

DECONSTRUCTING THE DESERT (VIDEO IN 3
PARTS: *SUN, SAND, AND SPACE*), 2009
3 adjacent 37" TV screens, video,
small wooden night stand,
female body, sand,
tape recorder

VIDEO 1: SUN [6 HRS X ∞]

[SETTING DESCRIPTION: female body and male body lying nude, though partially under covers, on twin bed set in corner of all-white room with little decorum: satin sheets, floral comforter, small nightstand adjacent to bed with what looks to be a tape recorder, female body awake and alert, spooning male body, perceived as asleep, his face turned away from both female and camera, therefore mostly unidentifiable and unseen, aside from his breathing and one or two visible extremities sticking out of covers]

TRANSCRIPT OF FEMALE VOICE THAT BEGINS TO SPEAK FROM THE TAPE RECORDER
ALREADY SET TO PLAY AND HISsing STATIC ON AN IDENTICAL NIGHTSTAND THAT
RESTS BELOW THE FIRST OF THE THREE ADJACENT SCREENS TACTED TO THE FAR
WALL OF THE GALLERY, THE VIDEO FIXED AS ONE WIDESCREEN VIEW, LIKE A
SURVEILLANCE CAMERA, AND IS FACING THE BED:

A lot of your weight is on my arm and it's starting to get that pins and needles feeling that happens right before it stiffens up and goes numb, but I don't want to move because I like you there and I am behind you and holding you close with my other arm, I am rubbing that little chunk of belly-flesh that protrudes when your body is bent with my fingers really gently because you are asleep, I think, or at least in some sort of relaxation state, because every minute or so you do that convulsive shaking thing that's common of R.E.M. sleep, but also of you, specifically, when you dream those action-packed, sci-fi-alien-monster, full-of-guns-and-political-turmoil scenes that make you shout out loud and your body sometimes even thrash, which I secretly like, even if it wakes me up or hurts me, because A, it gives me reason to hold you tighter, and B, I hardly sleep around you anyway, since I'm always so manic from you actually being here with me in person in my bed, touching me and looking at me in the face, the placement of your eyes and nose and mouth, the way you can be here but not be here at the same time, like I am looking at a fantasy reproduced in order to trick me, but when you're outside on my doorstep with your cigarette and designer jeans and the smoke billowing out of your throat like a chimney, my stomach plummets and my image-producing sense flickers and when you recognize me and toss the burning embers behind you and I open the door to a bright engulfing light and the rest is history because I don't believe it's real.

And now we are in my bed and you are sleeping. You are snoring now and how are you snoring and sleeping while I am wide awake and in some sort of mixed state of exhilaration and distress and I'm pushed halfway off the bed, my teeny tiny twin bed, because you're the wall and you're too tall to way out so your butt's towards me and so my your body like a quotation thinking here it is, oh is it LACK that manifests our bodies and minds are and words, how we can't silence because the too incredible to bear, and weren't sleeping and the of the apocalypse, then fastening your three-saying, "I think I'd better your place, "I think you leave now" and my reality fantasy would begin to die I'd pretend to understand everything is okay, this is you can't attach yourself though deep down inside I missing something, that in the eyes there is a meaning that I feel should coming incredibly soon, that I can taste it, because what it feels like because fucking time this is happening – the setting, the experience, the reconnecting, the blood-rushing...

4:30 P.M. There are now a handful of people in the gallery, all flocked, no doubt, to the back from where the voice becoming near-harrowing is emanating. The monochrome woman is still there, perplexed but drawn in, her head cocked to one side and her arms across her belly, holding tight. Next to her a man with two different colored socks pulled up over his jeans and a helmet hanging from his knapsack inspects the tape recorder as if

4:00 P.M. The gallery opens. An older woman in a monochrome corduroy pants and shirt outfit steps in from the city and is greeted by the front receptionist, who asks her to sign her name on a mailing list and then proposes she take a walk around. She lives a couple of blocks down, the woman says, and read an article in the paper last week about one of the artists here, and wanted to come see for herself. Wonderful, says the receptionist, who smiles and points in the direction of the screens. The artist I believe you're referring to has one piece over on the far wall. It's the one with the voice talking. The older woman nods and looks over. It will seem like it has already started, the receptionist continues, but the truth is that it never stops. It runs even when the gallery is closed. The older woman scrunches her eyebrows. I guess I shouldn't say anything else, says the receptionist. Go over and have a look for yourself.

