



**SV**

**Dance  
of the  
Photons:  
Video by  
Lee  
Whittier**

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## Dance of the Photons: Video by Lee Whittier

I understand Lee Whittier's video work as part of a broader recent tendency in the visual arts that I would characterize as "immaterialism." By immaterialism I mean a related set of conceptual strategies and formal characteristics in which the object, the concrete, the material, is dispensed with in favor of the ethereal, the evanescent, the luminous, the transitory-the immaterial. This immaterialism can be discerned in the work of artists as different as Olafur Eliasson, Martin Creed, Julie Mehretu, Sooja Kim and Yayoi Kusama. The new immaterialism finds its historical roots in Yves Klein, the process and phenomenological aspects of the art of the Sixties and early Seventies (Smithson, early Serra, early Oppenheim), and the post-Minimalist "California school" of Irwin, Bell, and Turrell, and before all of them, of course, inevitably, Duchamp. This immaterialism can also be linked to the lineage of abstraction in Modernism that runs from Suprematism, Mondrian, and Kandinsky to Pollock and after--what Thierry de Duve has broadly characterized (with faintly unconcealed neo-Marxist disapproval) as the "esthetics of contemplation" (*October*, Spring 1989).



Lee Whittier

But the new immaterialism is not your father's (or grandfather's) abstraction. The common denominator in immaterialism is an obviation or radical attenuation of the concrete object or representation of the object. Things and the depiction of things having been dispensed with or drastically attenuated, the stage is variously given over to the manifestation of light, motion, air, vapor, and sound (or some combination thereof). We can see manifestations of this immaterialism in the previous decade in the early work of Martin Creed. In *Light On, Light Off* (1995), the British artist (and later Turner Prize-winner) presented an empty room in which the only content was the automatically timed turning on and off of the lights. In 1998, Creed "filled" a room not with alternating darkness and light, but with air-air contained in a myriad balloons which purportedly contained half of the total air in that room (Work no. 201). Light, air, and sound have all subsequently been principal (if not the only) elements in Creed's palette.

Likewise with Olafur Eliasson, notably in his *Weather Project* installation this past fall and winter at the Tate



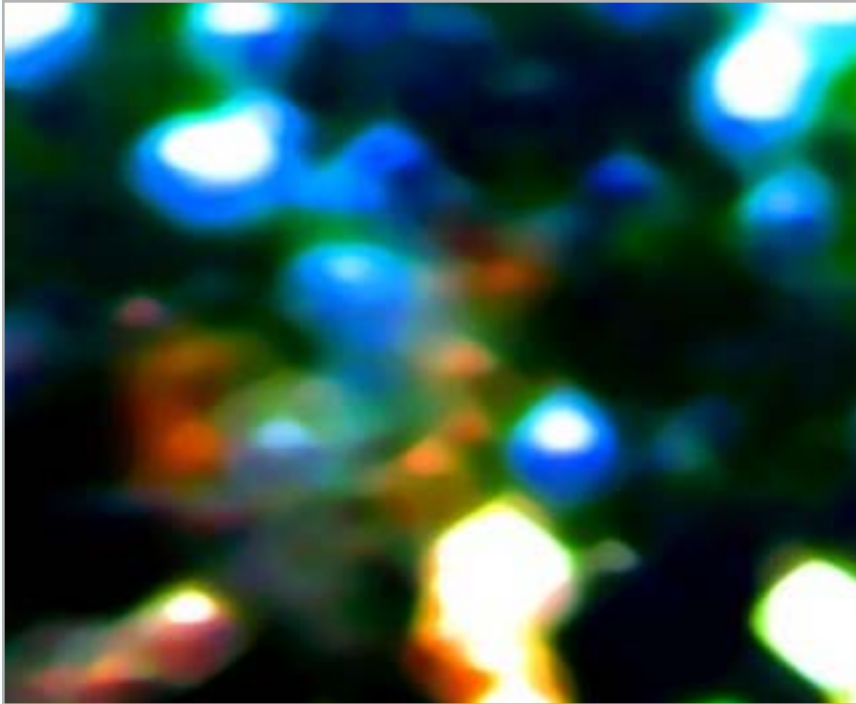
Modern, in which the artist combined representations of the sun and sky with an ambient mist; and in his 2003 Venice Biennale project at the Danish Pavilion, in which he created a room fitted with special lights that drained anything and anyone inside it of color and turned them to shades of black and white. Again in the installational genre, we find recent examples of immaterialism in Yayoi Kusama's one-person-at-a-time mirrored environment, "Fireflies on the Water," presented at the recently closed Whitney Biennial. We can similarly see an impulse toward dematerialization in painting, notably in the controlled explosions of Julie Mehretu, and in video work made last year by the Korean-born artist Sooja Kim.



