

Imaginative feats

LITERALLY
PRESENTED

THREE FABLES FOR VIDEO PROJECTION

Guarded

Flat Land

Lost

JEANNE C. FINLEY + JOHN MUSE

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Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery
Whitehead Campus Center
Haverford College

370 Lancaster Avenue
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www.haverford.edu/exhibits

Guarded *Flat Land* *Lost*





LETTING DOWN OUR GUARD

Finley + Muse and the Power of Disquiet

by Irina Leimbacher

SEEING JEANNE C. FINLEY AND JOHN MUSE'S INSTALLATION PIECE **Guarded** means literally walking *into* it. To experience the piece is to be immersed in a work where, paradoxically, immersion is impossible. Whether we are at its center or at its periphery, *Guarded*'s incessant motion continually sweeps past and sweeps us up with it. Caught in its relentlessly circular and circulating rendition of times and spaces, we find ourselves in a flood of anxious advance and retreat that loops around and beyond us. "Be vigilant," the work seems to say, "guard yourself from this world, a world both dangerous and unpredictable." And yet the result, this experience of being *Guarded*, only creates more anxiety, as we must cope with our inability to inhabit or hold on to any of its swirling dictates and images and thus even onto ourselves. There is no reprieve in such a well-guarded world.

Finley and Muse's collaborative works of the last two decades are powerful because they seduce us with affect only to unsettle us with irony. They lure us in with base and basic emotions—fear, anxiety, sympathy, wonder—only to engage our reasoned reflection and political critique. Most of their work demands that we let down our guard, that we give ourselves over, if only for a moment, to our feelings, however cliché or banal their often ready-made expressions may be. And yet it is from our vulnerability as sentient beings that they, and we, call forth a critical response to the world and the structures that regulate it. Only by first giving ourselves over to the emotional states they cite or solicit can we then be pulled into a reflective state through their elegant formal structures and rhetorical moves.

In some of their works affect trumps irony, while in others critical distance keeps emotion well in check. In all, however, there is a tension between the emotional and intellectual registers, as between the various elements—visual, auditory, documentary, narrative—they use to engage us. There is always something irreconcilable; and what cannot be reconciled unsettles, forcing us into a state of disquiet. And this is where Finley and Muse want us to be.

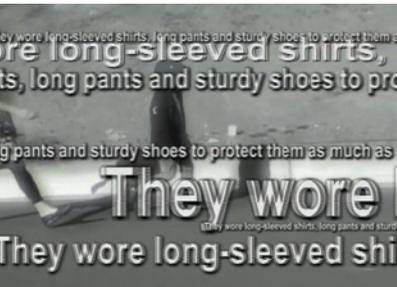
Guarded is a paradigmatic, if amplified, expression of the tension that infuses all their video and installation work. Here two projectors, aimed in different directions, rotate facing outward on a small platform. The images traverse two screens, and thus are visible on both sides (from the side of the projector and from without), as well as on the walls of the surrounding room as the projectors slide between them in their rotation. Searching for the optimal vantage



point within this space, we tend to head to the center, looking for the privileged point of view. Most likely we try to position ourselves, as we have been trained to do, at a plane parallel to that of the image, to capture and contemplate it. But *Guarded* will have none of that. For the images spin by and around us; we are just incapable of keeping up with these incessantly fleeting frames. As one projection leaves our field of vision, we turn to the other, but that too moves off and onwards, too quick for our turning body or our grasping mind.

Guarded's soundscape is defined by the percussive stamping of time. The sound-and-image of an office date-stamp strikes out at us, on us. Shot from below a transparent surface, it pounds down on the screen, on our "window" onto the world, on us, confirming its inexorable power, its aggressive and arbitrary might. The stamp appears on both video channels, but one image is literally the negative of the other: dark becomes light and light, dark. One moves through an accretion of dates and ink until the surface is completely obscured—there is nothing to see but the darkening of time—while the other reverses this trajectory, conceptualizing time as deletion, until all is blank, empty. The field of dates neither builds nor erodes according to chronological order, and when the piece was made (in 2003), each referred to a possible future: September 4th, 2007; October 24th, 2004; December 31st, 2007; September 10th, 2007... These futures combine with a narration posed in the past tense, exacerbating our sense of powerlessness with regard to any ostensible present. This too has come and gone—was dated, stamped, and filed away. Past, present, and future—a closed if uncertain case.





