

Aperture On A Virtual Field

by Douglas Crase

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APERTURE ON A VIRTUAL FIELD

Douglas Crase

I had the good luck to encounter Michelle Jaffé's room-sized installation, *Wappen Field*, at the Bosi Contemporary gallery in New York early in August 2012. I'd earlier seen and listened to her sparer work, *Awakening*, at the Sylvia Wald and Po Kim Gallery. Both were memorable, and *Wappen Field* in particular placed a claim that is not easily put to rest. I thought it achieved a kind of sublime, a kind I once had proposed in the context of poetry as the *evolutional* sublime. The thought takes some explaining, but because I believe it demonstrates the importance of both works I'm going to venture an explanation here.

Jaffé has said of *Wappen Field* that it asks us to consider "what we, as human beings, share in common instead of focusing on what divides us." On the evidence of the installation, she couldn't mean this as the blameless sentiment we think. It certainly does not describe my reaction as I turned from the sidewalk to the glass-fronted gallery and was there confronted by a phalanx of twelve impassively gleaming helmets, suspended at face height and seemingly locked on the whites of my eyes. Instead of our common humanity, I was impelled to consider in haste how we as a species are alien, to others, each other, the planet, and ourselves. In the game plan of those helmets I didn't register even as an impediment.

Michelle Jaffé
Wappen Field





They made a deep phalanx, too, in staggered ranks of five, four, and three helmets each, such that an end run was inadvisable. In short, I was toast.

In the meantime, they sure were beautiful. High-tech but Homeric, faces both of fashion and terror, they presented the innocent art-goer with a perfect occasion to reflect on the distinction between things beautiful and things sublime. That distinction, which properly refers not to the objects but the experience they elicit, has become more popular in art discourse than it used to be. You can raise it without fear of hyperbole, and this, too, no doubt encouraged me to my thought.

Of course they weren't really helmets, not even if Jaffé's title prompts us to think of them that way. The German *wappen* (she pronounces it with the *v* and not a *w*) means coat of arms, which naturally will inspire a visitor to parse the English as a *field* of battle. One might interpret it as any contested territory, I suppose, or as the expanded field that sculpture has long since won. A diagnostic essay on site-specific art, published by Rosalind Krauss in 1979, was called "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." But the truth is, battlefield or abstract territory, the objects that confronted me weren't really helmets. They were fire extinguishers.

It took Jaffé nine years of directed patience to bring *Wappen Field* from conception to its exhibition at Bosi, although the work was substantially complete a year earlier when it was installed at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She had been far along in its creation when she learned that the helmet-shaped objects of her design would cost more to manufacture than she could budget for the entire project. The fire extinguishers were a sudden insight. Each empty canister was refashioned into the minatory shape I could now see, and the effect was made the more fearsome by her decision to have the resulting objects chrome-plated. Economy aside, they certainly looked expensive. They were all polished indifference. They betrayed nothing of an interior being, but amassed their effect by sequence, one gleaming object after another. In such manner these helmets (for now that we've made our point we can call them that again) revealed their impeccable minimalist lineage.

In early minimalist work the sequence itself had to supply the dynamic that keeps art interesting. Today, we might reason that repetition increases the probability of an emergent order. Complexity theory has pointed the way. Once I regained my nerve, for example, and had penetrated the first rank of helmets in *Wappen Field*, I could see the others advance or shift position to intercept me from the periphery. More dramatically, I saw that the forbidding, convex visors that first confronted us were, on their reverse, vulnerable and concave. They were vacant, ready to try on. Each helmet, now recognized more accurately as the visor part of a helmet, has a narrow aperture horizontally incised at eye height. Believe me, it will not be long before you as the visitor have put your head inside, there to exchange your observer's overview for the restricted squint of one of the visored guard. Outside the convex, you were threatened. Inside the concave you are the threatener. The polarity, which remains unresolved, is enough all by itself to make *Wappen Field* a minimalist success.