Video still from the "Heaven" series. Lightjet print.



Kim's 2003 video "A Wind Woman" is an entirely phenomenological enterprise. Shot in a forest in Hawaii, and meant to be shown in a wall projection, "A Wind Woman" pivots and pans its (her) gaze across the high tropical foliage and the sky, "producing"-or is it recording-or is it both-a blurry, blue-green plasma. "A Wind Woman" seems to be an attempt to represent the "in-betweenness" of the here-and-now, the irreducible thing/space/time continuum that is palpable and yet beyond all symbolizing, narrative or ritual. It of course Sooja behind the camera, panning and pivoting and sweeping, invisible but for her movements, there but not there, a personal yet disembodied POV. The other two new videos, "Invisible Mirror" (2003) and "Invisible Needle" (2003) are entirely digital, and are composed of monochromatic screens, sequences of pure color. In "Invisible Mirror" one color fades out to another, with a kind of degree zero serenity. In "Invisible Needle," one



color pops in and out of view, replaced by another with a static suddenness that produces a discernable physical disturbance. This one is degree zero *agitas*. (Folks wearing a pacemaker should probably avoid watching "Invisible Needle").

The common denominator in all the above-cited work is the eliciting of optical, auditory, kinesthetic and other sensorial responses ostensibly unmediated by popular culture, art history, and mass media. This tendency to immaterialism is in my view at heart about a way to rethink and renew the very object and conditions and experience of looking, at a time when the very act of looking, dominated as it is by the image world, pop culture, and its multifarious attendant agendas, can seem somehow suspect, compromised, exhausted (not to say exhausting).

If Olafur Eliasson could be called the Monet of this new immaterialism, its video-Seurat is arguably Lee Whittier. A video-maker exclusively, Whittier calls his work Art for Television. That's telling: Whittier imagines his work best shown on a wall-mounted flat screen, so as to suggest the occupation of a conceptual space and esthetic experience situated between painting and television, the canvas and the plasma screen. Whittier's source material is nearly always the natural world: he has made videos that began life as shots of wildflowers along a riverbank, or a spider's web, or a waterfall, or the light shining through the vapor of dematerializing dry ice (shot in controlled conditions in the studio); or somewhat anomalously, footage of military airplanes flying overhead during an airshow (*The Day I Flew Stills*). In any event, in Lee's videos something is captured moving-shimmering, undulating, evaporating, pulsing, dripping, flying. Back at the studio, that something-in-motion is subjected to digital processing that involves a couple of key and signature manipulations: The frame-per-second speed is typically slowed down to an extreme (3-4 fps in the case of *The Day I Flew Stills*), and the chromatic range of the source imagery is ratcheted up, driven to extremes of contrast and intensity. Natural colors are keyed up to a hyper-vividness, lighter things turned lighter and dark things distilled to a stygian, deep-void black. The imagery is also typically out of focus, so that forms are stripped of any sur-