one towards the straighten all the pressed out body's mimicking mark, and I'm ever so coming, the between us when out of movements just be together in heaviness becomes I realize that if you world was not full you'd be up buttoned Diesels go" or if I was at should probably would flicker as the all over again, but like it's okay, how you work, how to anyone, even know it's me that's when I look at you blankness of be there or that is so incredibly soon I already know this is the fifth

Nagelberg's *Deconstructing the Desert* attempts to physically show all modes of her experience of her relationship with a man who she cannot seem to let go of. Through the Real, Symbolic and Virtual landscapes depicted in

he doesn't understand where the sound is coming from. Another man, taller and dressed in a suit, is obviously uncomfortable and turning red, and will turn a shade darker, later, when the voice talks about her underwear being wet, while a younger, college-student-looking kid in an argyle sweater and blue jeans writes furiously on a clipboard. Every minute or so the woman stares at all three, unsure if she should ask them if they know anything about the piece, are understanding what's going on, if all art is like this these days, or if she should even say anything at all. Is the voice supposed to be the girl's in the video, and if so, why isn't it coming out of her mouth? What is the point of all this? Do the second and third videos even turn on? What if they're broken? She scans the room again and hugs her body tighter, trying harder to listen to the frantic voice that seems to want to penetrate deep down inside of her and latch onto something.

The first video's image flickers and turns to black and white. The second video begins in the same room with the characters in the same exact positions, the only difference seeming to be the overly saturated, intoxicating hue of the film itself, which appears fantastical and dream-like, sort of like when Dorothy awakens into the Land of Oz. The tape recorder in the studio begins to hiss and crackle, the voice becoming either absent or indistinguishable from the static of the tape.

smoke-sweat until it gets too moist that I have to emerge for air, and what's strange is that the air in here is stifling a bit even when I'm on hiatus from your neck, and it's getting pretty hot and stuffy even with my legs sticking out of the covers, which is weird because I'm usually freezing all the time, even in the summer, and it's January. Oh fuck, am I hot and horny again, and it's January, and it's the fifth time this is happening – you and me, here, lying in only our skin even though it feels like I have eighteen sweaters on and gloves and mittens and earmuffs, too.

the three videos, *Sun, Sand, and Space*, she juxtaposes a real scenario of her lying in bed with the man we assume she is obsessively talking about in the tape, with a second video depicting a symbolic event, as well as with a mental reconfiguration of the LACK in the third video, of which becomes the central focus of her monologue, and that I will touch more upon later in this essay.

VIDEO 2: SAND [1.5 HRS x ∞]

GIRL: *(begins to shake the man in her bed)*
Wake up!

MAN: *(does not move)*

GIRL: *(shaking the man violently)* I said wake up, please, I can't take this anymore! I need to talk to you!

MAN: *(still does not show any sign of movement or response)*

GIRL: What the fuck, Adam – are you kidding me? Why the fuck aren't you answering me? I know it's three in the morning, but for Christ's sake... *(She aggressively rolls him over and gasps)*

...and it is when this déjà vu sets in that I begin nuzzling my face into your neck folds and inhale your sweet

GIRL: Oh my god oh my god oh my god
(she acts almost helpless as she doesn't understand what's going on. She tries scraping out the sand from his mouth but it just keeps building up and spewing out even faster, and she realizes that all in and around her is even more sand – that she's, in fact, covered in sand; she throws off the covers and there's sand all in the bed, in her hair, even caked in the clavicles of her bony upper frame. She thrusts her ear onto Adam's chest and immediately looks confused, as if she does, indeed, hear a heart beat.) WHAT THE FUCK! WHAT THE FUCK! WHAT IS GOING ON? WHAT IS GOING ON? *(The producing of the sand is gaining momentum and the floor, which already had some sand on it to begin with, becomes covered in its bright, blank whiteness. Soon it's two inches thick and in no time it's four inches. Five inches. Six inches.)*

The only time we see “Adam's” face is a grotesque close up in the ‘Symbolic,’ dream-like Video#2, which – and I don't know how Nagelberg does this – appears to be stunned and wide-eyed, with, most importantly, his mouth open and bulging with sand, and the sand is not just in his mouth but is pouring from it, like it's actually being produced from inside of his body.