There was a time when a minimalist success, especially in music, was a liberation so extended one could hardly want to go beyond it. Judd's boxes were thrilling, but *Music for 18 Musicians* was meant to free the bound quarks. The repressions that too soon intervened—the social, ideological, and informational enormities—made the style seem optimistic, too innocent, perhaps, to be believed. It had come to seem, John Ashbery once observed, “as quaint as a Shaker rocker.” So the post-minimalist response was to counter skepticism with information, to add allusive content (helmets, rather than boxes) while

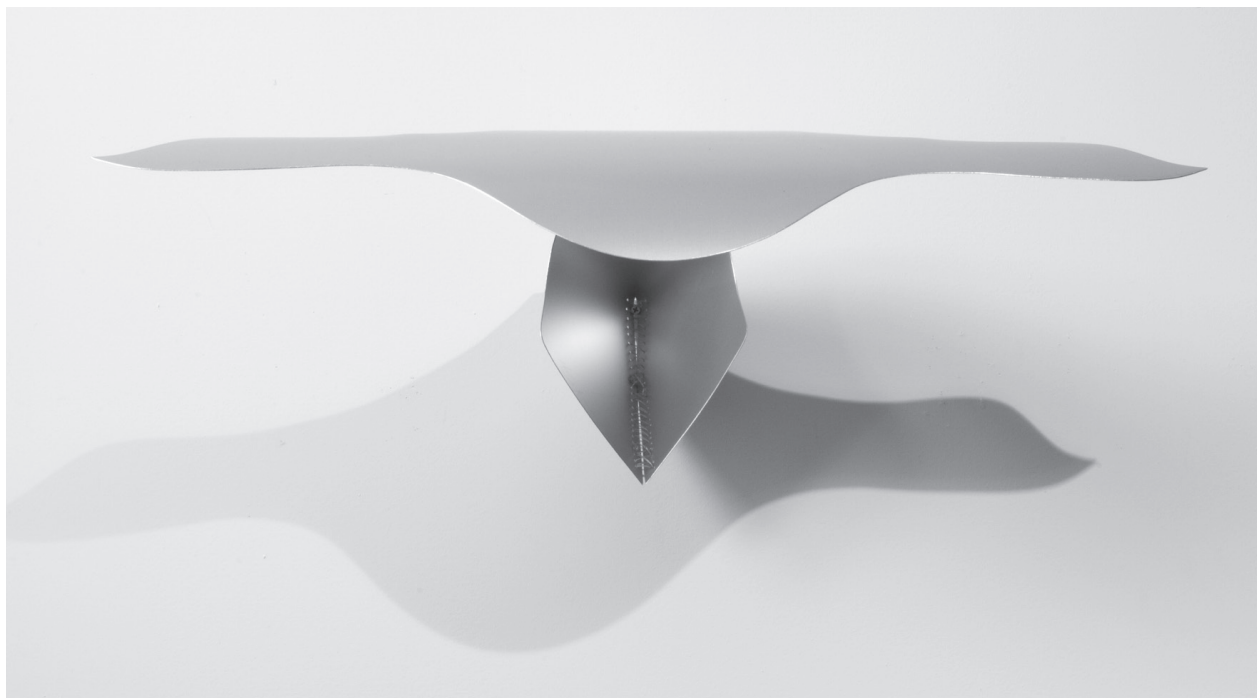
reducing the redundant assertions of form. One might also add media. Sculpture added light or sound. Michelle Jaffé adds both.

I say she added them, when it's obvious from *Wappen Field* that this is not the case. The thin shields of light she projected on the floor beneath each helmet are there to counteract our sense of gravity, which otherwise might weigh the helmets down to earth. One perceives immediately the shields of light and only later the chaste rods that suspend the helmets from a framework at the ceiling. Photographs, by collapsing space, collapse the timing of that perception. On site it's the shields (perhaps they are the *wappen*) which seem to hold each helmet aloft, as if on a column of invisible memory. And because Jaffé's light thus toys with gravity, because it alters the perceived mass of her installation, it was clearly sculptural. It is not an add-on; the work would not survive without it.

