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Cultures of light : contemporary trends in museum exhibition

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CONCLUSION

Pictured below is a contemporary lightwork by German artist Helga Griffiths (1959-) entitled *Identity Analysis* (2003) (fig. 5.1). The illustration captures only one of the installation's incarnations, since the work did not take the same form in each exhibition location. The original work, *Identity Analysis*, was first exhibited at the Havana Biennial in 2003 where no mirrors were used and the installation space appears to be considerably brighter than in its subsequent exhibitions. A variation, *Identity Analysis II*, was first shown at the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in Oslo, Norway in 2004. In this installation 12 mirrors were added and the exhibition space was significantly darker, producing a high contrast between the seemingly endless darkness and the glowing objects. The viewer enters a darkened room illuminated exclusively by a room-filling atmosphere of ultraviolet light which causes an eerie green glow to originate from the suspended test tubes and Petri-dishes which are arranged in a spiral shape at the centre of the gallery. Mirrors encircle the viewer, producing fractured and sporadic vistas of the artwork and the viewer himself.

When the viewer enters the installation they are free to walk around the central spiral where they encounter other viewers and even glimpses of themselves silhouetted against a backdrop of glowing strands. Intertwined with the wall-like spiral of test tubes are fluorescent tubes which emit both visible light in the blue-violet range and also invisible ultra-violet radiation which reacts with the Fluorescein in the scientific receptacles. Both types of cylinders hang down from the ceiling in a cascade of light where they meet the Petri-dished arranged in a concordant spiral on the floor in which striated black lines appear. The title of this series of works, *Identity Analysis*, is suggestive: on the one hand it implies a comment on the notion of identity as a sort of bringing together (identity being that which is supposed to guarantee the individual's unity across time and, on a larger scale, that which ties communities together), and on the other a comment on analysis as a kind of pulling apart signifying the way identity is a construction that is never whole or unitary and that can never be totally penetrated.

