

## artengine blog: art and technological experimentation

### Elektra 12, Montreal: Playing with your senses

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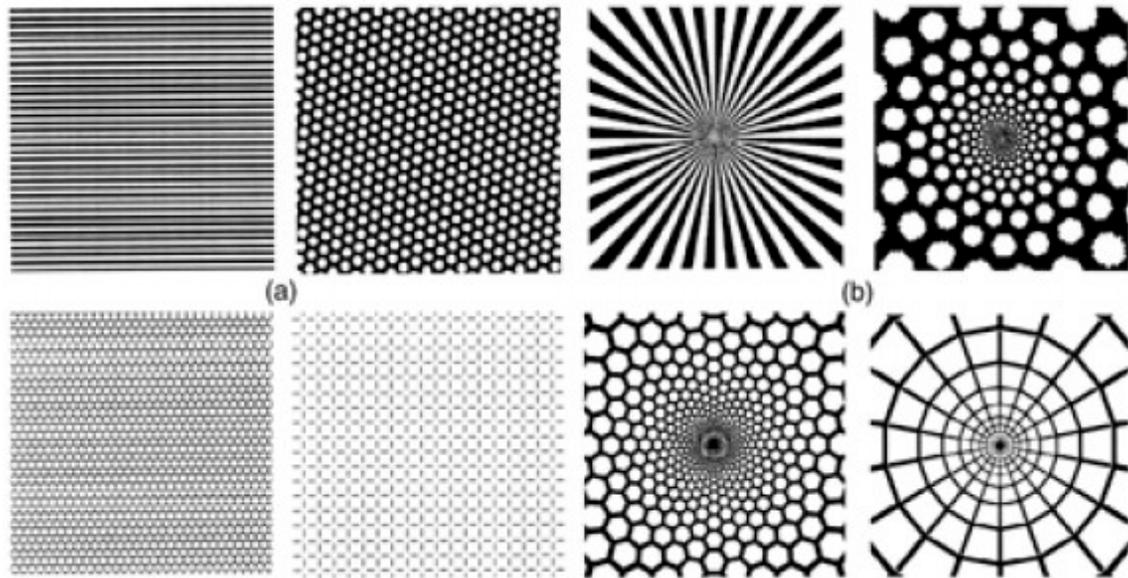


The best thing that Elektra had to offer was Kurt Hentschlager's *FEED*—and they know it. It ran almost every night, sometimes twice in one night, and has been shown at five previous Elektra festivals. It is a work in two halves and the second half completely overshadows the first. So much so that until I came to write this I had almost forgotten about the first part: a projection of a featureless computer generated male body floating and replicating in a black void. Except for serving as a warning of how we might soon feel, I saw no real connection between this projection and what followed. And what followed was awesome.



I will never capture the experience in words. Every person I spoke to had a different impression. Before going in we all had to sign waiver forms acknowledging that we had read the warnings about how overwhelming the experience could be. No wonder the projection was so forgettable, we were all sitting there waiting for the pandemonium to begin. It was well worth the wait.

Theatrical fog flooded the room. I immediately began to assume that we are going to see something akin to a 1960's Expanded Cinema event, maybe with lasers if we were lucky. But the fog got so thick that the possibility of seeing anything was quickly ruled out. I couldn't see my hand when it was right in front of my face nor could I tell if my eyes were open or closed. A strobe started up with accompanying pulsating sounds, and then the magic began. Rainbow colored vortexes and shimmering diagonal grids appeared, not in-front but *inside* my eyes. It was like an sober psychedelic experience. The scientists call these visions phosphenes. They are formed between the retina, as it is bombarded by light, and the visual cortex, as it strains to see something in the fog. You can approximate the *FEED* experience by pressing on your eyes or, of course, by taking hallucinogenics. Although it is more like the latter because you can always stop pressing your eyes at any moment and release yourself from the sensation. You can't escape *Feed*. It is engulfing and can become quite claustrophobic.



Typical phosphene forms

At a few stages I had the urge to get up and move around, to feel untethered from three dimensional space like the faceless man in the prelude. Undoubtedly, that would be a health and safety disaster. The bureaucratic mindset that had us signing liability release forms wouldn't want us crashing into, vomiting over, or passing out on each other.

When the strobes began I was quite relaxed; the rhythm created through light and sound was temperate. With hindsight, Hentschlager was just easing us into it. The intensity heightened. He is obviously aware of, and manipulating, a correlation between the

frequencies he could generate and naturally occurring frequencies in the human body like heart beats and brain waves. Hentschalger was playing our senses like they were dials on a synthesizer.

Previous discussions of *FEED*, which has been shown around the world, talk about it as fusing the human and machine providing a vision of our cyborg future. I can't help but channel Lev Manovich and Donna Haraway here and argue that *Feed* also provides a vision of our cyborg past and present. Renaissance perspectival machines harnessed and manipulated the properties of binocular vision. Cinema (and its various Victorian fairground precursors) works because our brains see movement when shown rapidly succeeding images. To be quite literal about it, all technology is just that – an extension and enhancement of human capabilities. We have been and always will be cyborgs.

