



Body Language

Nathaniel Stern



A constellation for Nathaniel Stern

by Charlie Gere

As you enter the space of *stuttering*, your movements trigger a multitude of previously invisible buttons projected on the wall in front of you. In an arrangement that resembles the asymmetrically gridded, geometric paintings of Piet Mondrian, these events or actions animate quotations and passages about stuttering, each accompanied by an audio recitation. If you move quickly the piece is saturated with a cacophony of visual and aural noise; if more slowly, you can experience individual phrases. The piece asks us to perform a kind of enfleshed listening. We carefully move back and forth, on and off, each rectangle, *stuttering* with our bodies.

stuttering is one of Nathaniel Stern's suite of interactive artworks, known collectively as *Body Language*. Each one of the four installations in the series is based on a similar configuration of apparatus. A camera (actually a Microsoft Kinect gaming sensor) captures, translates and amplifies the movements of the viewer, sometimes from the front and sometimes as if from above. Stern sets up situations that allow us, he says, 'to encounter some of the complex relationships between materiality and text. Each piece stages the experience and practice of bodies and/with language in a different way, enabling in-depth explorations of how they are always implicated across one another.'

The point at which body and text are most closely implicated may be the proper name. Philosopher and founder of deconstruction Jacques Derrida places the proper noun or name at the heart of language. A proper

name is a unique signifier for just one person, one body, and no-body else. At the same time to operate at all it must also be repeatable, be part of ordinary language. It is therefore appropriate that my first encounter with Nathaniel Stern was as a name, a proper name only, firstly in a friend's email, and then in the emails he and I exchanged, and finally in the form of a web address, *nathanielstern.com*, he sent me in order to first view the works in this exhibition. Here, in work, text and body, I encountered unique movements, signifying gestures, and most importantly, the conditions for possibilities between them. The questions of language that concern Stern and animate his work are, in many ways, exemplified in the proper name, in what it both affords and excludes.

In his text on the Tower of Babel, Derrida shows how God presents the builders with a double bind that is exemplified by his name being both translatable and also

1. Nathaniel Stern, *Body Language*, <http://nathanielstern.com/artwork/body-language/> (2013, accessed 6 May 2013)



singular and unique. He suggests that the story of Babel 'recounts, among other things, the origin of the confusion of tongues, the irreducible multiplicity of idioms, the necessary and impossible task of translation, its necessity as impossibility.'² Derrida analyses the confusion wrought by the word Babel, in that it is both a proper noun, the

name of a city, and also a common noun, 'related to the generality of meaning,' disconcertingly meaning either the 'city of God', or 'confusion.'³ There is, within this, an ethical demand that we both translate the other, that is translate them into our own idiom, and that we respect their otherness by refusing to translate.