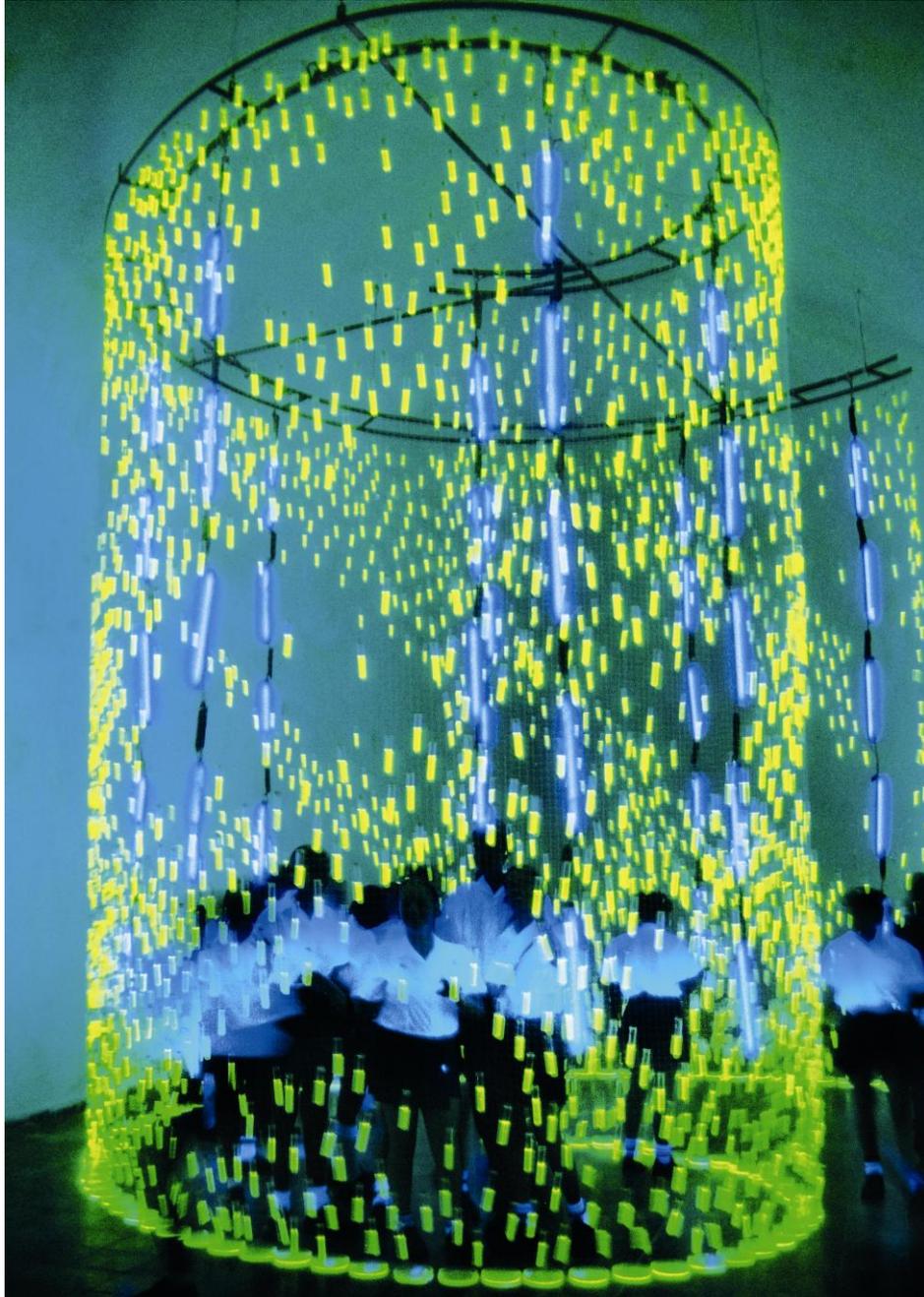


Figure 5.1. Helga Griffiths. *Identity Analysis*. Havana Biennial, 2003.

Griffiths' installation work reveals some of the most private and hidden information any human being can publicly disclose. The artist remarks in an interview that:

In this installation I reveal myself, displaying my genetic structure [...]. The installation, which shows my body or its genetic structure with its most personal information, allows the visitor to enter into the most inner sphere of my being and opens a new perspective, in which the visitor can view this abstract, architectonic body from the inside and put it into relation to his own body.¹

She allows us to metaphorically enter her body and view the coded information of her genetic composition. Not only has Griffiths chosen to disclose unique biological information but she has done so in a very public and engaging way, through the use of what Bal has called the “semantically empty” medium of light. Griffiths publicly exhibits her genetic composition by infusing the medium with rhetorical content. Her larger-than-life sized piece, in which an overall spiral configuration can be observed, relates to the double stranded helix arrangement of the recently decoded human genome. Griffiths has created an abstract, but at the same time very concrete, version of the human genome through which viewers can walk, as if they were entering a “universe of fluorescent body cells”.

This installation represents the genetic DNA code of one unique, individual human being, and by extension the entire human race. How much more inclusive, and at the same time individualistic, could Griffiths be? She accomplishes this by deploying four thousand test tubes and Petri-dishes filled with fluorescein solution, a compound used in forensics and serology to detect latent blood stains; among other uses, for example, as a food additive commonly known as D&C Yellow no. 7. Fluorescein “shines with a mysterious, almost other-worldly green light, when it is being illuminated by ultraviolet light”. At once, Griffiths engages with the discourses of both medical ethics and exhibitionism. With this lightwork, she confronts head-on the current debate on the privacy of personal information and its potential misuse through, for example, identity theft. This exhibit is an exposé exposing herself and the larger body politic, as if to say that the proliferation of personal information (of being known down to the basic building blocks of one's self) and the ensuing potential for identity theft is a scandal that ought to be dealt with in an equally public way. This

¹ All Griffith quotations have been drawn from “Expanding the Horizons of Space Perception: A Dialogue with Christian Huther”. Available at < <http://www.helgagriffiths.de/interviews/20041116%20kunstforum.html>>. Accessed 14.02.09.

form of exhibitionism not only brings to the publicly-accessible surface kernels of information in a coded way, but it does so by using the tool of light.



