pruning does not necessarily kill off the interest in a subject, but it can have the effect of masking the awareness of it. In other words, if the perceived world holds interest, according to the massing of certain neuronal clusters on certain subjects, the mind will be alerted to its presence, and will in turn direct us to attend to the subject. When there is no apparent interest, the conscious mind is not flagged and we pass by the object without a second glance.

The opportunities that this theory holds are tremendous, and help make sense of a number of idiosyncrasies we all possess. What it does for the social realm could be a different story, as it buttresses the problem in the polarization of communities, where socializing within our own persuasion is as therapeutic as only socializing with our self.

*The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.*¹⁰ -Guy Debord

If America has never been this polarized since the Civil War, then we face an uphill climb to recultivate an appreciation for the social realm. For Walter Benjamin or Guy Debord, the modern spectacle acted as antidote to 20th century forms of alienation. But they didn't note a difference in a healthy collective or a narcissistic nation. The cohesion provided by a phenomenon like spectacle created the veneer of substance in a democracy; spectacle without a true collective would seem to foster another dystopia.

We are natural spectators, caught in what Walter Benjamin identified as "reception in a state of distraction."¹¹ Benjamin considered the proliferation of media as a saturation of the horizon, "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction," and serves to expand our abilities to perceive. Yet, as Jonathan Crary pointed out in his book, *Suspensions of Perception*, "spectacular culture is not founded on the necessity of making a subject see, but rather on strategies in which individuals are isolated, separated, and inhabit time as disempowered."¹² Perhaps this is how the 21st century spectacle has become so much more efficient than its 20th century predecessor, for now the spectacle, at least in America, not only makes us feel like we haven't seen it before (when we have), and simultaneously makes us feel like we have seen it (when we haven't), but also imbues a sense of substance, that by sheer volume and repetition, makes it more convenient to find and communicate with others who look and sound like us, without the real substance that "social relations" as part of spectacle requires to live and breathe. Clearly, the 21st century version of spectacle is not the same animal that Benjamin had in his sights, and combined with the pruning of sense experience, puts us all in a precarious position to judge what goes on around us, and makes it exceedingly easy to mask off dissenting voices. One begins to see how an assault on our individual and social well-being can easily take root with us complicating in its future growth.

perceiving solutions

In normal day to day interactions, we get information in two main ways. First, we get information from what we are focusing on, where our center of attention is directed, [...] At the same time, we are also getting information from ambient sources. We may have a sense of the weather outside from ambient cues such as light, temperature, sound, and air flow from nearby windows. [...] In contrast to the conscious foreground processing [...], much of this ambient information is processed through background communication channels. Our goal[...] is to explore how we can take advantage of this natural parallel background processing using ambient media to convey information.

*One focus [...] of ambient media [would be] to subtly display and communicate information which is not the user's primary foreground task. [...] In the real world, when a process that was not a focus of attention catches our interest, we are often able to seamlessly integrate it into our activity. Realizing HCI analogs of this fuzzy, fluid boundary between background and foreground is a challenging research opportunity.*¹³

Ambient Media hold great promise not just for human/computer interfaces, but human/human interaction. Ambient Media take advantage of our highly sophisticated ways of handling multiple streams of sense data, especially those that take place in background processes. Ambient Media allow for abstract information to be presented in unmonopolizing ways, and has been shown to lend a sense of connectedness with others.¹⁴

Ambient Media is an area that has been gaining ground in the advertising industry, most notably in Europe. In 1999, Jane Barnes described Ambient Media as "temporary and unusual placements which take people by surprise, often connected with some event."¹⁵ Later in 2003, Kolja Wehle showed the development of Ambient Media and how it unites such media as washroom advertising, free postcards, cab advertising and point-of-sale displays. Most importantly, for advertising anyway, he produced corroborating data in evidence that Ambient Media contributes to improved responses in product acceptance.¹⁶

*An ambience is defined as an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint. My intention is to produce original pieces ostensibly [...] for particular times and situations with a view to building up a small but versatile catalogue of environmental music suited to a wide variety of moods and atmospheres. Whereas the extant canned music companies proceed from the basis of regularizing environments by blanketing their acoustic and spectroscopic background music is produced by stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all genuine interest) from the music, Ambient Music retains these qualities. And whereas their intention is to 'brighten' the environment by adding stimuli to it (thus supposedly alleviating the tedium of routine tasks and leveling out the natural ups and downs of the body rhythms) Ambient Music is intended to induce calm and a space to think. Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting.*¹⁷ -Brian Eno