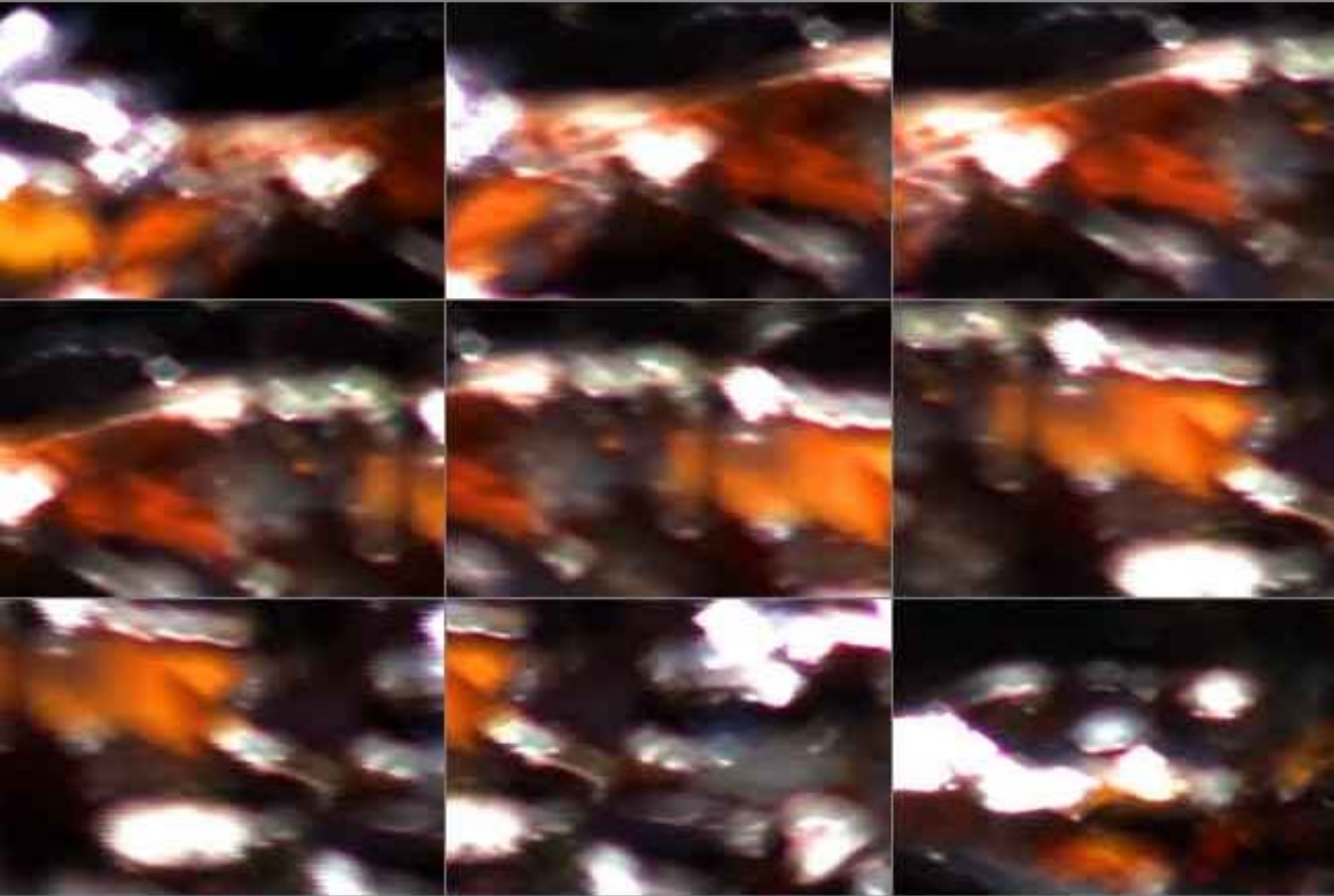
face particularities and abstracted to generalized, and often nearly unrecognizable entities. Objects are dematerialized to a point where they retain some borderline, contingent recognizability, in and out of which they may slip from moment to moment.