When you put your head into one of the helmets, you discover that Jaffé has sculpted in a similar way with sound. The helmets, though they betrayed no interior life from without, are all commotion within. As your visual field narrows to the visorlike aperture, your auditory field expands. It expands in an onrush of unintelligible vocables—unintelligible, that is, as discourse, while perfectly intelligible as prelingual emergencies of being. Among them I could identify anxiety; but also anger, surprise, relief, erotic chatter, gutturals such as those that betoken wisdom, reverence, grief, and even prelingual pretense.

The sounds were not off-the-shelf, either, nor adventitious. Jaffé worked with composer Ayelet Rose Gottlieb to create vocal sound events, which were performed and recorded by Gottlieb and six other vocalists. Jaffé and the software artist David Reeder then reconfigured the recorded events by means of the open-source program SuperCollider. The resulting sonic flux is routed through the suspending rods to speakers in each helmet. Because the sound is algorithmically spatialized and recomposed, no two persons in separate helmets will hear the same thing at the same time. Most visitors, who seem instinctively to recognize this separation, move from one helmet to another, their sound plane shifting as they go.

The contrast posed by the serene visage of each successive helmet and the visceral unrest within, is frankly spooky. Once you have seen the serenity, once you have heard the chorus of mammalian aspiration and complaint, you may wonder all over again what humans share in common that the other species don't. The query must have been there from the start; conceptually, it was one



of Jaffé's media and she sculpted it in. She has always been interested in what she calls "the pre-cognitive." In fact, she qualified that statement of hers, the one about *Wappen Field* and our shared humanity, by referring immediately to the "limbic brain" that drags us into repeated conflict. Apparently, what we share in common is that we are fatal to one another.

The field I encountered at Bosi Contemporary had been thus a reminder of all those interminable fields where the vanished bodies leave only secrets for us to listen to. The allusion was strengthened at the gallery by the placement, beyond the helmets, of silent works that resembled cast-off armor; namely, codpieces. Sensuously realized by Jaffé in anodized aluminum, they called to mind the proud equipment that was discarded on the field, or seized as trophies after the slaughter was done. More fatefully, these anodized jockstraps were that same armor in resplendent storage, silently building up pressure for the war to come. I'm indulging the distant perspective (you can almost hear "Taps") when it's just as plausible that the armor was funded by Homeland Security. It will be deployed by the officers in the helmets to crush dissent. This, then, was an exemplary use of gallery space. The anodized artifacts functioned as evidence that what you experienced in *Wappen Field* was imminent as well as historically real.

In your position at any helmet, the limbic experience that had registered in the brain was not only personalized; it was frequently isolating. Thanks to SuperCollider the sounds came according to an indifferent flux, rising sometimes from the field, approaching sometimes from the back or sides, but continually stretching or contracting your apprehension of the field. Sometimes—a deeper surprise—the groans seemed to emanate from you, yourself. You had become the alien, trapped in this alien phalanx on a planet where you never intended to be born. Jaffé, having changed your apprehended space by means of sound, made it clear that sound is a sculptural medium, too.

She is surely not the first to make the point. Max Neuhaus insisted that sound was a spatial medium, and this has been the traditional way to think of it in three-dimensional sculpture ever since. The question is whether three dimensions were enough. Christoph Cox, a pacesetter philosopher of sound who began his career with a book on Nietzsche and progressed from there to a critique of sound art, argues that sound, as used in sculpture, is indeed more than spatial. He thinks it adds a dimension of time, not as clock time, but as a

kind of temporal sublime. He also maintains with earnest, perhaps unwitting charm that sound art is “under-theorized.”

It seems impossible there could be anything left in art that needs more theory. But I’m willing to believe that Cox is right. Deploying an amalgam of Nietzsche and the currently rehabilitated Bergson, he aims to reconceptualize sound by separating it into two categories. One is actualized sound, the attentional sound of a musical composition or lecture. The other is virtual sound, the unceasing, unattended sonic flux we thought was noise until John Cage offered us an aperture for its appreciation in his famous silent piece, *4’33”*.