Substituting "music" in Brian Eno's manifesto above with the words media art, brings the focus of my project closer to how I envision ambient media art [AMA]. Distilling what HCI, advertising and music have to say about AM is instructive in defining AMA: **highly contextual and time-specific, AMA is individual even eccentric, sometimes uncertain, seemingly lacking conviction, unconventional and poetic. AMA is also "ignorable as it is interesting," unmonopolizing, floating between foreground and background attention, and takes advantage of our natural ability to glean information from our immediate environment without effort. Above all, AMA creates alternative places to interpret, even interrogate, context.**

We have become so savvy at disregarding the media landscape, of knowing when a door-to-door salesman resembles a popup ad in a web browser, that we know exactly how to turn a blind eye to the plea for attention. And when we "find" media that speaks to our interests, we just as easily shutter ourselves from the world. Operating on the fringe, AMA works in the realm of background processes, to craft juxtapositions that can catalyze issues-oriented discussion and disrupt our selective masking.

in the end

In the end, the battle is between the ears. -Western diplomat in Beirut¹⁸

Knowing what we have to protect should be simple. We Americans have become masters at protecting our personal interests to the detriment of those at the social level, to the point of being enslaved by those qualities we abhor in our Protestant self, and in the government we elect to represent us.

The projects in this monograph focus on one particular problem, of "surrounding ourselves with ourselves." This problem can be broken up by various forms of ambient media art, offering different interpretations on a particular way of looking, with greater potential of catalyzing social action to balance the apparent need to be with one's selves.

Some examples of AMA scattered alongside this essay make use of a custom media engine to create **mediaDrifts**, continually refreshed juxtapositions of randomly-chosen copy and image. Similar to William Burrough's Cut-Ups,¹⁹ particularly in form, "mediaDrifts operate in the realm of Guy Debord's notion of derive, literally "drifting" as, "a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances."²⁰ While Debord's drift was more physically driven, his concept works for AMA, especially when he elaborated that, "Derives involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll."²²

mediaDrifts are simple little stories that breeze along at a fast clip, catching one's attention at odd moments with what seem like strange references to current events, forcing the viewer to make sense of the fractured media combinations. The text comes from news sources like *New York Times*, *Newsweek* and email spam excerpts; the images are from sources like Reuters and the public domain. Text can be stylized with some script fonts for a more personal voice, but normally the lines of copy are displayed in simple Helvetica, the voice of authority. Photographic imagery are blurred to comment on "deep focus" and its analogy to democracy,²³ to enhance the effect on our desire to make sense of the image when few hints exist. Depending on presentation, mediaDrifts include interstitial panels that display first-person lines like "hold me," in between the image/text panels.