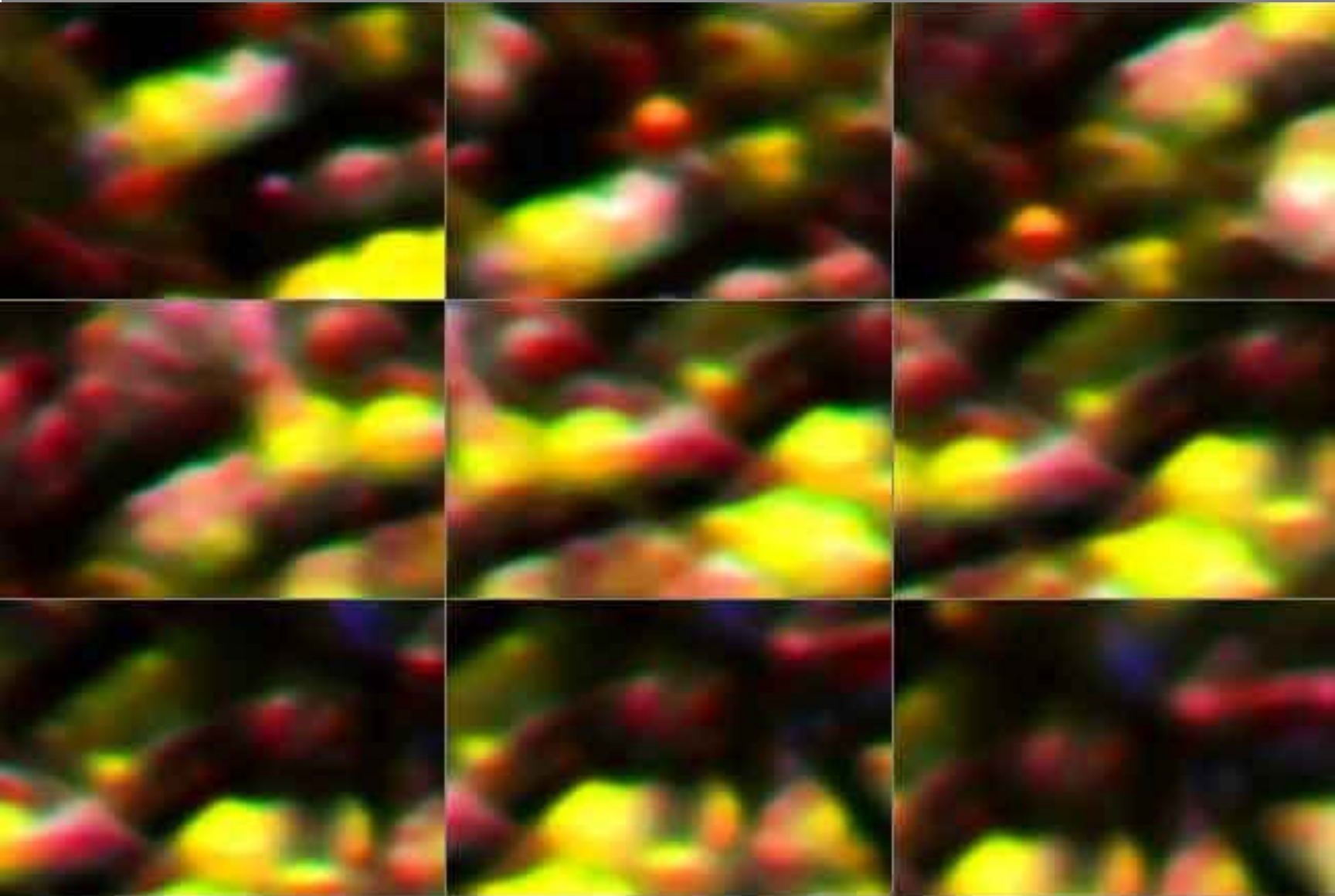


That the recognizability of any particular object in most of Whittier's videos is rendered effectively beside the point shifts the focus to something else that does indeed seem to be the point: the dematerialization of objects in the material world into so many variegated receptacles of light. Cobbling together hardware and software by Sony, MacIntosh, After Effects, and Final Cut Pro into his own digital brush-and-palette kit, Whittier effectively transforms himself into a 21st-century neo-impressionist, intent on going beyond the illusory concreteness of matter and capturing some more real thing: the transient reality (and beauty) of photons dancing before his eyes. Whittier's videos offer the opportunity to look anew at things that no longer seemed particularly worth the bother of a second glance (When was the last time you accorded more than a registering glance at a spider's web, or a wildflower, or a plane flying overhead?) This is what Lee Whittier's videos seem to me to accom-

plish above all: they invite you to look, look anew, look again, look differently, look slowly, look with concentration, and delight, at the immanent beauty of, and in, the moment.