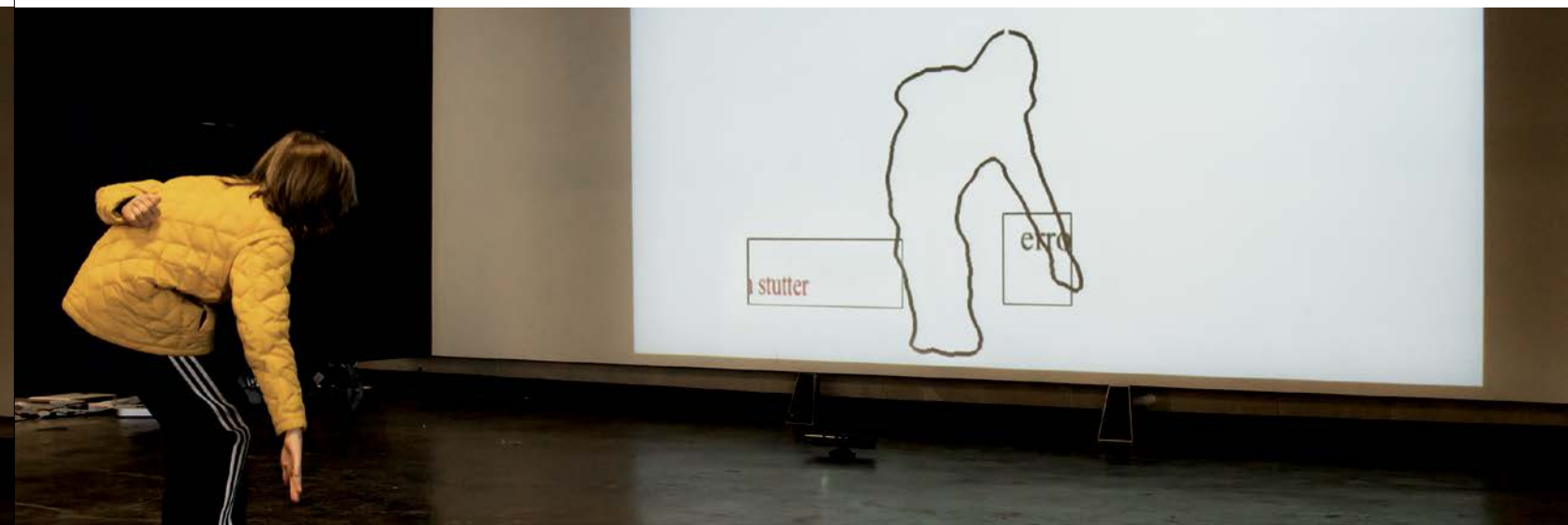
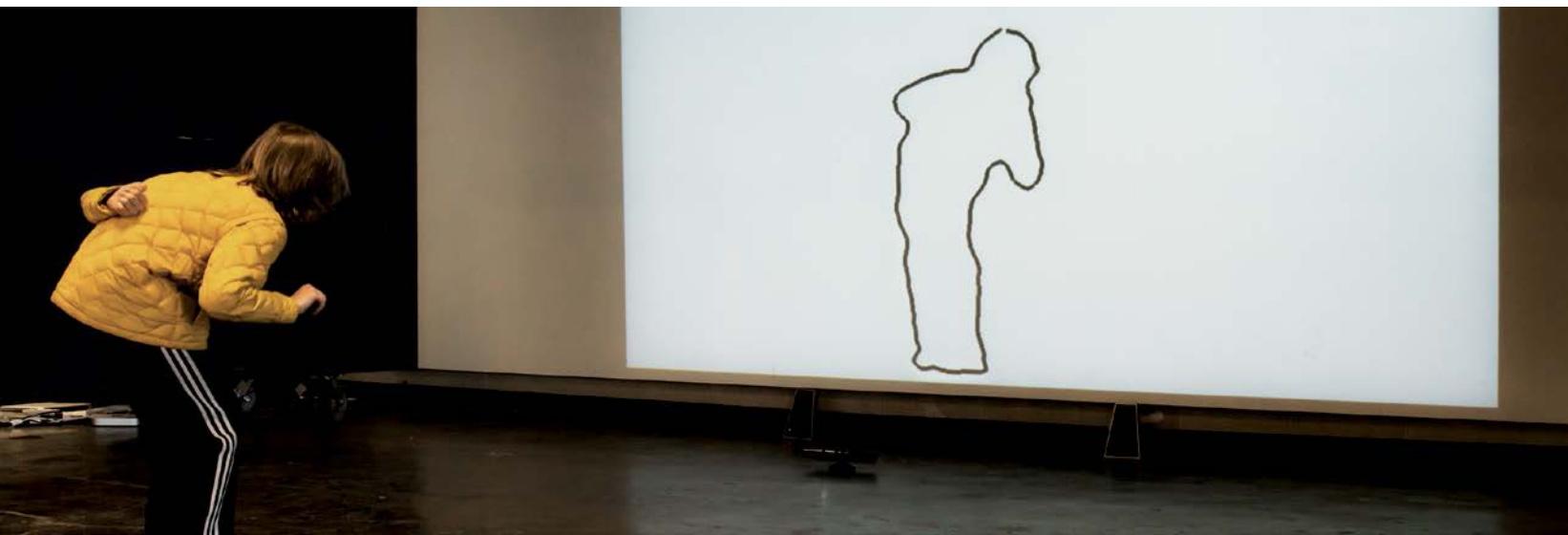
2. Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, edited by Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2001), 111