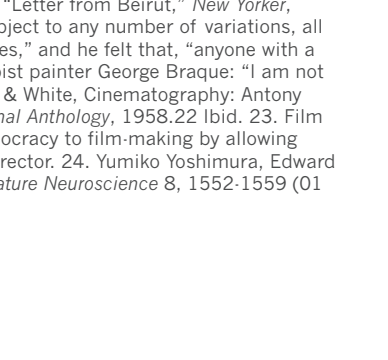
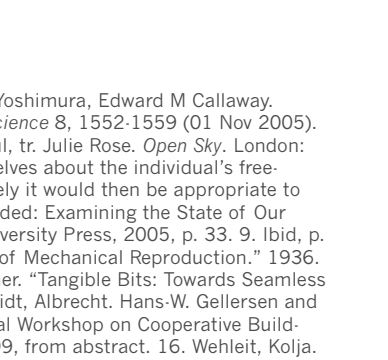
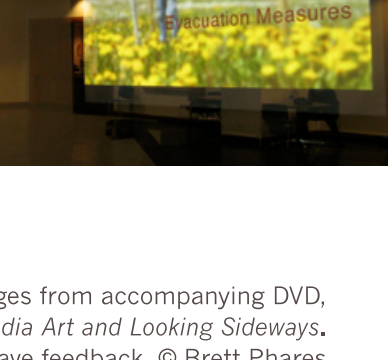
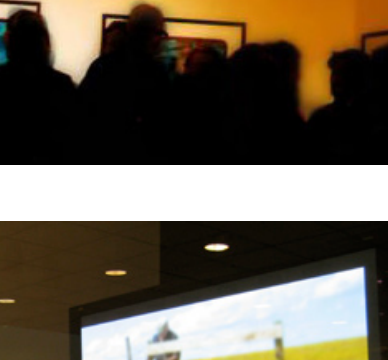
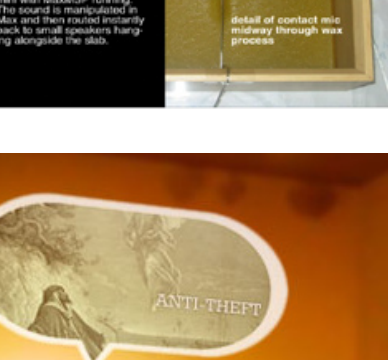
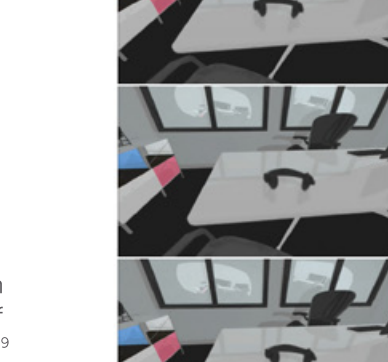
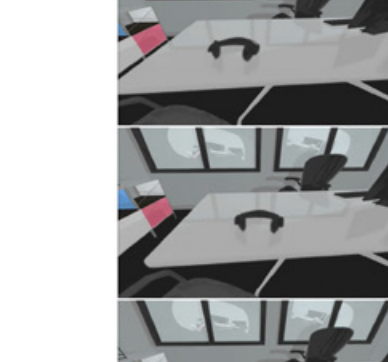
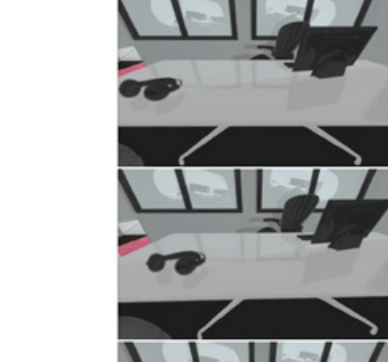
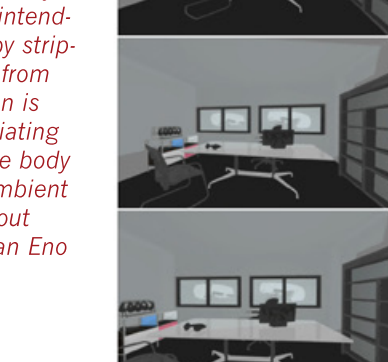
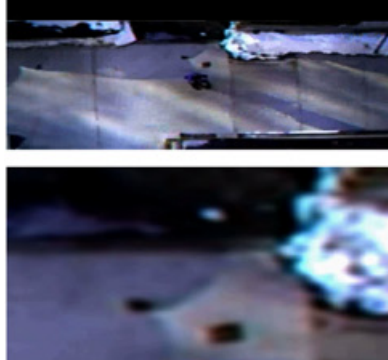
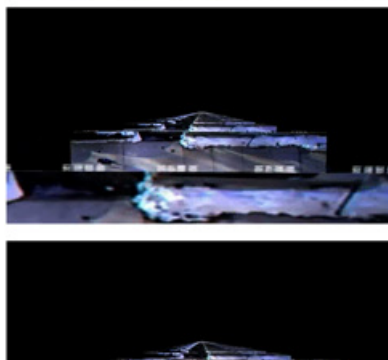
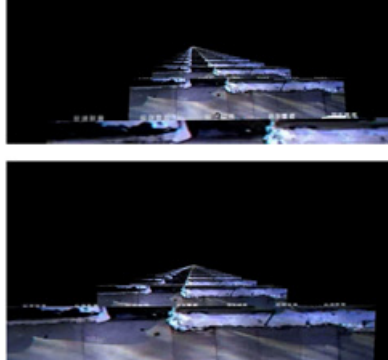
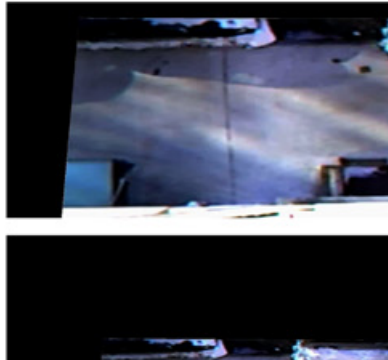
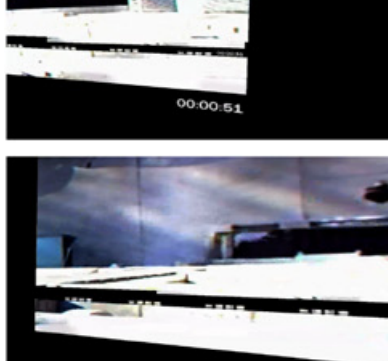
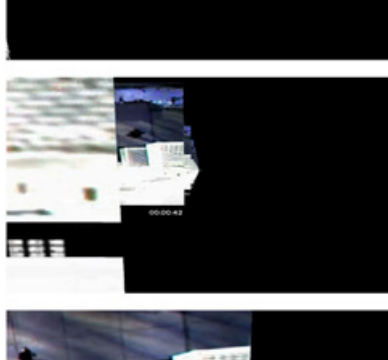
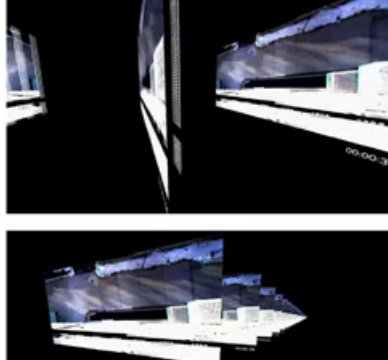
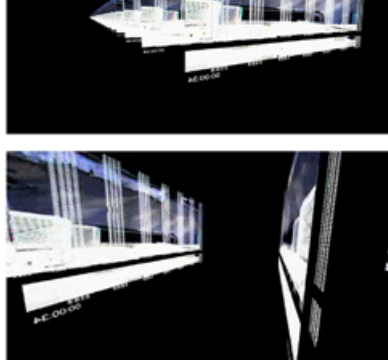