Sculpture, when it advanced on the expanded field, did so partly in search of analogues for Cage’s breakthrough. One of those analogues was Walter De Maria’s *Lightning Field*, installed in 1977 on a high plain in western New Mexico. The irony of *4’33”* had been that it required a concert setup, complete with seated audience and David Tudor at the silent piano, to frame the virtual sound one otherwise might hear by simply listening. The irony of *The Lightning Field* was that it required a grid of 400 stainless steel poles, placed 220 feet apart on a remote plateau, to frame the planetary weirdness of our planet, which, but for lack of attention, one might observe anywhere nearby if not anywhere else. Jaffé brought those two ironies of framing together in one installation. This was *Awakening*, which I saw in the spring of 2012. In that work, she used Cage’s idea of virtual sound to rescue De Maria’s virtual space.

The plan of *Awakening* was breathtaking in economy; as economical in its way as *4’33”*. Jaffé traveled to *The Lightning Field*, which is notoriously difficult to visit. It admits annually no more than eleven hundred visitors, six at a time, who must stay overnight in the single cabin. Photographs and videos are not allowed. The well-known photos you’ve seen were authorized. Perversely, although it is meant to reveal a dynamic tapestry of light, dark, and atmosphere when visited in person (it is said to be glorious at dawn), *The Lightning Field* has become for most of us a static postcard instead. Jaffé recorded what you might hear there during twenty-six minutes and twenty seconds after dawn. At the gallery she placed seven fluorescent tubes, fixed horizontally to the walls ten inches above the floor. On the floor she left two pillows, so visitors would take the hint and sit. The gallery light was dimmed, the tubes glowed thin-atmosphere blue as if on a high horizon, and with the assist of strategically positioned speakers the dawn began. Coyotes yip and wail, the wind drones, insects chitter, the ravens

croak, and one takes flight with wingbeats so percussive you are inclined to duck.

In a recent travel essay, the writer Geoff Dyer described his experience at *The Lightning Field* as intense. He described its light and dark and distance; but he never mentioned sound. Not a yip, wail, croak, or buzz. Perhaps sound is under-theorized, after all. I can certainly attest that the allusive playback of Jaffé's *Awakening* did for my static image of a famous field—and, by extension, any field on the turning earth—what 4'33" once did for noise. It opened an aperture on the unattended space by framing that space in the sound of time.

According to Christoph Cox, the difference between actualized sound (a composition) and virtual sound (such as Jaffé brought back from New Mexico) will correspond to the distinction in Nietzsche between being and becoming, or the distinction made by Bergson between quotidian time and duration, *les temps* and *la durée*. To my mind, there is something beguiling about that latter distinction, *la durée*; rather too beguiling, like finding out there really is an eternity. Cox is confident, however, that there is nothing essentialist at its base. More to the point, then, I would like to know how he would distinguish the sounds, composed but algorithmically reconfigured, that emerge from the helmets of *Wappen Field*.

I think I can guess. There is good minimalist authority for linking the flux of perception which precedes a work of art to Bergson's concept of durational time. None other than Donald Judd cast his appreciation for the paintings of Pollock and Barnett Newman in just such terms. The thought and emotion of their work, said Judd, was "underlying, durable, and concerned with space, time and existence. It's what Bergson called 'la durée.'" But Cox goes beyond Judd. He implies that the installation artist—Jaffé being our example—may sculpt from duration the way Cage composed music from duration, not by process of analogy, but by providing in the work itself an aperture that opens directly onto durational time. Cage and the post-minimalists, he writes, "posed a notion of time as duration and proposed an infinite, open process in which presence and completeness are forever deferred, a boundless flow that engulfs the auditor or spectator in a field that he or she can never totalize."

Well, there you have it: the answer I was looking for. That boundless, engulfing flow is not a bad description of the unintelligible commotion that issues from the concave interiors of the helmets in *Wappen Field*. Once again, it appears they weren't really helmets. They were portals, through which I could overhear the virtual, sonic field of a species whose existence was but

one possibility in durational time. By the same token, the fluorescent tubes of *Awakening* weren't blue-fingered dawn. They were foils to bewitch the eye and focus the ear; transports to the alien sonic events that occur as this oddest of planets spins, and accomplishes unacknowledged what should stupefy us every day with disbelief.