Text rolls across one of the screens. Since the projected frame is turning, it is difficult to read, and yet it moves against the grain of rotation, as though some of it were indeed standing still, revealed by the light of the projector. To read the text is to stop following the movement of the image; to be caught by the flow of images is to cease reading the text. More text appears, in multiple font sizes, speeds, and depths. We may catch something like: "They had prepared a disaster supply kit in..." "kept extra cash and copies of their drivers' license..." "...will, life insurance policies and powers of attorney," "tried to remain calm and patient..." And later, with irony given the nature of the piece: "children do not realize that it is repeated video footage and would think that the event is happening again and again." The text, adapted from a Red Cross booklet entitled *Terrorism: Preparing for the Unexpected* and published in October 2001, is placed in the past tense by Finley and Muse. The disaster, inexorable, has been, is done, and yet remains in our future as the dates suggest. *Guarded* gives us the future anterior tense: all this will have come to pass. The text incites and repeats our own preparations and anxieties; it drags us along with its relentless glimpse of a future doom already past.

television reports

In between the fitful stomplings of time and the narratives of catastrophe, images arise, evoking anxiety but also celebration. A musician performs on his lute, a woman gets married, a birthday cake is full of candles. The obvious “foreignness” (to the American spectator) of some of these images might serve to estrange. In other scenes, piles of hundred dollar bills are counted and change hands, again and again; somewhere a fire burns, and a sparkler explodes with momentary light. Like the times and dates, all this passes too, circling round and round. There is a lonely chair hanging from the sky, a rusty pink chairlift—what missed opportunity? How many past journeys? Like the small gears of the date stamp, the spinning projectors on their turntable, the chairlift also spins its big pink and now purposeless gear.

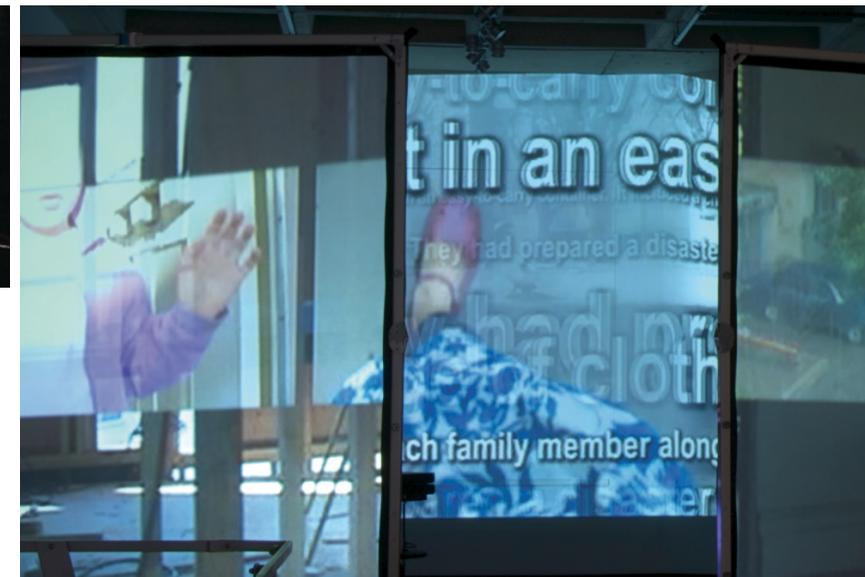
Aside from the dates, sound exists only in fragments. Bits of voice, of song, the clamor of urban life are scattered among the prevailing percussive blows of the stamp. Cachunk, cachunk. And the rhythm accelerates, slows, accelerates again.