And the really off-putting thing about it seems to be the fact that Rachel (who is the woman in all three videos) never even tries to leave the room to get help. She doesn't for even one moment consider it an option. For the duration of the second film we just see her freaking out from all the sand, towards the end clutching the seemingly dead and un-blinking body of Adam as sand is pouring from his mouth, hysterical that he's about to die, along with her, as they are swallowed by the sand.

And I suddenly have this feeling like the one I sometimes get when I'm riding on the bus and I wake up from some sort of subconscious state I fall into for a couple of seconds or minutes or whatever, and I look out the window and don't recognize where I am, and I feel this sudden hollowing-out fear like, wait, am I even on the right bus?

How could I have possibly gotten on the wrong bus? But then after realizing I'm fine I feel almost disappointed that I was on the right bus, because at least if I'd gotten on the wrong bus than something would have happened, I would at least have to deal with something concrete, would have to look someone or something in the face, would have some sort of destination to return to.

5:00 P.M. They are all now shoulder to shoulder, the audience, huddled together in a throbbing mound, surrounding the installation like mice. By now the crowd has taken on some pretty important people, thinks the woman, as she takes her now ritual glance around the room. She sees young girls with thin

“WHAT DO YOU THINK SHE'S GETTING AT WITH THE SOUND OF HER VOICE IN THE TAPE RECORDER?”

thin waists and pink tights, young men with holes in their pants, with hair that suggests they woke up in a dumpster. Kids, she thinks. But what's the most different is that

“WELL IT SEEMS THE SOUND IS DISPLACED FROM HER OWN HEAD INTO OUR REALITY, THAT IT EXISTS IN OUR SPACE, AS ONLOOKERS OF HER SITUATION...”

there is now a conversation going, or rather, multiple dialogues. The audience in the room has finally begun to discuss the piece. The woman tries to catch snippets of all the different

"HOW CAN WE EVEN BE SURE IT'S HER OWN VOICE?"

Picasso, where the colors melt into one another on one simple canvas that you can stare at and take in a be done with; however, the article in the paper caught her attention and stayed with her for three nights – mainly the part about something called the "LACK" that the writer picks up on as inherent to the artist's piece. Something she's never quite thought about completely or has given a name to, but that she's felt a thousand times, and then forgotten – this absence of life and time and space when language and bodies no longer suffice, something like a short recognition of a complex desire, unknown and unsatisfied, something that has lingered deep down in the spaces between her organs that seems to have always been there, or at least since she can remember.

VIDEO #3: SPACE [∞]

conversations around her. She is not familiar with art like this, and usually has no interest in any artwork besides painters like Van Gogh and

"WAIT, THAT WOMAN IS THE ARTIST, THAT WOMAN IN THE VIDEO?"

"IT SEEMS LIKE SHE IS MAKING THINGS VERY HARD AND COMPLICATED WHEN THEY REALLY DON'T HAVE TO BE."

"DAMN, SHE IS FINE. WHAT'S HER NAME AGAIN?"

"IT SEEMS LIKE SHE'S TRYING TO PULL SOME SORT OF CONTEMPORARY YOKO ONO ON US."

"FLUXUS IS DEAD, MAN."

"SINCE LIKE WHAT, THE SEVENTIES?"

"BUT IT DOESN'T SEEM TO BE WORKING."

"WELL WHAT DO YOU THINK'S NOT WORKING ABOUT IT?"

"THAT EVERYTHING PLAYING NONSTOP AND ALL AT ONCE AND HAVING THE VOICE SEPARATED FROM THE EVENT IS REALLY NEAT AND PROVOCATIVE AND ALL, BUT IT'S ALMOST SO MUCH THAT SOMETHING ALMOST FEELS LIKE IT'S MISSING...SOMETHING REALLY, LIKE, VITAL, IN ORDER TO MAKE THE PIECE WHOLE..."