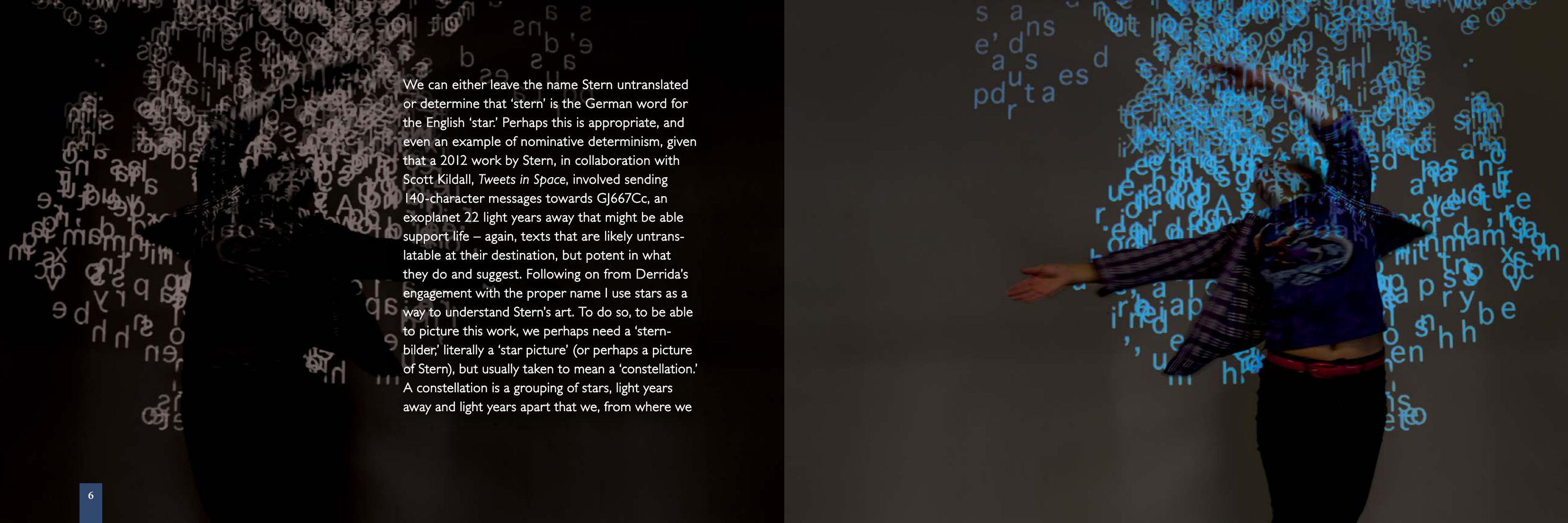
3. Ibid

Stern makes *stuttering* a proper noun, making it both repeatable and untranslatable. Erin Manning, an artist, philosopher, dancer and former student of Derrida's, says, 'Language always stutters, is always overlaid by affective resonances beyond the words (in the gestures, the pauses, the rhythms). Stern explores this beautifully

in *stuttering*, an innovative work.'⁴ Between movement and stasis, Stern asks us to engage with speaking and listening, thinking and feeling, translation and otherness, and understanding, but without full comprehension. We rehearse an intensified mode of embodied consideration, inside and outside both text and body.

4. Erin Manning, *personal communication with the artist* (16 December 2010)





We can either leave the name Stern untranslated or determine that 'stern' is the German word for the English 'star.' Perhaps this is appropriate, and even an example of nominative determinism, given that a 2012 work by Stern, in collaboration with Scott Kildall, *Tweets in Space*, involved sending 140-character messages towards GJ667Cc, an exoplanet 22 light years away that might be able support life – again, texts that are likely untranslatable at their destination, but potent in what they do and suggest. Following on from Derrida's engagement with the proper name I use stars as a way to understand Stern's art. To do so, to be able to picture this work, we perhaps need a 'stern-bilder,' literally a 'star picture' (or perhaps a picture of Stern), but usually taken to mean a 'constellation.' A constellation is a grouping of stars, light years away and light years apart that we, from where we



stand, bring together into a singular image of significant conjunctions and meaningful configurations. In shifting the frame of perception, we become aware of complex forces and how they relate. The notion of a constellation is perhaps exemplary of the imbrications of language and/or with body as they are found in Stern's *Body Language* series.

Stern's *elicit* offers such a configuration, one of matter and signification, where participants' movements prompt a poem stored in the computer's memory to emerge dynamically onto the screen, character by character. The rate at which the characters emerge depends on the speed of the viewers' movements. What results is not the linear order of written language that we are used to, but something 'literally' like a constellation of letters, which emerge fluidly and beautifully, in slight variations of color; in response

to interactors' movements. And these performers respond in kind, dancing in elongated arm waves, with sweeping leg folds, and twisting and turning torsos and toes. With *elicit* there is continuity, there are organic and ongoing dynamics, in how we move and are moved by language.

