

**MISHAAN
HASU:
LIQUID
CIRCUIT**

I accept Modernism's conclusion—the Self is lost. That's one less thing to worry about. Freed from "Self," consciousness enters the "Object"—merges with the world.

Tishan Hsu, September 1983

Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit
Edited by Sohrab Mohebbi

All rights reserved, including rights of reproduction
in whole or in part in any form.

© SculptureCenter and the authors

Published by
SculptureCenter
44-19 Purves Street
Long Island City, NY 11101
+1 718 361 1750
info@sculpture-center.org
www.sculpture-center.org

ISBN: 978-0-9998647-0-8
Design: Henrik Nygren Design
Managing Editor: Lucy Flint
Printer: TMG Sthlm, Sweden, 2019

Opposite: *Autopsy*, 1988
Plywood, ceramic tile, acrylic, vinyl cement compound,
stainless steel, rubber
55 × 49 × 94 inches (140 × 124 × 239 cm)
Karin and Peter Haas Collection, Zurich



Table of Contents

Plates
p. 1–31.

Foreword
Christian Rattemeyer
p. 35.

I'm a Cyborg: Tishan Hsu in Conversation with Sohrab Mohebbi
p. 37–51.

Simulation and Security: Tishan Hsu's New York and Cologne, 1987–1990
Jeannine Tang
p. 53–71.

Drag on Air
Brian Kuan Wood
p. 73–81.

Works in the Exhibition
p. 83–86.

Selected Bibliography
p. 86–90.

AND SECURITY SIMULATION

Simulation and Security: Tishan Hsu's New York and Cologne, 1987–1990
Jeannine Tang

In the spring of 1988, Tishan Hsu left New York City for Cologne—an unexpected departure, in light of his early commercial success and burgeoning critical reception. By then, his field of recognition included a 1986 solo exhibition at Pat Hearn Gallery—herself a rising star of the East Village—that was soon followed by another pair of solo exhibitions in May 1987, simultaneously presented at Pat Hearn Gallery and the venerable Leo Castelli gallery in Soho.¹ The artist's recognition spread beyond New York in 1987 through a survey of his drawings, paintings, and sculpture curated by Elaine A. King for Carnegie Mellon University Art Gallery in Pittsburgh. Hsu might have staked his practice in downtown Manhattan if not for a timely intervention: a collector sympathetic to Hsu's art recommended the artist live in Germany to adopt a slower pace of production and relief from the pressures and fashions of the American art market—a prospect Hsu would subsequently find compelling.

But before this departure, the pivotal Hearn/Castelli exhibitions showed predominantly wall- and floor-based works, rectangular shapes or cubic volumes that oscillated between painting and sculpture.² Hsu produced the work by applying lightly glossed acrylic and compound paint to wood panels, whose edges were cut and sanded to produce the rounded corners characteristic of Hsu's art. In some of the works, objects are affixed to planes of solid neon or primary color: in *Liquid Circuit*, 1987 (p. 17), a stack of aluminum grab bars protrude from a bright yellow panel at the center of a triptych. Reminiscent of Donald Judd's wall sculptures, in which boxes are vertically arrayed like the rungs of a ladder, they are also evocative of boombox handles.³ Such wall works did not function as passive reliefs; their protrusions instead suggested an object “coming out at you,” in Hsu's words. The panels to the left and right of *Liquid Circuit* also featured articulated sections containing many fine horizontal lines incised into a black surface, their varying density producing a sense of topographic depth while echoing the horizontal scan lines and rolling screen of a flickering CRT television monitor.

Hsu's epidermal topographies were studded with rounded mounds and apertures, their shapes drawn from battery dials and fish mouths as well as ATM machine slots⁴—the latter having been recently introduced into the East Village amid a wave of gentrification that saw banks targeting

an artistic bohemia and its uptown collector class.⁵ These works appeared initially aligned with prevailing postmodern approaches of the early 1980s: Hsu's art circulated within and verged on identification with neo-geometric, neo-conceptual, and postmodern modes. Like his peers, Hsu was profoundly affected by the 1983 publication of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations*, which he excerpted in his exhibition catalogues. Hsu's hard-edge geometry, commercial color, found objects, pop titles, and concern with electronic media led critics to make associations with the slick geometric planes and simulationist references of Ashley Bickerton and Peter Halley, as well as the evocations of commodity culture by Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach. However, as Donald Kuspit would observe, among the so-called neo-geo artists, Hsu distinguished himself by offering a reply to the question of how to "get beyond the naïve utopianism of the streamlined, and to signal the new melancholy of the technology" by way of the paradigmatic modernist grid, open to association with silicon chip and the production of "atmospheric" disturbance.⁶