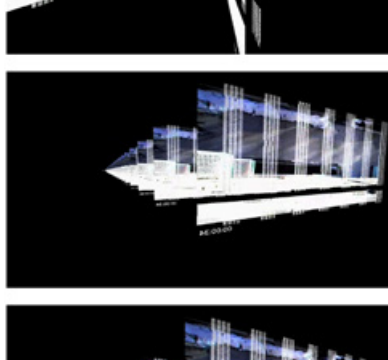
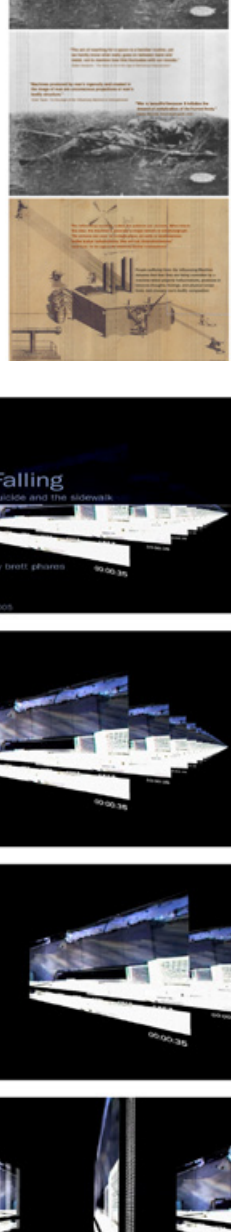
My AMA blend text and imagery with reactive sound and display (see *here*, *Full and Looking Sideways*) to affect viewer behavior. More sound: more talk; more definition; and conversely, less sound: less talk; less definition. The work might promote rudeness, with increased use of things that make more noise, like a car horn on the street, or a cell phone in an office lobby. The goal is to promote participation in the public realm, to contribute to the conversation, to expand on what might seem a point of view from a mediaDrift and push the viewer to ask around for clarity.