The fortuitous relations between Stern as a name or word, and between stars and constellations, stage the very experience and practice of his artworks as conjunctions that make 'sense' only as a relation between and with presence, action and inaction, embodiment, observation and gesture, signification and meaning. These relations are rehearsed together; to question how text, context and body are formed as a joining of previously isolated surfaces and their insides. Each is a presence presented with and through us, as inter-acting agents, embodied being-becomings.

In the *Passagenwerk*, a collection of essays on experiences of the city, Walter Benjamin describes what he believes to be a 'Copernican revolution in historical perception.' Rather than focusing on 'what has been,' he argues that we should favour, in a dialectical reversal, the 'flash of awakened consciousness,' which enables us to see that 'the facts become something that just now first happened to us; to establish them is the affair of memory.'⁵ History happens in the present as much as the past. Benjamin too was famously fascinated by stars, and he also employed the motif of the 'constellation,' here as a way of describing the connections between apparently disparate historical events. Indeed, astrology offered him a model for the recognition of what he called 'nonsensuous similarity': the perception of similarity in a flash, a perception of the fleeting and transitory as a constellation, which is, in turn, 'bound to a moment in time.'⁶

5. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), 388

6. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol 2, part 2, 1931 – 1934 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 696



For Benjamin the stars offered an alternative model for thinking. As Sam Weber puts it in his book *Benjamin's –abilities*, 'Benjamin's fascination with astrology... has at least two dimensions. First it involves a relation to the cosmos that is neither immanently meaningful nor divinely symbolic: a move away from the religions of the Book, be they Christian or Judaic. Second, nature appears as a textual network to be read rather than as an image to be seen. That is why astrology and allegory are generally linked in his writing'⁷ In the flash of the now, there is an awakening of the not-yet-conscious, into thought or knowledge. This thinking-feeling is not brought about by divine intervention, or by text, image or human alone. Instead, it is a confluence of events. *stuttering* and *elicit*, indeed all the works in Stern's *Body Language* suite, ask us to both listen to, and produce, the other and the outside, to experience and perform connections. Each promotes a mode of moving and becoming as a rehearsal of networked words and things, as bodies in process.


At the heart of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's thought on writing and being, much as with Stern's work, is the body. Following Merleau-Ponty, but also moving in a different direction, Nancy is concerned to show how the body, what Merleau-Ponty calls the flesh, in French 'chair,' is neither to be regarded as the site or source of thought transcending the world, nor as simply an object in the world, but as the very basis of sense itself.

For Nancy, as Ian James puts it, the body is the 'pivot' of the world, 'and existence cannot be thought of outside of, or in abstraction from, bodily finitude.'⁸ This may suggest a kind of relativism in which the world is different for each and every body, but it is, as James suggests, more of a kind of naturalism, in that it implies that we 'share a world, that since we are inserted into or intertwined with the world and thus each other, we share a horizon of being, of sense, sight, and touch, so



7. Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's –abilities* (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 2008), 264

8. Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand: an Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 131



that when one person sees another person they do so in the context of a disclosure of being, of visibility, which is a general and universal attribute of flesh.⁹ In his long essay, 'Corpus', Nancy asks

Does anyone else in the world know anything like 'the body'? It's our old culture's latest, most worked over,

sifted, refined, dismantled, and reconstructed product... The body *is* weight. Laws of gravity involve bodies in space. But first and foremost the body itself weighs: it is sunk into itself, according to a specific law of gravity that has pulled the body so far down that it can't be distinguished from its own weight. From its prison-wall thickness, say, or its earthy mass piled up in a tomb, or its

9. Ibid, 129

clingly burden of cast-off clothing, or finally, its own weight of water and bone – but always, first and foremost, sinking under the weight of its fall, dropping out of some ether, a black horse, a bad horse.¹⁰

Diane Perpich claims that for Nancy (and I would say for Stern as well), 'bodies make the world go

round.¹¹ They are a gravitational force, pushing and pulling, inside and outside, text and flesh and the transitions between them. 'Corpus' has a considerable importance for Stern's work, and directly connects (and deconstructs) the broader questions of embodiment, language, writing and signification, the very questions that underpin Stern's art.

10. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Corpus' (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 7

11. Diane Perpich, 'Corpus Meum: Disintegrating Bodies and the Ideal of Integrity', *Hypatia* 20(3): 75-91, 78-9.

This is particularly evident in *scripted*, in which a 3D sensor uses head-tracking to follow participants' movements as if from above, and responds by drawing unbroken, charcoal-like lines of their actions on screen, which then slowly fade into the parchment-like background. If at any point one of the shapes they make, as they move forward and backward, left and right, resembles a character from the English alphabet (loosely based on the Palm Pilot 'graffiti' gestures), that letter will be temporarily overlaid in the projection in a standard font (Times), accompanied by a John Cage-like oral recitation ('Aaaaah,' 'Buh,' 'Kah' and so on). In the proposal Stern wrote for his project, he suggests that

scripted asks participants to investigate Jean Luc Nancy's concept of exscription, how the activities of writing and embodiment require one another. Nancy says that while

we may not be able to produce any successful language or discourse that is 'embodied' as bodies are, we also *fail to produce any discourse without the body already in it*. Bodies are, after all, required to write or speak. Both inscription and exscription, language and bodies, are implicit in everything, every constitution, every action, every communication, every meaning and every text. Here writing becomes more than an abstraction, created by a hand and an eye. Writing is the site of the active body, and the body as a whole writes its own discourse.¹²

The strange word 'exscription' used here by Stern, and hinted at in the title of his piece, was coined by Nancy for his particular understanding of language, and means more than simply writing in the normally understood sense. It is the point of contact between impenetrable matter and bodily sense, and between bodily sense and linguistic signification. Here we might think of the process by which those who encounter



12. Nathaniel Stern, *ibid*





Stern's artworks interact with them, making them make sense sensorily. Participants accidentally write (letters), or often pursue and fail to write (letters or otherwise), with and as bodies, which are also written. Their movements and writings leave marks that both continue and fade away. They shuffle their feet, lean from the head and waist and neck, to scribble lines and texts and bodies, both readable and unreadable. They feel the sound and shape and texture of scripting as they interact.

Nancy evokes the five billion human bodies currently alive, soon to be eight billion, 'not to mention other bodies.' He tries to imagine what the space is that is opened between eight billion bodies, sixteen billion eyes, eighty billion fingers, 'seeing what? Touching what?'¹³ Bound up with this is Nancy's notion of 'ecotechnics.' This is his attempt to think through

how our embodied relation to space, and the world, is entangled with our technologies.

Our world is the world of the 'technical,' a world whose cosmos, nature, gods, entire system is, in its inner joints, exposed as 'technical': the world of the ecotechnical. The ecotechnical functions with technical apparatuses, to which our every part is connected. But what it makes are our bodies, which it brings into the world and links to the system, thereby creating our bodies as more visible, more proliferating, more polymorphic, more compressed, more 'amassed' and 'zoned' than ever before. Through the creation of bodies the ecotechnical has the sense that we vainly seek in the remains of the sky or the spirit.¹⁴

An ecotechnical sense, one where we 'move-think-feel' (a Stern coinage) bodies and technics and systems, is made most apparent, and developed, in another of the *Body Language* pieces, *enter*.

13. Nancy, 'Corpus,' 83

14. *Ibid.*, 89

The viewer of *enter* is presented with an outline of their bodies drawn with large reddish dots. Short blue-black phrases float around them in animated sequence, which the viewer can use their outline image to grab. Each word that a viewer's outline touches will stop, turn red, and recite a line of poetry. In contradistinction to the operation of most body-tracking software, the code is written so that only the outermost points on the horizontal axis are shown, so if the viewer puts their hands over their head, their head will not appear on the screen; people who touch each other in the space of the installation, temporarily become one 'body' in the projection. The movements of and relations between each part and whole, in other words, both rupture and connect other parts and wholes.