Simulationism in Situ

These commercial and commodity aesthetics would wane in Hsu's production after the Hearn/Castelli shows, while his interest in screen space and embodiment persisted and came to dominate his work, not only to reshape screens but to en flesh them. Both *Liquid Circuit* and another work produced that same year, *Institutional Body*, 1987 (p. 11), marked this shift. The flat surface of *Institutional Body*, while heightening the work's illusionistic rendition of corporeality and volume, does not aim for pictorial realism but instead functions as a remediation of televisual and computational screen space. Hsu disrupts the flatness of screen space by introducing panels and objects of textured, obdurate materiality onto the illusionistic surface—one notes, for instance, a thick pink plane covering the work's right half—that would visually "ground" (to borrow Hsu's words) the screen to its physical world. The work's palette is reminiscent of drab institutional wall colors or human and animal skin (particularly when juxtaposed with the picture of an armadillo in the Castelli exhibition catalogue). As Hsu puts it, such works question "how to contain a sense of an object and not a painting as window to the world," arguing that "objects are themselves portals into virtual worlds."⁷

It bears mentioning that the Hearn/Castelli exhibitions also marked Hsu's foray into an expanded scale: in contrast with smaller works made several years before, such as *aHead*, 1984, by 1987 his wall works would predominantly envelop the spectator's visual field. Approaching the dimensions of the walls on which they were hung, Hsu's late-1980s works behaved like material objects, screens, and connectors to virtual space, in addition to topographies extending across and beyond the architectural enclosure. Hsu had studied the writings of Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida, and would observe in 1986 that "the signifier is freed from the conventional signified. This ambiguity which deconstruction attempts to explore, may not leave us empty, but, instead, give us potential."⁸ Hsu's practice was initially seen to embrace and allegorize a free flow of signification: in his review of Hsu's 1987 New York show, Holland Cotter focused on the major sculpture *Ooze*, 1987, at Pat Hearn Gallery—its "floatlike platform" and its luminous DayGlo turquoise spreading across other wall and floor pieces. Preliminary sketches for these amoebic works show their edges and perimeters dissolving into blank space, and their display together—with color as a unifying element across an spatial field—produces a continuous surface encompassing perambulatory and wall space. Additionally, these works need not be hung evenly spaced at eye level, but may be installed at disparate heights, as though "buoyant" or "contingent" in a spectator's visual-phenomenal field.⁹ Hsu's placement of gallery works consequently simulated an unbounded space of digital virtuality.¹⁰

That said, the potential Hsu saw in the deconstruction of metaphysical dualism and the adventure of signification was not, however, a disembodied celebration of semiotic drift but rather a deeply corporeal project, undertaken amid a widespread televisual and computational restructuring of domestic, outdoor, and work spaces, with the concurrent reconceptualization of bodily sensation and experience. As Hsu folded his viewers into screen space as object, portal, and surround, it bears mentioning that he did so in direct physical relation to the profound technological transformations of the mid-1980s. Like his peers, Hsu came of age with electronic media such as television in the home, and was—perhaps more significantly—an early adopter of computational technologies.¹¹ The mid-80s saw shifts in industrial and product design toward more ergonomic, minimal, and user-friendly aesthetics, registered in the release of the first Apple personal computer in 1984—the Macintosh—whose monitor, windows, and dialogue boxes featured thin grooves, curved contours, and rounded edges, already ubiquitous in public signage and architecture, to

elicit the desirability and approachability of personal computing and digital devices. Hsu, having trained in environmental design and architecture at MIT during a rise in the advocacy of ergonomic design, was especially sensitive to these developments. Additionally, he worked as a word processor and was often isolated in front of a computer terminal in a separate room, where computational screen space occupied optical and phenomenological experience in a way that was relatively more immersive when compared with the more public sociality of 1990s desktop access.¹²

Hsu's technological reorganization of embodied visibility also emerged relative to critical debates around the hand in contemporary art production. In the early and mid-80s, postmodern critics were critical of simulationist drift, the prospect of a derealized subject of information, and the market-driven return to the supposed authenticity of individual expression, that would reassert notions of connoisseurship, mastery, and genius by way of fetishizing the artist's hand in painting and sculptural production. The more explicitly feminist conceptualisms of artists such as Barbara Kruger and Sherrie Levine—who appropriated photographs and mass media commercial imagery to incisively critique their social and ideological production of female and feminine embodied experience—was championed by critics for their postmodernist resistance to the myths of mastery, genius, and authorship.¹³ Yet in 1983 Douglas Crimp would argue that appropriation by that point extended to every aspect of contemporary life, and that “if all aspects of the culture use this new operation, then the operation itself cannot indicate a specific reflection upon the culture,” while Levine, against critics' emphasis on her use of the photographic image, would openly reemphasize the dimensions of play in her work and accentuate the role of the artist's hand in her art.¹⁴