Figure 5.2. Helga Griffiths. *Identity Analysis II*, detail. Øystein Thorvaldsen, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter. Oslo, Norway, 2004.

Genetic markers are brought to light with light. By breaking with the traditional external representation of the body, by abstracting herself and equating identity with the barcodes of her genetic composition, Griffiths at once makes herself more visible “by allowing the visualization of nanoworlds and the interchange of visible perceptible worlds” and less visible, since except to geneticists, her DNA looks much like everyone else’s. Figure 5.2 illustrates Griffiths’ genetic profile graphically, in the Petri dishes which are spirally organized on the floor of the exhibition space, abstractly depicting the double-helix strand of the now familiar DNA molecule. This intertwined helix can be seen in the installation shot (fig. 5.3) as a “rain” of test tubes in the visual array of the viewer.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this study there are several discourses or cultures of light at work in the museum environment. *Identity Analysis* is a lightwork which addresses all four cultures of light that I have investigated and analysed in the space of this study. Looking at one specific work of a contemporary artist thus allows me to draw the disparate strands of this study together and to make some concluding remarks about the exhibition of light.

Firstly, *Identity Analysis* speaks to the notion that light as a medium is at first a “semantically empty” substance through which ideas may be transmitted. Emanating from the Petri-dishes illustrated above, the effects of ultraviolet light illuminate a barcode-like representation of the artist’s genetic profile. The barcodes are actually created by the alternation of light and dark stripes which represent the building blocks of Griffiths’ genetic profile. I argue that these stripes are a memorial trace or stain that represents a very specific human subject. In this respect, light is no longer “semantically empty”, but rather full of meaning; that is, Griffiths has infused it with a message. The message being that to expose personal information to the public is controversial. The message transmitted through light as a medium is a graphic, abstract depiction of the artist herself. The metaphor of a biological, growing medium is brought literally to light by illuminating the building blocks of human genetic composition with another medium, the medium of light. The fact that this message comes through the light-emitting compound in the Petri-dishes reminds the viewer that human life grows from these building blocks, which are depicted by light and, in the case of the dark strips, its absence. As the viewer actively engages with the installation, by walking amidst the helix-configured test tube strands, the viewer sees a fractured representation of himself, which is actually his changing reflection seen in multiple mirrors. The installation changes the way the viewer sees himself, thus addressing the notion of light as a communication medium. The dialogic relationship that is established between viewer and work engages the notion of narrativity in

exhibitions by arguing that the installation tells a story, both about the artist and about the viewer.