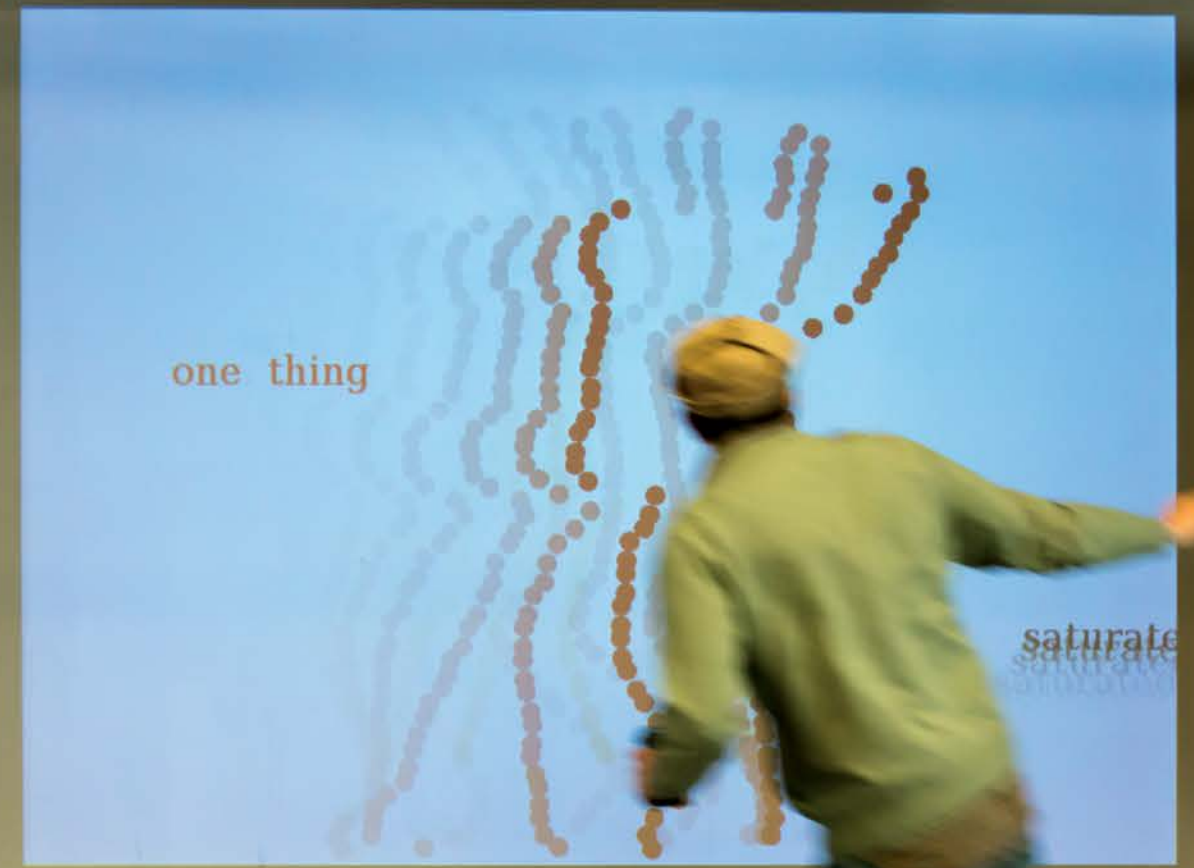
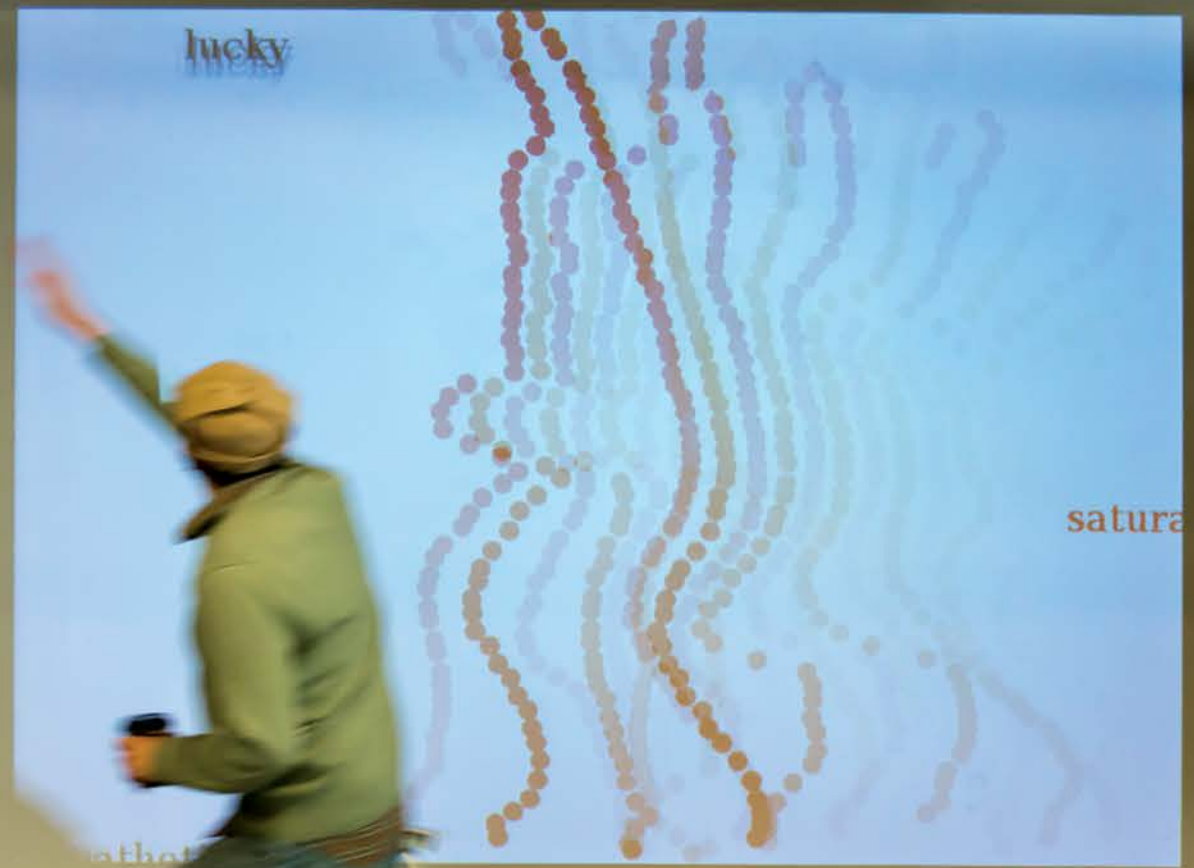
enter was first made and exhibited in 2001, when it ran on an old and comparatively slow 8500 Macintosh.

