

The Disappearance of the Human

JASON ODDY

Craig Kalpakjian's terminal vision



Craig Kalpakjian, *Hall*, 1999, cibachrome mounted on aluminium, 100.3 x 133.4 cm. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

At first it is almost possible to believe in *Hall*, Craig Kalpakjian's photograph of an interminably long corridor somewhere in corporate hell. Lit from above by row upon row of strip lighting, its only discernible feature is a knee-high air-conditioning vent a third of the way along its length. A precise line of black skirting marks the bottom of the immaculate grey walls, and below this a dim reflection of the vent and the fluorescent lights can be detected in the glassy surface of the floor. It may strike you as strange that there are no doors leading off to other rooms, and perhaps stranger still that there is no sign of anyone ever having visited this inviolate interior. Yet the longer you look at *Hall*, the more you see that this is a place of

apocalyptic desolation, a cold, glittering world that has been purged of every trace of humanity.

For anyone who knows just how sophisticated technology has become, it will come as no surprise to learn that Kalpakjian, thirty-nine, created *Hall* entirely on computer. Using architectural design programmes such as Form Z and Lightscape, he is able to generate uncannily convincing images of interiors and fixtures out of nothing more than ones and zeroes. He begins by drawing a simple model on screen, before adding details such as light, surface, texture and tone. Then he selects a viewpoint and once the image has been digitally rendered he makes a photographic print of the result. If the confusion which the ensuing pictures gives rise to is

an uneasy reminder that what we like to think of as the virtual and the real are no longer truly opposed, then the sterile, unpeopled geometries of these intensely psychological spaces also point to the mood of the computer age, which has seen the cooling effect of technology telescope into every last corner of our being.

Kalpakjian, who studied art history at the University of Pennsylvania, first emerged on the New York scene in the early 1990s. Inspired by minimalism and conceptual art, his work from that period was a sort of hybrid between sculpture and installations, employing barriers, waiting lines and other objects that control the way we move through space. Yet it was not until six years ago, while using a computer to help

him lay out an exhibition, that he realised its potential to move his work in a new direction. 'It seemed like the sculptural objects became the things that everyone wanted to focus on, and I was really more interested in the space around them. I thought that as a medium these programmes could explore space more directly.'

Corridor, a video that describes a never-ending journey along a perfect, white, circular arcade, was his first digitally-generated piece. Like the still pictures that followed, it is both disarmingly beautiful and peculiarly unsettling, a sort of meditative, maddening trip through cyberspace. Using video allowed Kalpakjian to eliminate objects from his practice, and his next step – producing photographs on computer – enabled him to eliminate movement as well. The virtual viewpoint implied in all his pictures is intentionally cinematographic, a little in the manner of a film still. Movement is condensed into a single view. Empty scenes are used as a device to introduce dramatic tension. And preventing us from seeing round the next corner has the effect of creating a sense of claustrophobic foreboding.

Outputting his work as photographs also meant that he was able to take it to the very limits of technical perfection. 'I got really obsessed with adding as much information as possible, and with video you can only get limited resolution. Making still images meant that I could produce enormous pictures which contain really fine detail.' Working at the microscopic level of the pixel each piece takes Kalpakjian over a week to make, a painstaking process that he likens to 'painting with your hands tied'. The results appear more real than reality, hyperbolically mimicking the technology they describe. It is a technique that pushes this same technology *beyond* itself, turning the seductive purity of these images into something ambiguous, and even ironic, the cool satisfaction to which they give rise being held up as a mirror to the cold, technological systems that are inexorably annexing our lives.

In an age that has seen the Human Genome Project digitally encode the innermost secrets of existence, little remains that can conceal itself from science's gaze. In works such as *Monitor* – a depiction of a surveillance camera encased in a glass hemisphere – Kalpakjian alludes to



Craig Kalpakjian, *Monitor*, 1999, cibachrome mounted on aluminium, 45.7 × 61 cm.
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

the fact that space is no longer something we simply inhabit. As we pass through it, our every gesture is recorded and simultaneously transformed into a binary combination somewhere in cyber territory. The hermetic, airless quality of his pictures evokes a world that has lost its memory, a world without depth, in which reality, gradually engulfed by the relentless proliferation of digital information, disappears.

Yet if the manner of their production suggests that these closed images refer to nothing outside themselves, then, from a figurative point of view at least, they do always contain the idea of a way out. Doors, corners, vents and passageways hint at a world beyond the machine. And in spite of the fact that these unnatural environments result from technology alone, this New York artist believes that the apparatus around which they are constructed imbues them with a kind of life. 'It's sort of contradictory that although the space and the architecture I'm usually drawn to is so inorganic and so hard-edged, it still has this organic side to it. I like the way that all these ventilation and circulation

systems give a sense of breath, of breathing, to the images.' According to Kalpakjian he reveals himself in his 'psychologically charged' work, which together with the idea that these pictures conceal an enveloping, nurturing presence, transforms them into something more than a simple elegy for our Faustian pact with science. For if, as Gide says, 'Melancholy is nothing but abated fervour', then these forlorn, empty spaces read also as a lament for a lost plenitude, a nostalgic ode to a time when the succour of the mother-machine was guaranteed.

Kalpakjian's recent output has become less specifically focused on matters architectural, and more interested in the play of light on surface, a tendency towards abstraction that has brought to the fore a cosmological dimension in some of his work. *HVAC III* may be a view from inside a Heating Ventilation Air Conditioning shaft, but its cruciform reflections suggest that there is an underlying spiritual intention to the picture. His newer photographs, such as *Dark Hall II* with its black, Ad Reinhardt-inspired volumes, are also more self-consciously beautiful. But for this artist beauty is always associated with the disappearance of the human. It is as though, by presenting us with images that are sophisticated to the point of fatality, he wishes to show us a dream of our own end. And once we have been wholly absorbed into technology, once we have succumbed to total digitalisation, all that will remain of us will be these refracted, melancholic visions orbiting in cyberspace around a world of inhuman purity.



Craig Kalpakjian,
HVAC III, 2000,
cibachrome mounted on aluminium,
76.2 × 101.6 cm.
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

¹Craig Kalpakjian: *Dusk*, 16 September – 28 October, I:20 Gallery, New York.