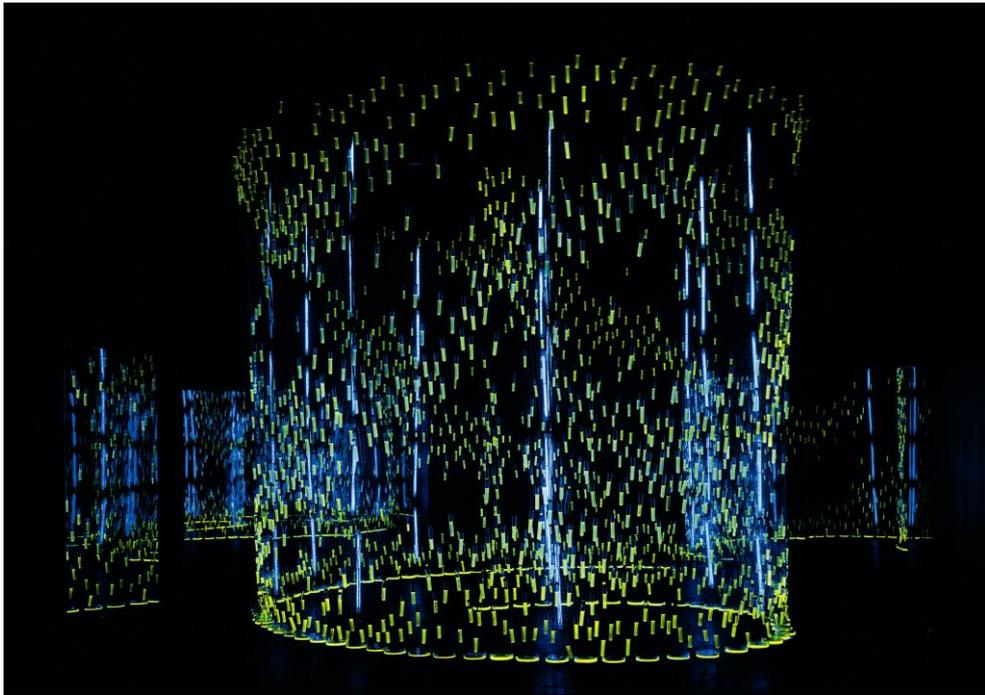


Figure 5.3. Helga Griffiths. *Identity Analysis II*, installation view. Øystein Thorvaldsen, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter. Oslo, Norway, 2004.

The use of light is not constant in this piece; it changes from a uniformly distributed, visible, violet ether-like light into a localized, green, glowing substance when its electro-magnetic properties come into contact with the amalgam in the test tubes and Petri-dishes. The medium of light in this installation has two functions. Firstly, light has a mediating function. That is, it transfers meaning and ideas from artist to viewer. I contend that light is the conduit through which a coded message is sent that there is a new discontinuity between what is personal and what is private, as well as a new perspective on identity, and that Griffiths has something to say about this. Secondly, light in this piece has an affective function. Affective force, a “dynamic process of intensity circulating between the work and the viewer”, is incubated and

intensified by the aid of light.² Because the installation is darkened, because we can literally walk through it, and because ultraviolet light saturates the space (enlightens the air, so to speak), the medium of light seems to penetrate the flesh of our bodies and touch our senses. Entering through the organ of the eyes, the medium engages with other senses of our bodies such as touch and causes viewers to have an embodied experience with *Identity Analysis*. We as viewers not only see a geometric abstraction of another human, but through the affective force of the installation, viewers are able to envision their own embodied code in the same material form, aided by the effects of light (directly and reflected by the mirrors).

Secondly, I suggest that Griffiths engages the viewer discursively with the effects of light, that is, the artist tells a story through the deployment of light. *Identity Analysis* engages in a self-reflexive discourse with the viewer. Like the period rooms discussed in chapter two, this installation, through the effects of the strategy of its illumination, creates a narrative about identity and how it is constructed and used in the public sphere. In addition, the three-dimensional depiction of the genome as something we can walk through points to the way the genome itself is inherently narrative: it can reveal that we are predisposed to contracting a particular malady, syndrome or life-threatening disease, and possibly even predict our natural lifespan.

Chapter two was also about how the use of light is both historically and culturally specific. The use of light in this artwork is closely linked to the present time, or the digital age. A connection can be made here between this artwork and the current trend in night clubs which encourages the use of glow sticks by the patrons in conjunction with the increased use of ultraviolet light in the contemporary entertainment scene. DJ's have migrated to digital media from vinyl records and lighting technology has advanced to the extent that light-jockeys can now flood a space instantaneously with pulses of ultraviolet light that penetrate the body enabling the glow sticks to become dancing light messages similar to the test-tubes in *Identity Analysis*. Through the strands of glowing test tubes, which remind the viewer that he is walking through an exploded, abstract depiction of the structures of his own body, the viewer's perception of himself is altered, similar to an experience one might have in a nightclub. As in a nightclub, the installation also makes the viewer look at others, while the radiant Petri-dishes engage the viewer in a discourse about the origins of the human species, tying in with contemporary discussions about evolution and genetic medicine. The narrative told through light in this installation is thus emphatically linked to a particular period in history. The pictorial composition of the installation

² Bal, M. Personal correspondence on 27.01.2009.

deploys light as a narrative tool to relate Griffiths' perspective on various contemporary debates, on her own identity, and, most emphatically, on creation. In this sense, the installation can be compared to illuminated manuscripts of the middle ages where other creation myths are depicted didactically. This narrative work of display not only tells and questions a possible story of origin, but in this piece, the viewer is literally put in the story and picture – *mise en scene* – by his own mirrored reflections, led to question himself and his own story as well.