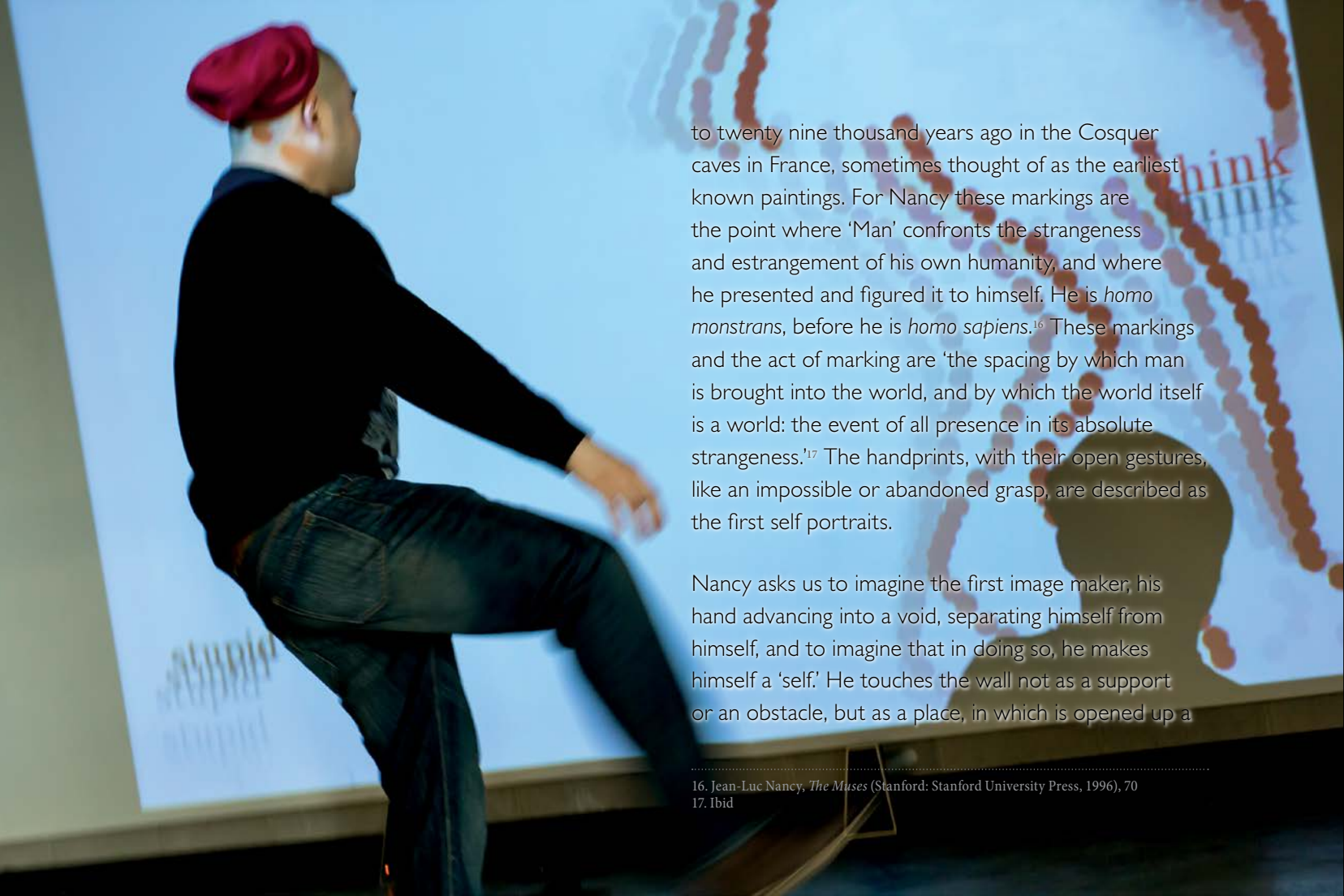
Stern has replicated the aesthetic feel the original's 'lag' created by adding slowly fading trails to each animated word and the viewers' outlines. These vestigial traces give the piece more of a sense of call and response, and less than that of a mirror of each viewer's movements. In this way, with his technical apparatus, we become a part of our environments, techniques and technologies, affected and effecting the creation of bodies, both material and conceptual. With *enter* performers feel words and bodies and systems as activity and genesis; they dance and breathe phrases; they move, bend, extend and stretch to capture and trigger continuously mobile expressions. Says Stern, they '*chase after words, turn on a phrase, or reach (for) the end of a sentence.*'¹⁵