In another set of images, among the most compelling and emphatic because inaugurating an end, we see a child. We’ve seen this child before: once she ran toward the camera, but was never greeted, never met. Did she cry out “wait”?—we can’t be sure. Finally, she walks determinedly, quickly, in a short coat, as if to reach someone, or escape from something else. As she moves across the frame, the image repeats and follows the circular trajectory of the projections themselves. We cannot comfort her nor even hold her in our sightlines. She keeps on going, going. At a certain point a woman—is it Finley?—comes

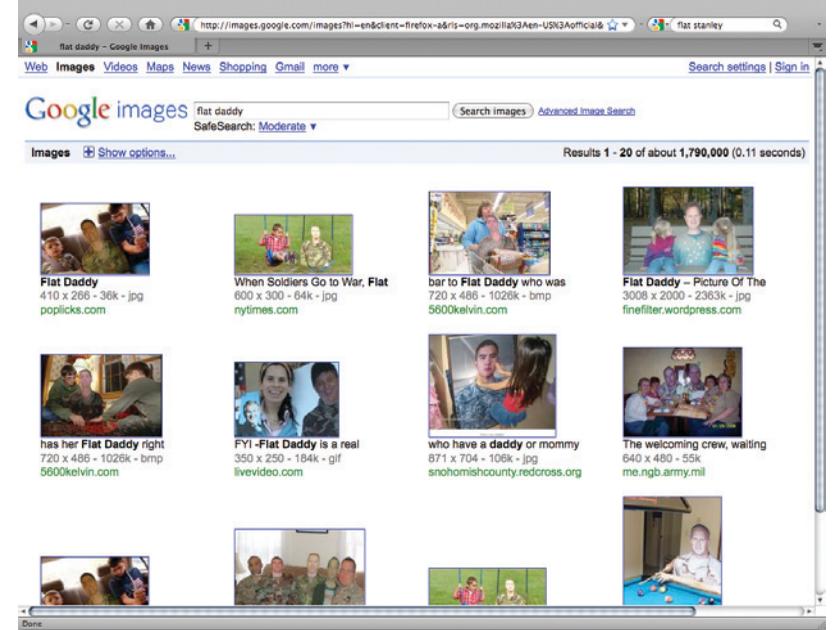


behind her, also walking faster and faster. Will there be reconciliation, support, an embrace? But the woman, wrapped in her own disaster, continues on, passing her. And the child keeps trying to catch up, trapped in the installation’s time warp.

We must be unguarded to experience *Guarded* and the tension of its almost constant anxiety. It is our subjectivity that is in question. As the images move, slip and slide past in their unending voyage, a voyage that we can never take, they offer us no vantage point from which we can see securely and survey the work as a whole. *Guarded* creates an experience which is the exact opposite of that of a panopticon. One image is always escaping while the other appears, and we, like the child, fall behind, again, again, and again. We are forced to decide how to position ourselves—physically, ethically, affectively; our sense of desire for and failure of control, of vigilance, is very much at the core of the piece. *Guarded* argues that we aren’t vulnerable, susceptible only occasionally, but constitutively. Paradoxically, the political imperative to take cover and shelter, to guard ourselves, deforms our very capacity to be vulnerable, to be as open as we are.



ALTHOUGH AESTHETICALLY VERY DIFFERENT, **Flat Land** and **Lost** continue Finley and Muse's engagement with the life and times of disaster. Less about creating the affective ambiance of a politically confused world, these works explicitly address discourses that sustain the US military invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. As with *Guarded*, these pieces provide no ground upon which a viewer can reconcile their unsettling juxtapositions. Yet unlike *Guarded*'s constantly moving images, each uses not only a stable frame as its site of projection but also presents either still or barely moving images. *Flat Land*'s double projection appears on either side of a single paper-flat screen. As one moves around the screen, the images on the other side become inaccessible. Conversely, *Lost* is a single channel work, yet the nature of the image—fog lifting, settling, and lifting again over a Pacific coast landscape—and its disjunctive relationship to the aural testimony we hear, create a similarly unsettling tension that frustrates any desire for straightforward comprehension or emotion. In these works, pathos emerges not so much via the image and our bodily engagement with it, but through the vocalized subjectivities of "characters" who speak. The characteristic Finley-Muse critique then resides in the audio-visual and spatial frameworks that structure and inflect our listening. Unlike *Guarded*, where we are literally placed "inside" the work, here we are resolutely outside. Yet again we are asked to decide how and where to position ourselves—both in relationship to these screens and to the attitudes they depict.