אם ירצה (הנד הנה) יסונו תהיה אף הנה אף הנה

As neurobiologists have shown, our brains enable a process where "the inhibitory neurons are not just brakes, they can also be used to steer,"²⁴ wish to re-emphasize that the processes that bring us to safety are also responsible for keeping us from experiencing the world afresh.

Ambient media art exists to be seen, but its juxtapositions and glimpses are about catching yourself in the mirror, glimpsing something from the corner of your eye, about seeing connections and associations you previously were unaware of in unlikely locations. To what end? To re-energize media interpretation, to increase understanding of context, to cultivate the desire learn again.

Utilizing traditional devices/channels that point back at its source, my work allows a viewer the opportunity to struggle with issues and ideas, to be critical of the beauty masking the message, to see the message beyond the context. Remixing and randomizing, my work takes from the world its headlines and imagery and combines them with familiar materials, to reveal how they contribute to the maintenance and fortification of our right to be deaf, dumb and blind. Perceiving the world is the first step to action, and while it might not seem like much, it's the place where we need to start, to loosen our self-imposed blinders and see the world as it is, and take the next step.



All images from accompanying DVD.

Your Divided Attention: Ambient Media Art and Looking Sideways. See <http://mrphares.com/YDA> for more information or to leave feedback. © Brett Phares

Notes

1. Virilio, Paul, tr. Julie Rose. *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*. Semiotext(e) Books, 1991, p. 47. 2. Yumiko Yoshimura, Edward M Callaway. "Fine-scale specificity of cortical networks depends on inhibitory cell type and connectivity", *Nature Neuroscience* 8, 1552-1559 (01 Nov 2005). If shown the scene in its entirety, there is evidence of how neurons also induce schizophrenia. 3. Virilio, Paul, tr. Julie Rose. *Open Sky*. London: Verso, 1997, p. 96. A basis for an ethics of perception, "it would surely be a good thing if we ... asked ourselves about the individual's freedom of perception and the threats brought to bear on that freedom by the industrialization of vision ... Surely it would then be appropriate to entertain a kind of right to blindness." 4. Foser, Jamison. *Media Matters*, May 26, 2006. 5. "A Country Divided: Examining the State of Our Union." 20/20, ABC News, June 30, 2006. 6. Ibid. 7. Ibid. 8. Edelman, Gerald. *Wider Than The Sky*. Yale University Press, 2005, p. 33. 9. Ibid, p. 29. 10. Debord, Guy. *Suspensions of the Spectacle*, (1967; #4)11 Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 1936. 12. Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of Perception*. The MIT Press, 2001, p.3. 13. Ishii, Hiroshi, and Brygg Ullmer. "Tangible Bits: Towards Seamless Interfaces between People, Bits and Atoms." MIT Media Laboratory. Tangible Media Group, 1997. 14. Schmidt, Albrecht. Hans W. Gellersen and Michael Beigl. "Matching Information and Ambient Media." Proceedings of CoBuild'99. Second International Workshop on Cooperative Building, Pittsburgh, 1999. 15. Barnes, Jane. "Creating a difference with ambient media." *Admap*, February 1999, from abstract. 16. Wehleit, Kolja. "Ambient media: the key to target group communication." *Admap*, May 2003, Issue 439. This article traces the development of ambient media from 1995 to 2001. 17. Eno, Brian. *Music for Airports*. liner notes, September 1978. 18. Anderson, Jon Lee. "Letter from Beirut." *New Yorker*, Issue of 2006-08-07. Unattributed quote. 19. "Any narrative passage or any passage of poetic images is subject to any number of variations, all of which may be interesting and valid in their own right — cut-ups establish new connections between images." and he felt that, "anyone with a pair of scissors could become a poet." Miles, Barry. *El Hombre Invisible*. Virgin Books, 1993. (Echoed by Cubist painter George Braque: "I am not so much interested in things as with their relationships with each other.") 20. *The Cut-Ups*. 1966. UK, Black & White. Cinematography: Antony Balch, Screenplay: William S. Burroughs. 21. Debord, Guy. "Theory of the Dérive," #2, *Situationist International Anthology*, 1958.22 Ibid. 23. Film theorist Andre Bazin said that Gregg Toland, cinematographer for Orson Welles among others, brought democracy to film-making by allowing viewers to discover what was interesting to them in a scene rather than having this choice dictated by the director. 24. Yumiko Yoshimura, Edward M Callaway. "Fine-scale specificity of cortical networks depends on inhibitory cell type and connectivity", *Nature Neuroscience* 8, 1552-1559 (01 Nov 2005).