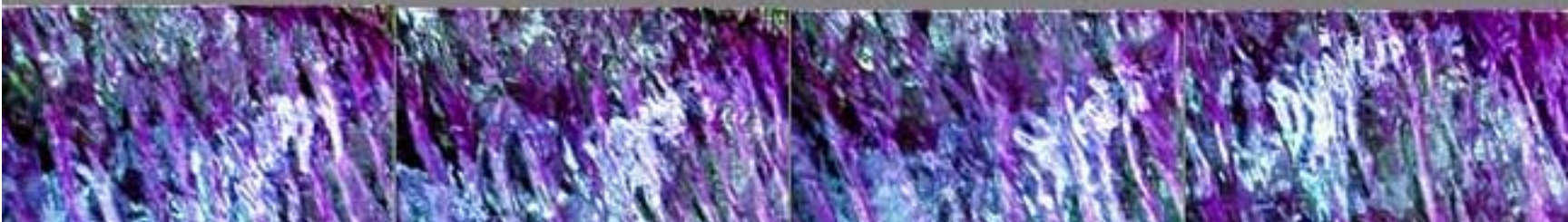
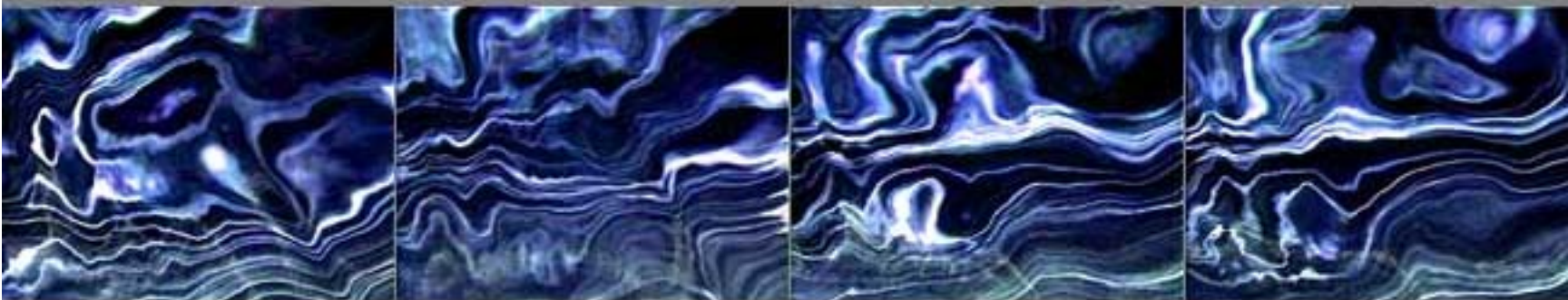
Robert Knafo