Yesterday morning when we reunited again and we read poetry out loud to one another in your attic while you chain-smoked and my chest turned inside-out, and we drank whiskey in the terrible coffee you make that I pretend to like because everything you do is perfect and I can love everything you do and

*say
because I
just want
you to*

5:30 P.M. The woman stares at the third screen as it pops on to a close-up of the artist's face, she thinks, and just assumes anyway, because whatever, it doesn't matter, because oh my God, are her

love me, and the tension and caffeine made us manic and I started to feel the sun all over my skin and I was warmed for those minutes and hours, and my underwear was dripping like mad, and it wasn't until after watching a film on your TV in mid-afternoon that

It is in the third video, "Space," where the LACK is finally manifested in the physical landscape. In an all white room with no furniture or anything to distinguish the borders of the walls, floor, or ceiling, Rachel, completely nude, walks around the space, contemplating, it seems, the space-less form of her surroundings, as she is seemingly confined within the boundaries of the screen. Like in the first video, the camera never moves; it stays firmly attached to the wall like a surveillance camera, though at times she will walk right up to the camera until her entire face is in our view, and stare (rather uncomfortably) into us, as if she knows we are watching her. And then after a minute or so she'll back away and start pacing again.

eyes magnificent - wide, open eyes, like living crystals, piercing right into her own facial skeleton - but it's only for a second, really, until the artist, or Rachel, the woman thinks, Rachel is her name, walks away from the camera and moves back into a space of some sort, opening up to the audience as an all white room without walls, it seems, but definitely a floor, because how else would she be standing? And oh my, she is still completely naked, but for some reason it's different in the context of this space. The woman can't stop staring at the girl's body, the way the bright white outlines the coils of her waist and hips, the orifices of her face, the strangeness of the lack of shadows, the feeling of the emptiness and depthlessness of time. And the tape recorder must be on it's eighteenth loop because she recognizes some of the lines, and she can't even believe she's been here in the gallery for this long, but suddenly she feels an intense heat inside of her body that seems to start somewhere un-locatable but it spreads from the inside outwards as Rachel's recorded words begin to match up with the images and most importantly, the feeling inside the woman, producing a connection of some sort, a co-creation of history. She pictures the toaster oven in her kitchen, its insides caked over with layers of burnt excess, the sounds her husband makes while in the bathroom, the lampshade by their bedside - how she can never think of anything interesting to say anymore besides greetings, besides questions...

The speaker's intonation is now increasingly frenzied and near-raging, suggesting a rapid heartbeat, an emotional outburst, a flaring of questionable memory...

time. and I love it and hate it terribly all at once, all at the same time, I hate this line, you fucker, I laugh and melt and cringe when you say this

line, I must look like I'm convulsing, for Christ's sake. Sometimes you ask me if I'm okay for what seems like no reason, and I'm

"Hi, honey, how was your day?" realizing now it must be when I'm physically trying

to react to what I'm feeling around you, because hell, it's every god-damned emotion all at once, and I

"What would you like for breakfast this morning?

"Is it already time to go to bed?" can't seem to figure out which one is true, I can't make the decision to stop.

we had an excuse to put our hands on each others legs, and then torsos and face and oh, I swear to God I felt and still feel what I think is love, or what others describe as love, where I want to cut open our bodies and press the fresh open wounds together until we become indiscernible - you say, "I think we are wearing far too many clothes," you say this every. fucking.

But when I bump into you on the corner of a street months after the last time I hear from you and your tender eyes meet mine I see you as you were to me the first time, I rewind and the past rewrites itself, except the going-back seems to erase something vital, something that makes a memory live and stick.

I think what Nagelberg's ultimately trying to do with the ending of the cycle of her piece, with the combination of all three screens playing at once and her screaming into the tape recorder the same love-letterish emotional monologue (that we hear on a loop starting even before the time we walk into the room) is simply trying to convey a *feeling* to the audience. I read in an interview with her in ARTNEWS that she feels like much of art today has lost sight of the importance of the artist-viewer connection, and that art is not just a displaced object or personal form of reference, but a dialogue between the creator and onlooker through the very medium of the creation itself. Through the relation between the screens and the displacement of her voice as a partial object separate from the actual Event of the first video (where she is lying in bed with Adam and cannot even open her mouth to tell him how she feels), Nagelberg is trying to have us viscerally experience the LACK that she feels when in the same space as Adam by drowning us with an overload of images.