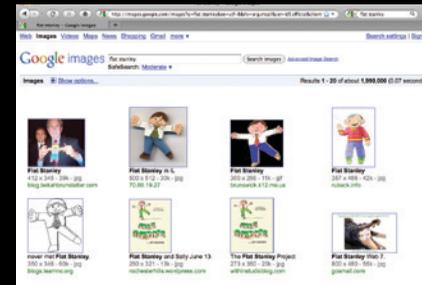


Flat Land's two video channels, presented on opposite sides of a hanging "flat" screen, are concerned with stories of ideologically charged "flat" characters—or rather character surrogates. On one side are the "flat daddies," the lifesize, waist-up, cardboard cutout photos of soldiers in military attire who substitute for daddies (and a few mommies) now at war. On the other side are the "flat Stanleys" (on whom the "flat daddies" were first modeled), who, as surrogate schoolchildren, go off on voyages of discovery, in this case specifically to visit the White House and then on to Iraq. The Stanleys' adventures are tracked through digital images sent back to children from sites along the way, while the daddies' vital role on the homefront is shown by their central placement in numerous family photographs. In both cases, the role of these visual proxies in the affective and ideological lives of their flesh and blood family members becomes one of the subjects of the piece.

The “flat daddy” family snapshots mimic but also disturb the most banal rituals of American life: dinner at home with dad, dinner out with dad, dad asleep on the couch with sleeping child next to him, dad being kissed by baby, dad with daughter at some school event, dad as best man at a wedding. The positioning of the cardboard daddy within the space and among the other bodies of the snapshot sometimes makes for uncannily “realistic” images—at first glance, indeed, daddy/husband seems to be there too, smiling graciously at all who look at him. Even though, in a few shots, the flat and the real (now of course “flattened” by the snapshot as well) seem disturbingly out of synch, we understand how, in the collective representations that make up family life, cardboard can stand-in and become the object of affection and projection. The images of the paper Stanleys refer more to the clichés of tourism, making little attempt at the artifices of real occasion: the Stanleys aren’t so much part of scenes as in front of them. They propel the viewer into foreign spaces, into the exotic; their incommensurability with their surroundings make them cute. Stanley gains his status from his ability to leave home. He associates with distant figures and sites, here next to political leaders, civic monuments, as well as the tanks, weapons, and other military paraphernalia associated with the beloved, now absent father.

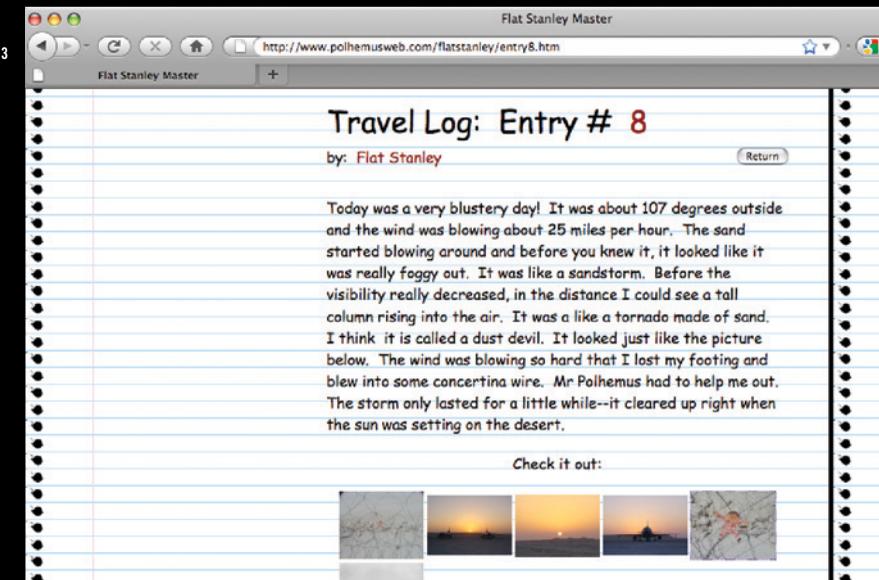
In *Flat Land* these images of and within images, these video projections of psychic projections compensating for and courting real loss, are accompanied by two first-person narrations. On one side, the voice of a military wife and mother tells us about her decision to procure a flat daddy, his assimilation