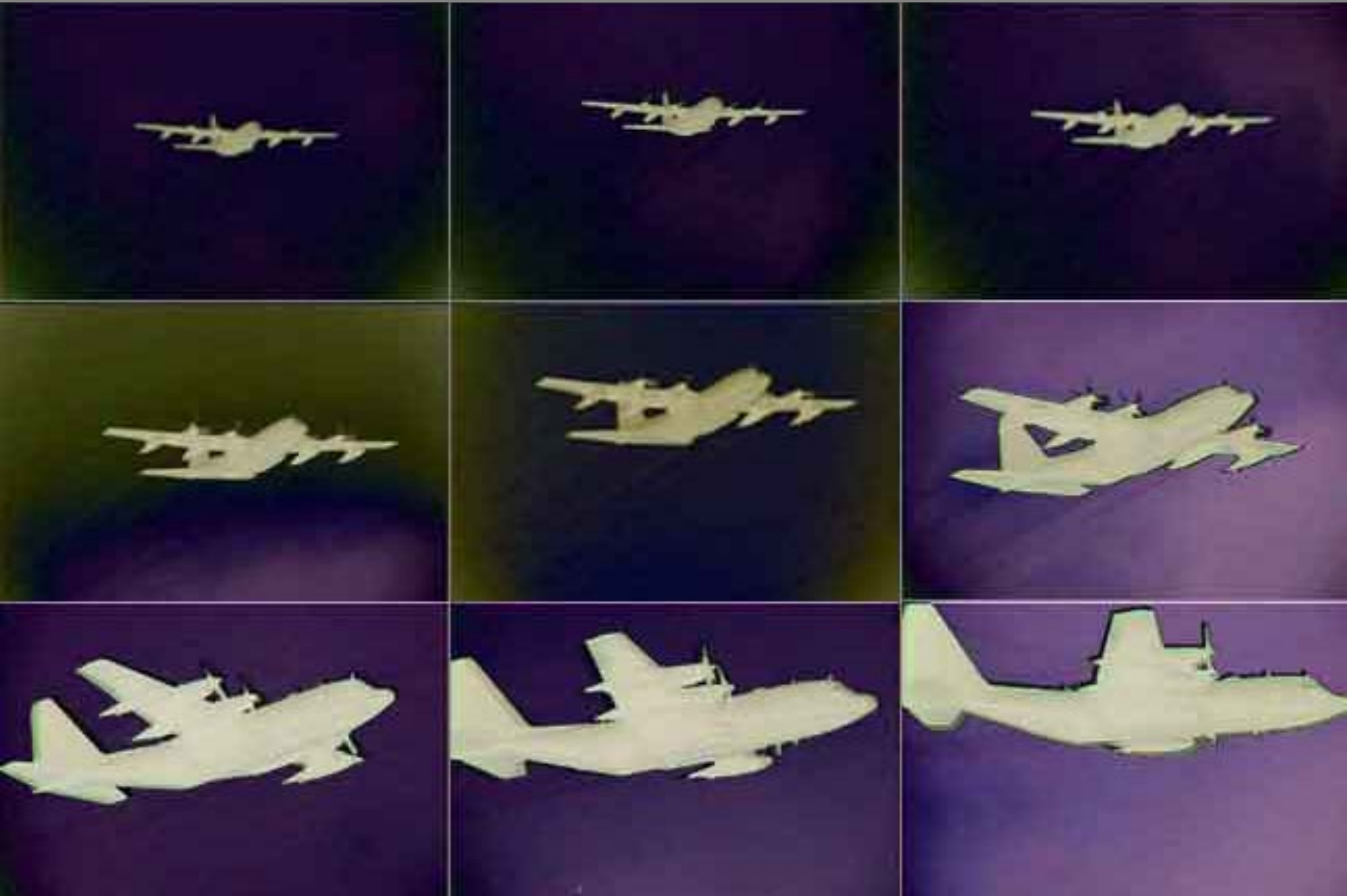


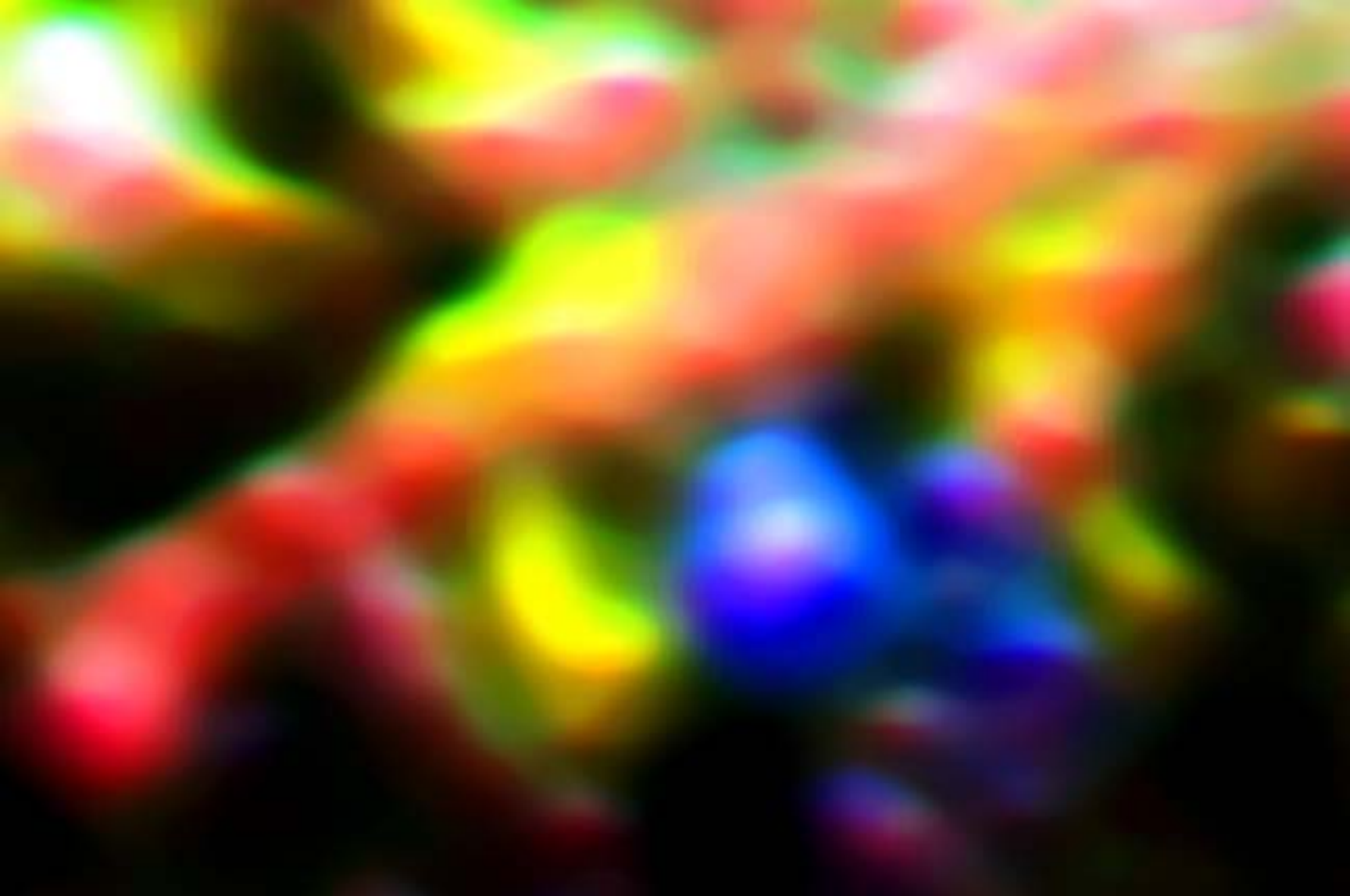






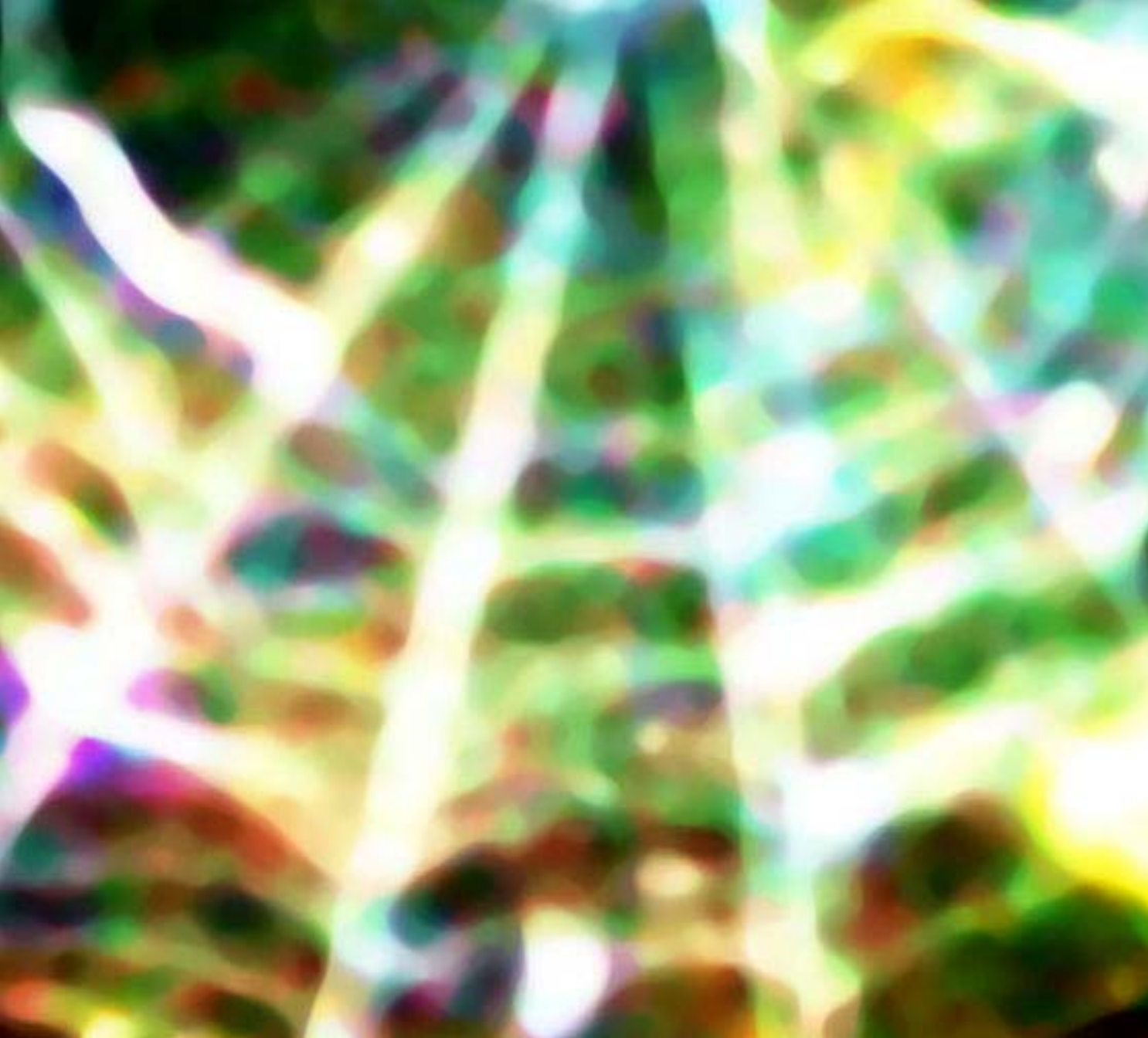
**DVD 2** (from top): *Still Running Some Tests* 5:00; *Similar to Telepathy* 5:00; *Honeymoon* 3:30.