Hsu adopted post-formalist materials and methods by artists such as Lynda Benglis, whose work involves manipulation by hand, and experimentation with materials and their physical interaction with architectural space. In 1971, while a freshman at MIT, Hsu saw one of Benglis's most ambitious cantilevered pour works, *Totem*, at MIT's Hayden Gallery. In an account of this event, Kelly Justine Filreis notes that Benglis used not a single wall but two perpendicular ones, that “some of the pours were placed up high or even underneath other pours,” and that the artist replaced her usual palette of black, white, and gray with pink, red, and orange. This pour by Benglis was especially anthropomorphic; its color would “actually *touch* the gallery walls and floor.”¹⁵ Hsu was deeply impressed by the organic quality of Benglis's materials, the temporal transience of her actions, and

the work's projection from the wall. The gallery was utilized not only as a space of viewership but also, and equally, for "viewing the production and eventual destruction of the forms," which were sawn off the wall, befitting the site-specific and location-bound nature of the piece.¹⁶

In his 1987 works, then, Hsu relied on methods developed by women artists reimagining organic form and process-based methods since the 1960s—following, for instance, Eva Hesse's use of latex to elicit visceral epidermal effects, prior to the broader availability of liquid injectable silicone in the 1990s. The art of Hesse and Benglis was correspondingly reevaluated in such exhibitions as *Natural Forms and Forces: Abstract Sculpture* (1986) at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, organized by Douglas Dreishpoon and Katy Kline.¹⁷ This was hardly an isolated affair, in light of other reassessments of Louise Bourgeois's and Eva Hesse's work by museums and galleries during the 1980s. Hsu's May 1987 presentation at Pat Hearn Gallery was followed by an ambitious group show that September of sculpture by Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Annette Lemieux, and Rosemarie Trockel, and by a November solo exhibition of Hesse's work. In 1988–89, Hsu's solo exhibitions were flanked by those of Susan Hiller, Philip Taaffe, and Peter Schuyff. Which is to say: A crux of Hsu's practice in 1987—operating between biomorphic, site-specific material experimentation and the theoretical developments in postmodern and post-structural semiotics—went unremarked by critics at the time, but might be retrospectively discerned in Pat Hearn Gallery's exhibition program.

Social Security

During a 1987 visit to Cologne, Hsu met the artists Rosemarie Trockel and Curtis Anderson through a collector, and especially admired Trockel's feminism, handmade production, and theoretical critique. Their amity supported Hsu's intercontinental move to Cologne in the spring of 1988: Upon his arrival, Hsu immediately settled into an apartment identified by Trockel and Anderson, which included space for a small studio—a work/life arrangement common to artists in their circles. But within a year, Hsu sought the assistance of a broker and located a more expansive space in Ehrenfeld, an industrial part of Cologne. No other artists of Hsu's acquaintance thought to situate their studios in such a remote neighborhood, and the few visitors Hsu received would routinely lose their way en route to his studio.

Although bereft of the intimate setting and concentrated sociality typical of artist apartment-studios, the situation suited Hsu—his steady run of exhibitions in New York had belied his limited circulation on the East Village party scene. Not only did the Ehrenfeld studio provide Hsu with ample space in which to construct large wall and floor pieces, but it was reminiscent of industrial spaces in downtown Manhattan. Hsu loved its high walls and the skylight through which the gray light of Cologne streamed in.

That year, David Joselit would describe the work of Hsu, Koons, Steinbach, and Robert Gober as a destabilization of an electronic and televisual everyday teeming with sexual politics marked by the AIDS epidemic, in which “the home as an institution” and the boundaries of public and private life were necessarily renegotiated.¹⁸ For Joselit, the critical vocabularies of these artists seemed “acutely conscious of the desire we invest in the objects we acquire.” He marked Hsu’s techno-organicist use of tile, along with stainless steel faucets and food pans, as thrusting “the private into the public; he endows the laboratory-like spaces of the kitchen and bathroom with a voluptuous awareness of the body, of what goes on in those domestic spaces to feed or cleanse it.”¹⁹ The psychological landscapes that Joselit describes would shift discernibly in Hsu’s 1989 production—the domestic elements and themes perceived in earlier works were superseded by an appropriation of signs and forms from biomedical literature and biopolitical institutional processes.