that it is repeated
16



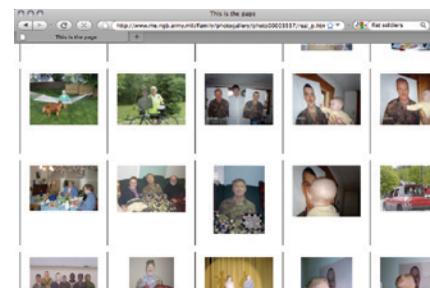
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Jeanne C. Finley & John Muse
Flat Land



into the family and the domestic sphere, his power to comfort her children and engage them in conversation, the ambivalence she feels when she finds herself talking to him too, and his subsequent sequestration in the den. On the other side, we hear a schoolboy tell the story of how his class made Flat Stanley, who was sent first to the White House, where he enjoyed photo ops with President Bush and Secretary of State Rice, and then to his father in Iraq. Here Stanley learns how to use a gun, goes on dangerous military missions, and is sometimes scared “because bad things happen at night in Iraq.” But he makes it home safely, only a little bit worse for wear.

video footage

In these stories, the voices of the mother/wife and son also function as stand-ins, like their cardboard or paper relatives—surrogates for the tens of thousands of women and children whose situations and perspectives they appear to exemplify. It isn’t quite clear how the artists feel about their characters, created and compiled from citations found in the journalistic and web-based public sphere—and this reticence unsettles. Are these voices intended to give three-dimensional and empathic flesh to the users of the daddies and Stanleys, or are they also “flat,” as flat and reductive a version of the American family as the cardboard daddies and paper Stanleys they love?

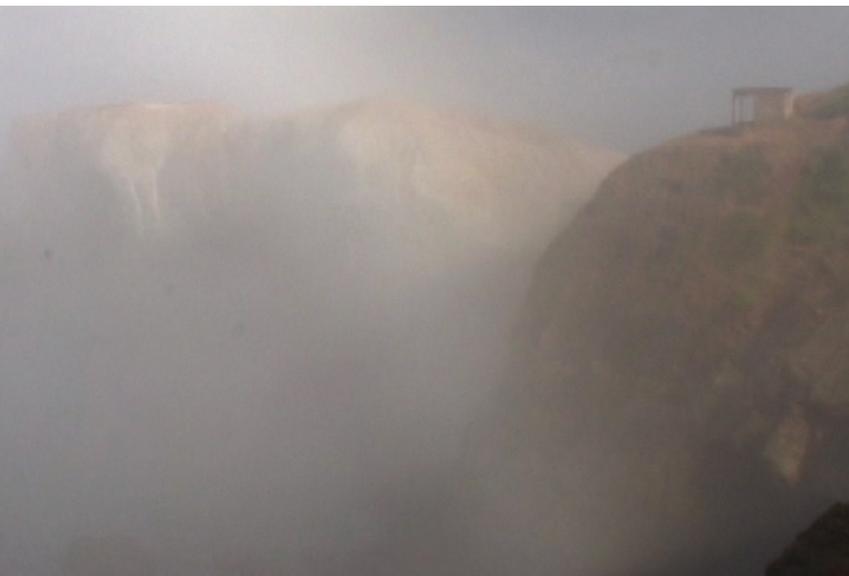
While the narratives, especially that of the wife and mother, cannot help but move us, they also make us aware of the narrow frame in which such pathos can move, even narrower in the narration of the child where good and bad, power and authority, go unquestioned. On both “sides” of the installation there is a heroicizing and idealization of the military man; the discourse is limited to the frame (and by the frame) of the affective, domestic sphere. The tragedy and wounds are real, but the framework for articulating them, both in image and in language, is stiff, self-centered, and ultimately defensive. We are stuck in a kind of *mise-en-abyme* of the flatness of national discourses around war. As viewers/listeners, how can we reconcile the narrow but poignant pathos and the broader, intolerable politics? Between empathy and cynicism, between condescension and anger, where do we place ourselves? And whom can we blame for the ensuing disquiet brought on by both the narratives’ complacency and our all-too-real, collective *Flat Land*?