A link can also be drawn between this installation and the exhibition I discussed in chapter two. In *Dangerous Liaisons* mirrors were liberally used not only to facilitate different views of the mannequins, but also to reflect light and an orienting image of the viewer. As a result of the placement of mirrors in *Identity Analysis II*, they also serve to reflect light and facilitate views of others viewers experiencing the installation at the same time. But the mirrors in *Identity Analysis II* disorient and abstract the viewer, as opposed to the orienting function of mirrors and light in *Dangerous Liaisons*. Another aspect of Griffiths' work that relates to *Dangerous Liaisons* is the way localized illumination is used to focus the viewers' attention. In all of the tableaux, but especially in "The Withdrawing Room" (fig. 2.1e) and "The Card Game" (fig. 2.1i), a localized brightness illuminates key aspects of the exhibits. In *Identity Analysis* localized brightness is deployed in a similar manner. The light confined to, but at the same time emanating from, the Petri-dishes serves to highlight a central aspect of the installation, displaying the building blocks of human life arraigned in a spiral resembling the helix configuration of the DNA molecule.

Thirdly, ultraviolet light is a variable and active agent that can transform the viewer. The ultraviolet-induced visible fluorescence or the practice of using ultraviolet radiation to reveal hidden attributes of an object discussed in chapter three functions dramatically in Griffiths' installation too. Ultraviolet light acts as an agent that reveals coded messages; it also operates by blanketing or enveloping not only the artwork but also the bodies of its viewers. Thus, the installation seems to unite the use of ultraviolet light as a display medium in the mineral exhibition, with the way ultraviolet light is used in Schumann's installation and with the way ultraviolet light traces change in Mondriaan's paintings. Here, ultraviolet light is itself a variable element of the artwork as it moves between exhibition spaces. As a tool of scientific illustration, ultraviolet light reveals the barcode-like bands in the Petri-dishes containing fluorescein. In Schumann's exhibition the viewer is virtually transported by the aid of ultraviolet light into an artistic landscape. Viewers of *Identity Analysis* are in effect also transformed into voyagers traversing the topography of the human genome. And ultraviolet light facilitates a below-the-surface look at the building blocks of human

genetic identity similar to the penetrating non-invasive look below the surface of Mondriaan's work.

The illumination of *Identity Analysis* further creates a "total installation" in a style similar to Kabakov's installations where the effect of light creates a total luminous atmosphere by which viewers are surrounded and engulfed. This mode of illumination addresses the viewer through a discourse of scientific discovery and investigation. The illuminated atmosphere not only causes the fluorescein to glow but it also causes elements of the viewer's clothing to fluoresce. This creates yet another visual link between the artwork and the viewer. By looking at their own glowing reflection in the mirrors, viewers are cajoled to make a mental connection between themselves and the discourse of light created by the work.

Fourthly and finally, in *Identity Analysis*, darkness or the absence of light contributes to the narrative of the installation by enveloping and perhaps penetrating the body of the viewer. The darkness that surrounds the installation seems endless. With the exception of the effects of the ultraviolet light, the absence of other wavelengths of visible light creates an atmosphere in which attention is drawn to specific elements of the artwork, specifically the test tubes and Petri-dishes but also the "dripping strands" of fluorescent ultraviolet tubes. By situating the later piece in a significantly darkened space, the work creates a sense of physical and psychological immediacy not present in the earlier installation. Here, the absence of light actively contributes to the semantic dialogue by sending a coded message, as if saying, metaphorically, when it comes to the mysteries of the human genetic code and the consequences of its public use we may all still be in the dark.

Griffiths' work thus helps me to tie together the four chapters of this study, in which I have demonstrated how the agency of light is operationalized and contributes to museological discourse by engaging the senses of the viewer, which in turn augments the dialogic relationship between the museum and its visitors. Light as a tool creates semantic as well as physical bridges that connect the various strands of the exhibitionary story to the receptive viewer, putting this viewer in a better position to interpret the coded messages transmitted through the medium and tool of light.