In a review of Hsu’s 1989 exhibition *Social Security* at Pat Hearn Gallery, Robert Atkins writes that given the “nearly monochrome palette of greys and brown [in the] clinically white space of the gallery, you feel as if you’ve entered a medical detention center, some futuristic version of the tuberculosis clinic in Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain*.”²⁰ The exhibition included *Fingerprint*, 1989, in which a photocopy of Hsu’s fingerprints is overlaid with a grid and encased in a rubber-sealed frame manufactured in Germany. At the time, immigrants to Germany were required to submit copies of their fingerprints and a “certificate of good behavior” from a German citizen in order to obtain residence (in Hsu’s case, the citizen was Trockel). *Social Security* announced Hsu’s personal and professional return to New York. Many of the wall works were images of multipanel grids, such as *Cellular Automata*, 1989 (p. 23), where fleshy rolls of human skin are juxtaposed with fleshy orifices and body parts: gaping fish mouths, a diseased tongue visible between parted human lips, swollen lids surrounding an eye straining to look up. Hsu first worked up *Cellular Automata*’s up-close depiction of flesh in pastel drawings, which he photographed;

he then combined these photographs with other visuals appropriated from biomedical textbooks, producing a single large image through a dot matrix printer. The scale of *Cellular Automata* is such that the silkscreened dots comprising it are legible: even as the handmade production and imagery elicit intensely visceral sensations, the work also announces its techno-mediation through an evident digital reproducibility.

Though commonly used in advertising and design, Hsu's methods differed from the appropriation of advertising imagery by Richard Prince or fashion iconography by Barbara Kruger, which often addresses visual cultures that promote identification with white masculinity or femininity that artists—especially those working from a feminist perspective—would deconstruct and critically dismantle. Hsu's deconstructive appropriations in the *Social Security* exhibition would instead feature specimen trays or chest X-rays incorporated into floor sculptures, thereby focusing instead on the medical body as it is produced through scientific research, clinical presentation, and treatment. In doing so, Hsu references the writings of Elaine Scarry, whose use of deconstruction within the material, enfolded, and political arenas of torture and pain he admired.

According to Scarry, for the felt attributes of pain to be represented in a visible world, they require attachment to “a referent other than the human body” or must be “appropriated” as “attributes of something else.”²¹ The visual discourse of pain circulating as sign opened onto a paradox of its representation, whereby “in order to express pain one must both objectify its felt characteristics and hold steadily visible the referent for these characteristics.”²² Lynne Cooke captures both the expressivity and sensation of pain and their referential character in describing how Hsu, in works like *Cellular Automata*, seeks to “problematize the complex and contradictory sets of emotions surrounding the body viewed as patient/victim/specimen” by way of “ambiguous uses of machines that scan, clean, and store the body—that might well torture it while also offering it opportunities for renewal.”²³

In Hsu's work, the “machines” that treat and manage the body are not only technological but also statist and institutional ones. The *Social Security* exhibition announcement card notably featured Hsu's social security number, thereby disseminating a measure of the artist's identification by the state and putting his profile at risk of appropriation. In 1990, Gilles Deleuze would publish his essay “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” which emphasizes a new phase of capitalism characterized by “ultrapid forms of free-floating control,” examples of which include

“the extraordinary pharmaceutical productions, the molecular engineering, the genetic manipulations” in which “what is important is no longer either a signature or a number, but a code” or those numerical languages barring or providing access to information.²⁴ By the 1980s, many states began implementing machine-readable travel documents, inaugurating a new phase of electronic control via biometric information, in the context of fears regarding HIV transmission and racialized population change.²⁶ By resituating Hsu’s longstanding focus on embodiment and technology within the framework of informational biopolitical governance (that would regulate and control a subject’s passage across and within national borders, rights to residency, welfare, freedom of movement, and public life), *Social Security* may be understood as a prescient corporeal characterization of conditions already lived, prior to their theoretical articulation. It also preceded Hsu’s return home to the United States and to New York City, where Hsu has since lived.

Jeannine Tang is an art historian and Assistant Professor in Art History and Visual Studies at the New School, New York. She specializes in modern and contemporary art.