A boundless, engulfing flow is not a bad start, either, toward a description of the sublime. In the nineteenth century, if you wanted to confront the sublime, you stood on a pinnacle of the world and looked into the abyss of geological evolution. Time flowed boundlessly to your transparent eyeball. You were "glad to the brink of fear," as Emerson said. People got this thrill in upstate New York. The fortunate, who can afford the admission and travel, may get it still at Marfa, *The Lightning Field*, or *Spiral Jetty*, although those are increasingly destinations of privilege. Imagine the carbon track entailed. Nor are they under-theorized, which must eventually compromise their brink of fear.

Jaffé's models of the sublime, by contrast, are each transportable. *Awakening* can be set up anywhere, like a tent. And *Wappen Field*, we know, was installed initially in Michigan, where it was popular with the art-going public and featured on local Fox TV. I don't doubt that Fox TV can compromise the sublime. But it would be nihilism in the extreme to deny that a free quotient of Michiganders, conscious beyond the media, could discover in art more than enough of wonder to redeem their state.

Wherever it goes, one thing that will be said of *Wappen Field* is that the helmets are beautiful. They are too beautiful, in fact, to be sublime. Regarding their ranks from the front, or recollecting in tranquility from the back, you can always take the distant view. It's a comfort, that view, the way "Taps" is comforting. It elevates you above the fray; and visitors who go through the installation in a hurry can probably preserve their elevation. On the field itself, brought to attention in the helmets, their sense of comfort would begin to fall away. In place of the visually serene order they will hear the ceaseless, reconfiguring field of vocal skirmishing. It was inevitable that someone, if not this writer, would compare that field to the philosopher's concept of durational time, or the composer's virtual sound. But there was a better comparison we might make to the same effect. We can think of *Wappen Field* as a field in quantum physics, and conceive its sound as the unrealized events that are

propagating there as waves. Seen, or rather heard like that, the vocables one hears through any helmet become the constituent sounds that someday may evolve a species. They are those sounds before they actualized as language or collapsed into inanimate entropy. To hear through one of the helmets was to hear back in time, the way a telescope looks back in time while focused on a distant nebula.

When we express our fate in terms of grandeur we are still, of course, indulging the distant view. We are regarding it *sub specie aeternitatis*, as the philosophers used to say, “under the aspect of eternity.” This too is a comfort, since it presumes our fate has been a success. Knowingly, or because she couldn’t help it as an artist, Jaffé removed the safety of that beautiful view. She made sure our view would be limited, as it is in life, by the armor that protects us. She approached the sublime not by making us grander, but by inserting each passing individual as an alien—inarticulate, helmeted—in the indifferent flux she defined by sound. I call it indifferent because, thanks to SuperCollider, you can never rely on what is coming next. There will be no time-out for “Taps.” Caught, even momentarily in that field, is to be sonically subject to a sentient but thoughtless universe, not even grist in its evolutionary will to power. It would be only human to resist.

One could make a case that the traditional sublime, the view from the mountaintop, influenced profoundly the art and science of its time; probably the politics, too. In the guise of romanticism, it was widely perceived. People haven’t widely perceived the evolutionary sublime. You don’t climb a mountain to see it. Because it comes to us in private; because our bodies are ordinary to ourselves and lovers; because we measure it in blood pressure, orgasms, sonograms, and exiguous decades; it seems only *our* birth, *our* death, *our* fever. We measure it in policies and negotiation as if it were *our* war and *our* climate rather than what it is, the indifferent thunder of evolution in anonymous flesh. There is the new abyss.

The thing is to confront it. That is why these works by Michelle Jaffé matter. She is never strident; her installations refuse to give up their subtlety. She can sneak their effect right past the media. Whether in the immersive dimensions of *Wappen Field* or the exquisite chamber work *Awakening*, she has opened apertures on the sublime which render it visible, audible, and imminent.