Video still from *Lagorce*. Lightjet print.





Video Still from  
*Web*. Lightjet  
print.

**B. 1968, Tallahassee, FL. Lives in New York.**

## **Education**

B.A., Florida State University, 1990.

## **One-Person Exhibitions**

Art for Televisions, Paul Sharpe Contemporary Art, New York, NY, January, 2003.

Friends of the Twilight, Paul Sharpe Contemporary Art, New York, NY, January, 2001.

## **Group Exhibitions**

Bodilicious, Tattfoo Temple of Art and Design, New York, NY, July 2003.

All Artists' Show, Paul Sharpe Contemporary Art, New York, NY, January 2002.

Ship of Fools II, The Frying Pan at Pier 63, New York, NY, April, 2001.

64 FL OZ, 123 Watts Gallery, New York, NY, July, 2000.

Space1999, Videoland Gallery, New York, NY, November, 1999.

Motel Fan Club 1, Artspace, Richmond, VA, September, 1999.

## **Collaborations**

Double Bar, Princeton University, May, 2004. Video backdrop for Anemone DanceTheater production.

An Evening of the Anemone Dance Theater, The Puffin Room, New York, NY, May, 2004.

Video Backdrop.

Listening in the Sound Kitchen, Princeton University, November, 2003. Video backdrop.

Evolving Arts Theatre, Dance Space Center, New York, NY, May 2003. Video backdrop.

## DVD's

Three DVD's by Lee Whittier are available through **SV**. Each DVD is published in an **edition of 50** and is numbered and signed by the artist. The price of each DVD is **\$800**.

**DVD 1** contains the videos *Val* (9:30) and *Titlipur* (12:00), a compilation of several videos (*Lagorce*, *Silver Butterflies*, *Waterfall*, and others). **See pp. 9-13 for illustrations of DVD 1 frame sequences.**

**DVD 2** contains the videos *Still Running Some Tests* (5:00), *Similar to Telepathy* (5:00), *Honeymoon* (3:30), and *New Twilight Exchange* (6: 00). **See pp. 14-15 for illustrations of DVD 2 frame sequences.**

**DVD 3** contains *The Day I Flew Stills* (34:00). **See p. 16 for illustrations of DVD 3 frame sequences.**

## Video Stills

Video stills captured from these videos are available as Lightjet laser photographic prints. Prints are available in ~18x24" and ~24x36" sizes. Dimensions are approximate and will vary; please inquire as to exact dimension of each print.

Each print is produced in an **edition of 15 plus 2 Artist's Proofs**. The price of a small print is **\$400**. The price of a large print is **\$800**. The video stills illustrated in this portfolio are notable examples of available stills, but other stills selected by the artist are also available. Reproductions of additional video stills are available on request.

**Technical note regarding Lightjet prints:** Video stills by Lee Whittier are produced using the Lightjet photographic process. A Lightjet print is an actual photographic print process. A digital file is exposed onto archival photographic paper by a laser. The Lightjet process produces prints of extraordinary fidelity to the source image.

**For more information: email at [office@studiovisit.net](mailto:office@studiovisit.net). Tel. 917.340.3760.**

# SV

Lee Whittier is represented by (and is presented in **SV** courtesy of) the Paul Sharpe Gallery.

## SV FAQ

### What is SV?

**Studio Visit (SV)** is a periodical digital exhibition of new art. By arrangement with the artists, the work featured in SV is for sale unless otherwise indicated. SV readers are welcome to personally review artists' work. Phone inquiries may be made at **917.340.3760**. email: [office@studiovisit.net](mailto:office@studiovisit.net)

### Who Publishes SV/Format/Frequency

SV is published twice a month (except in August) in Acrobat/PDF format. SV is published by KGAP in New York. The producer and editor of SV is Robert Knafo

### How do you get SV and SV-related email announcements?

By e-subscription. **SV** subscribers and complist recipients receive email announcements about new issues of SV. Recipients can opt to receive **SV** as an email att. (PDF) or view it/download it online at [studiovisit.net](http://studiovisit.net). Inquiries: [subscription@studiovisit.net](mailto:subscription@studiovisit.net).

Please direct other questions to [office@studiovisit.net](mailto:office@studiovisit.net).

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