

Svetalana Swinimer & Jean Halstead
Combat

John K. Grande

Number 85, Fall 2008

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9075ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Grande, J. K. (2008). Review of [Svetalana Swinimer & Jean Halstead: *Combat*]. *Espace Sculpture*, (85), 38–38.

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John K. GRANDE

For their most recent installation, Svetlana Swinimer & Jean Halstead address the issue of COMBAT on various levels. *Combat* could be microscopic and invisible, environmental, or it could reference war as a human phenomenon. It also is a feature of change, causes a transfer of energy (whether on a macro or micro level). *Combat* also addresses issues of life and death, of the cycle of life, and can draw on the theatre of human history or natural history. Intuitive and experimental, *Combat* opens with a video sequence and draw links with the latest in scientific discovery. They extrapolate using available materials, and with a succinct understanding of the medium of installation.



Next to the entrance of *Combat*, we see a looped video sequence — *Apocalyptic Dance*. While the title is seemingly prophetic, a large screen monitor presents visuals that move from a sequential reading of people of all ages dancing. Streamers of red, white and black colours flow through the air as they dance. The seemingly innocent images soon shift into a less material, broken sequence of visual fragments. What initially reads as a

dance, with women and men, once distorted begins to look like some kind of digitized tragedy. They all eventually fall to the ground and what was a beautiful celebration becomes something more like Hans Holbein's *Dance of Death* or Edvard Munch more fatalist *Dance of Life*. We are all players, repeating roles in some historic and mythologic hologram Swinimer and Halstead's *Apocalyptic Dance* seems to suggest. Like cultural identities, or natural diversity, it is all chopped up, and digitized, something Marshall McLuhan predicted with the emergence of new technologies. This inversion of the public and private is absolute in the present work. It looks as if eternity hangs in front of our eyes, and we, not the imagery, could disappear in an instant. A sound element, present at the beginning of the piece, soon goes off. What we are left with is an abstract flow.

The imagery can be read in a hieroglyphic sense, as a series of flat symbols, and these too break up. Steel structures, more formal and traditional, in one corner of the lower gallery space, in two parts look like two abstract entities locked in combat. Steel is a strong, armour-like material. These steel beasts describe weaponry in the traditional sense. In the light of the cellular, microbial and allusive visual elements to still be seen, it seems almost archaic, tragic, and primitive, yet still effective as an embodiment of war in all its sense, whether human, natural, or cosmic. A film that actually recorded these steel elements in the show, is projected onto the steel structures, introducing a further multi-dimensional reading of these forms in combat. There is an old mechanical cog, with chains that are directed upwards, to finer chains and these fan out to become a wall or wave of wire swells upwards, curving through the gallery space upwards to extend still further in the upper gallery space. The wire suggests neural connections, a connectivity or wiring. This could be genetic or combinatory, mathematical or biotic. As a piece of rudimentary hands-on sculpture, this feature reminds us of the limitations to our spatial constructs, of our modular universal theories and exists as a unifier for the various elements at Karsh-Masson Gallery.

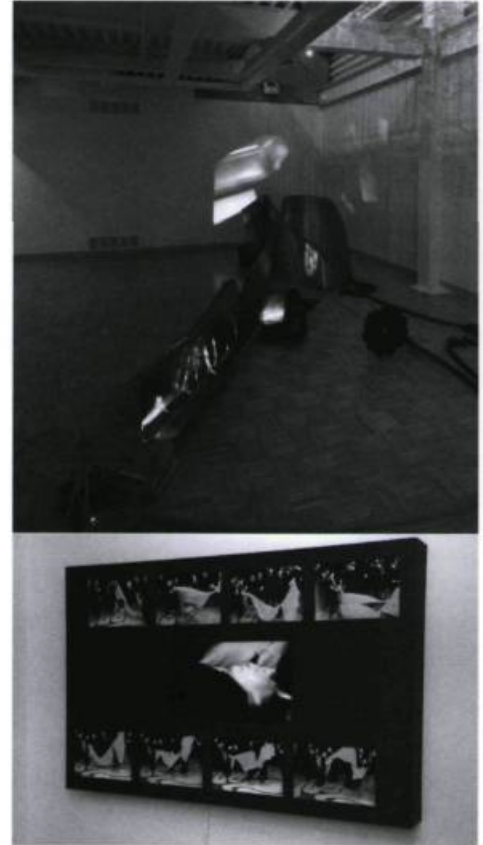
Holograph-like moving visuals are projected into the well-like space of the gallery. The moving images pass through a series of grid-like structures. The images can be seen sideways from the stairs that ascend or from above, looking down onto the piece. This multi-layered piece and the images projected through it, are Dantesque in their 3-dimensional modular character. The image alludes to combat on many levels such as water, an element essential to human life, and all life, or air — essential to life too.

We enter another sectional space of the upper gallery to discover a series of three floor-situated cylinders that resemble Petri dishes from a science experiment. Within each of these, there are video monitors projecting images that are endlessly evolving and devolving. Some read as molecular or biotic fragment, to then distort and distend, extend. A series of real-life chains ranged around the screens have been painted alternatively red, white or black. These flow upwards and over the cylinder structures. The mirror-like walls reflect video and real-life elements simultaneously and these shift as we move around these modular multi-media abstract sculptural anomalies.

As we look at these filmic waves of visual information, once real, now imagistic, then distorted, they become evocative kinetic documents of what a more kinetic approach to the sculptural medium can do.

Cosmic or universal, or just as readily microcosmic, combat is part of the world we ourselves are part of.

Swinimer and Halstead seize their subject well, and take it all an expository level further. This show is neither pure science, nor an extrapolation of a scientific module, but an extrapolation of the human condition itself. We cannot seize the broadest definitions of a universe if we are ultimately rational or conscious because the structure of our own sensing mechanisms themselves provide barriers to that ultimate interpretive understanding. There are ghosts in any machine, aren't there?



The *zeitgeist* is here, but it questions the manufacture of meaning(s) that are part of the industry of knowledge, of imagery, of production, something that counters nature's own ongoing and industrious energies that simply are what they are, before and after the theatre that is our human predicament comes and goes, from birth to death and thereafter. ←

Svetlana Swinimer
& Jean Halstead, *Combat*
Karsh-Masson Gallery, Ottawa
July 18 – August 31, 2008

John K. GRANDE is the author of *Balance: Art and Nature* (Black Rose Books, 1994 & 2004), *Intertwining: Landscape, Technology, Issues, Artists* (Black Rose Books, 1998), and *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists* SUNY Press, 2004 (HYPERLINK <http://www.sunypress.edu>) also in a Spanish edition (Fundación Manrique, 2005). John Grande's *Dialogues in Diversity: Art from Marginal to Mainstream* was published by Pari Publishing (Italy) in 2007 (HYPERLINK <http://www.paripublishing.com>). *Art Allsorts: Writings on Art & Artists* (2008) is available from www.lulu.com and www.grandescriptive.com

Svetlana SWINIMER & Jean HALSTEAD, *Karsh Masson Exhibition Gallery View*. Photo: Courtesy of the artists.

Svetlana SWINIMER & Jean HALSTEAD, *Apocalyptic Dance*, 2008. Video, tv, prints, foam core. 6 x 6 ft. Photo: Courtesy of the artists.

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Svetlana SWINIMER & Jean HALSTEAD, *War Machine*, 2008. Steel. 20 x 15 x 4 ft. Photo: Courtesy of the artists.