enter brings to mind the very earliest works of art, described by Nancy in his essay 'Painting in the Grotto,' about the handprints made twenty seven

15. Nathaniel Stern, *ibid*







to twenty nine thousand years ago in the Cosquer caves in France, sometimes thought of as the earliest known paintings. For Nancy these markings are the point where 'Man' confronts the strangeness and estrangement of his own humanity, and where he presented and figured it to himself. He is *homo monstrans*, before he is *homo sapiens*.¹⁶ These markings and the act of marking are 'the spacing by which man is brought into the world, and by which the world itself is a world: the event of all presence in its absolute strangeness.'¹⁷ The handprints, with their open gestures, like an impossible or abandoned grasp, are described as the first self portraits.

Nancy asks us to imagine the first image maker, his hand advancing into a void, separating himself from himself, and to imagine that in doing so, he makes himself a 'self.' He touches the wall not as a support or an obstacle, but as a place, in which is opened up a

16. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 70

17. Ibid

'distance that suspends the continuity and the cohesion of the universe, in order to open up a world.'¹⁸ Nearly thirty thousand years later, Stern's artworks impel reproductions of the same action: contact and separation, touching and being touched, movement and signification. Here body and language are inherently entwined and always confused, making the world through linkages, both present and not. Stern opens up the space in front of us, in order to make room for the senses, for sense-making, and for meaning.

Here perhaps we can return to the astral imagery with which this essay began. In his essay 'Dis-Enclosure' Nancy remarks that 'Space is not the name of a thing, but of that outside of things, thanks to which their distinctness is granted them.' Thus the "'conquest of space"' cannot be considered in the same way as the discovery of preexistent places. One does not discover what was previously covered up, or at least one does

18. Ibid, 75

19. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 161

not just discover but one opens up as well.' What Stern opens is the 'separation between bodies, the stellar remoteness, and the galactic distances' which together 'send out toward the ever-receding cosmic extremities' a kind of 'unique point,' but one 'without dimensions, plunged deep into its own nullity.' And this point is also 'this dust, this seed and this hole we have discovered ourselves to be, as well as this silence, which we call the big bang, whose echo haunts our voice'.¹⁹

Stern's work invites us all to be explorers in space, even if we do not leave the earth.

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The Artist

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Video documentation

<<http://nathanielstern.com/artwork/body-language/>>