1. For a synthetic social study of the artists in Hsu’s milieu, see Amy L. Brandt, *Interplay: Neoconceptual Art of the 1980s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 22–24. Hsu and Hearn worked together while Hsu lived in New York in the mid-1980s and following his move to Cologne in the late 1980s, with Hearn promoting his work in the US and Europe. Hsu’s work first appeared in exhibitions in New York City’s East Village—group shows between 1981 and 1991 that assembled a loosely organized group of artists whose work was informed by French post-structuralist and American postmodern theory. The art of Ashley Bickerton, Jack Goldstein, Peter Halley, Sherrie Levine, Haim Steinbach, Philip Taaffe, and others appeared at such galleries as Artists Space, International with Monument, Metro Pictures, Nature Morte, Pat Hearn Gallery, and White Columns and in exhibitions organized by independent curators such as Collins & Milazzo. As Brandt notes, these curatorial endeavors emphasized common elements or themes—highlighting, for instance, the artists’ use of appropriation and irony—though the practitioners were far from unified in method, position, or perspective.

2. Some of this description leans on the reception of Hsu’s 1987 shows: see Holland Cotter, “Tishan Hsu at Castelli and Pat Hearn,” *Art in America* 75, no. 9 (September 1987): 173, and Donald Kuspit, “Tishan Hsu,” *Artforum International* 76, no. 1 (September 1987): 122.

3. My thanks to Tishan Hsu for this observation on the association of the handles and its proximity to popular and street culture. Conversation with Tishan Hsu, July 9, 2019.

4. Conversation with Tishan Hsu, July 9, 2019.

5. See Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, "The Fine Art of Gentrification," *October* 31 (Winter 1984): 91–111.

6. Kuspit, "Tishan Hsu," 122. Kuspit linked these aims to those of other "neo-geo artists" while noting—with reference to *Ooze*, 1987—that Hsu's work especially articulated "the morbid expressivity of technological control, its seductive Mephistophelian character," in which system and expressivity are seamlessly one.

7. Tishan Hsu, in conversation with the author, July 9, 2019.

8. Tishan Hsu, quoted in *Tishan Hsu: New Geometries, Conscious Objects and OTHER Matter* (New York: Pat Hearn Gallery, 1986), n.p. The preceding text reads: "Post-modern criticism has shown that the attempt to pose binary oppositions must fail. We can no longer believe in simple opposites."

9. Here I draw on Hsu's own descriptions for the effect of these works in space. Conversation with Tishan Hsu, July 9, 2019.

10. See Cotter, "Tishan Hsu at Castelli and Pat Hearn," 173.

11. On the impact of television on artists and art of the 1980s, see Helen Molesworth, "This Will Have Been: Art, Love and Politics in the 1980s," *This Will Have Been: Art, Love, and Politics in the 1980s* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2012), 14–46.

12. Hsu's occupation was symptomatic of computational inroads into commercial office spaces in the mid-80s, in which secretarial pools were gradually converted to IT helpdesks, transforming the function of the hand and its relationship to written script into machine interface and keystroke entry, and the feminization of word processing as dictation into a more masculine, intellectual concept of work.

13. See essays in such collections as Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), and Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983).

14. See Brandt, *Interplay*, 25–26, and Douglas Crimp, "Appropriating Appropriation," in Paula Marincola, *Image Scavengers: Photography* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1982), 27–34, reprinted in Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 126–37.

15. Kelly Justine Filreis, "Picturing Process: Lynda Benglis' Cantilevered Pours" (MA thesis, University of California, Riverside, 2016), 15–16.

16. Filreis, "Picturing Process," 18–19.

17. Douglas Dreishpoon, "Natural Inflections of the Abstract Sculptural Object," in *Natural Forms and Forces: Abstract Images in American Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Committee on the Visual Arts, 1986), 18. The exhibition surveyed art that drew from a long modern vocabulary of

the biomorph—a “swollen enclosing curve, familiar from the work of Arp or Moore” that had traditionally represented forces of life, vitalist procreative energy, and growth. Curator Douglas Dreishpoon noted that more recent art expanded on this association to include tensions with the raw material properties of “gravity, balance, resistance” relative to developments in the natural sciences and mathematics.

18. David Joselit, “Investigating the Ordinary: Young Artists Who Take Domestic Existence as Their Central Metaphor,” *Art in America* 76, no. 5 (May 1988): 150.

19. Joselit, “Investigating the Ordinary,” 154.

20. Robert Atkins, *7 Days*, May 3, 1989, 64.

21. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 13.

22. Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 16.

23. Lynne Cooke, “*Mind Over Matter*: New York, Whitney Museum,” *Burlington Magazine* 132, no. 1053 (December 1990): 899.

24. Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3–7.

25. See Dorothy Nelkin and Mark Michaels, “Biological Categories and Border Controls: The Revival of Eugenics in Anti-Immigration Rhetoric,” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 18, no. 5/6 (1998): 35–63.