She tells the interviewer: "If I could just read my monologue to an audience and be done with it, then I would. But it is in today's digital media, image and information dominating society that there is a need for a new language to convey meaning. We have seen, heard, and read about every form

And as Rachel approaches the camera and her face becomes the landscape's raw terrain, it is the woman's own sense of place that, too, deteriorates, as the walls of the room begin to ripple and sway. Their eyes lock in what feels like a vacuum, where nothing exists outside of the energy that is passing through and around them, inside and outside, and it is in this moment that the floor rumbles beneath the gallery. The audience stumbles a bit, unsure of the cause, or if it's even part of the installation. Perhaps a water main broke? Or a mini earthquake is happening? Neither is impossible. But then the plaster at the corners of the wall begin to crumble and fall to the floor, and there's a sharp sound similar to bones snapping and paint cracking, as an overwhelming pressure surrounds the gallery's walls from outside. The audience has no idea what to do, as they feel the danger of fear, but don't know how to place it with the setting, keep thinking it's part of the piece, keep waiting, even though standing on and off on opposite feet, some grabbing their loved one's fingers, others loosening their neckties, scratching their scalps...

Because I never realize where I am with you until after we fuck and you fall asleep. Because the LACK is like this desert space that keeps drawing us in with its deafening quality, its alarming allure – the wide-open space and ebullient sun become a vacuum of silence, a flesh-burning tongue.

And all the while the woman is standing up close and facing the screen, locked into an unblinking position with Rachel's face, fully immersed within the image and sound combined. What is produced is a separation of worlds, a whirling tunnel of focus, where the space between the woman and the artist's gaze becomes separated from what is happening outside of them, and at last, there is silence. A silent drowning of motion, a vacuuming of speed. And the woman thinks, this is what the desert must feel like. And that is when it comes.

The sand. The pressure releasing first out from little cracks, like harmless little pokes and then bursting through the walls like white-water rapids, pouring out into the space of the gallery over and around the heads of the audience, who, like the artist in the Video#2, cannot seem to escape. A few of them run towards the front door but for some reason there's no handle or knob, no latch to turn or to twist. Others try boarding up the holes with their hands, placing the backs of their bodies against the walls to try and halt the flow. But it's no use. The pressure is too grand.

*Once we are in it we don't realize until after
we're gasping for air, after you're slapping my
ass shouting "oh my God" and moaning when I*

MAN WITH TWO DIFFERENT COLORED SOCKS: Help!
Help! We're going to suffocate! We're all
going to die!

GIRL IN PINK TIGHTS: My foot, it's stuck! I can't move
my foot!

MAN IN SUIT: Dear Lord, my wife, I have get home
to my wife. My children. My wife and
children. Oh God...

WOMAN IN MONOCROME SHIRT AND PANTS: (*standing
silent, still transfixed on Video#3, seemingly
invisible to the chaos around her*)

GUY WITH BED-HEAD: (*screaming*) I AM A VIRGIN. OH
CHRIST, I AM A VIRGIN!

*side because I have this simultaneous
urge to both fuck you and take care of
you, which I don't even know how to
handle (which is probably why at these
times you ask me if I'm okay, and I say,
yes, yes, are you? Because your face, too,
has a grotesque-looking pained
expression, like you don't know whether
to hate or to love, or if they are even
separate things to begin with), and right
after you burst into me and deflate and
pinch the top of the condom as you slide
out, you know and I know that the
fantasy's played its part, it is only so
long until one of us makes the move to
leave, and it's always you.*

*straddle
you on top
and close
my thighs
together so
that it's
super
elastically
tight, and all the while I'm
sporadically kissing your face and
rubbing that soft fleshy part on your*

of emotion. Hollywood has butchered any "true" portrayal of romantic love - has set up ends to our desires that are too fantastical to possibly exist, creating and constantly producing more LACKS into our daily experience, thinking we know what we ultimately want but never actually getting it because there is no real or true *object* of our desire. It's like what Roland Barthes says in his *A Lover's Discourse*: "But isn't desire always the same, whether the object is present or absent? Isn't the object *always* absent?"

6:15 P.M. And it is as everyone and everything is becoming swallowed that the area of blank space and stillness surrounding the woman and the artist halts. It is as if they are in the body of a whale that has risen above the water for air, has squirted them up through its blowhole and relieved the pressure from within. In the time it takes for the woman to let out one breath, she is back standing in the gallery, its walls and floors solid and intact, no sand but the material in the second video to be seen. But the difference is that she's the only one there. The others must have left shortly after the third and second videos turned off, and the two-hour rotation began again. The woman takes a deep breath, looks briefly around, and heads towards the front door. She smiles at the receptionist, receiving a nod in return as she steps back out into the city, the absence rustling in the crater of her chest, but more awake than before, and tingling.