In a flat world there is no possibility of perspective or over-view. Finley and Muse’s version of such a flat land suggests how appealing and appealingly simple things might be in a universe where vision is limited to the domestic plane and two-dimensional surrogates can assuage three-dimensional wounds. But this myopia is perturbed by our multi-dimensional perspective, as we move around the installation and lose our certainties yet again on Finley and Muse’s unstable ground.



THE SINGLE-SCREEN INSTALLATION **Lost** enacts a similar tension between empathic engagement and critique. Here a well-meaning tale of the absurdities of war evolves into the legitimization of military action and American values while the image we see—a long take of a stunning, fog enshrouded coastal cliff—is a landscape from a radically different world. The turbulent ocean estranges us from the life and death story in contemporary Iraq. We try to make sense of their relation, but initially the connection between text and image seems as obscure as the fog on the cliff. “I can’t begin to describe today. It’s been sort of a strange one,” says Chaplain Major Eric Olsen, whose audio diary we hear while lost in this fog. He candidly describes the war and speaks candidly too about the inability of his language to describe, to deliver a clear view.

Unlike the generic narrators in *Flat Land* who obliterate the mortality and vulnerability of the flesh, Olsen recounts a single, bloody event: he tells an Iraqi woman that her husband, the father of her two children, has been killed by American troops. Addressing an American audience, he seems at pains to legitimate the killing, noting that this farmer from the south had been involved in the weapons trade. At the same time he gives voice to this family’s poverty and the widow’s despair. But the Chaplain manages to find, for himself and for us, a moral “good” even amid the widow’s screams, concluding his story by telling us that the visually impaired children were given, by the military staff, the name of an ophthalmologist in Baghdad who might restore their sight: “So maybe in sort of a weird way, some future sight will come out of the actions here today.” The Chaplain’s discourse cannot free itself from a desperate



again

need for a righteous moral framework and thus a familiar narrative arc: the cathartic release of a happy ending, a bright future that may justly compensate for what he has just called a “very legitimate shooting.” The Chaplain’s penultimate line about the children’s future “sight,” (if indeed they make it to Baghdad, have the money, the time to find the doctor, and are cured, unlikely as that seems) reflects back on his own sight and insight (and lack thereof) in the articulation and framing of his emotionally harrowing experiences.

But the artists don’t leave him alone to conclude his narration: they superimpose the phrase “future site” over the landscape at the very moment the Chaplain says “future sight”—and even the title *Lost* imposes on the piece as a whole. “Future site” seems to refer both to the image at which we have been looking—for the small structure that appears and disappears in the fog may be a former military site—and to the ideological site of the Chaplain’s fantasy of “sight,” either his own or that of the children orphaned by US troops. Iraq too is a “site,” one that is impossible to “see” clearly when one is positioned in its mi(d)st. This question of the sites of sight, the positions from and through which we view, frame, feel, and come to understand our world, is one that extends across all of the works in this exhibit.

Imaginative Feats Literally Presented delivers us to and literally presents to us a world struggling to cope with anxiety, loss, and the impending or real dissolution of the family. *Guarded*, *Flat Land*, and *Lost* cite a number of contemporary American cultural artifacts—the Red Cross guide, the daddies, the Stanleys, and the Olsen diary. These circulate our culture’s imaginative work, its

happening



and again.

attempt to frame, fix, flatten, and contain disaster, a labor that just as certainly promulgates the harms in question and makes these harms all the more difficult to fathom and face. Finley and Muse confront us with them in an environment that requires constantly shifting our own physical, moral, and affective positions. Over the time of our viewing, we're invited to feel the fear of catastrophe, the anxiety of losses already sustained; we experience our culture's belated methods of affective and ideological damage control; and intimate the damage wrought by such fantastic strategies of containment. None of these works allow us to sit still. We see, we are forced to see, from multiple positions, multiple sites, and yet can never reach any synoptic conclusion. Instead, we waver and slip, our guard down and open to the works' affective swings and shocks, in a state of anxious but invigorating disquiet.

→ **IRINA LEIMBACHER** is a film curator and scholar based in the Bay Area. She writes on non-fiction and experimental film and installation, served as a film programmer at San Francisco Cinematheque for twelve years, and curated the 2009 Flaherty Film Seminar, at which Jeanne C. Finley and John Muse were guests.



VENUES AND SCREENINGS

Guarded <i>media installation</i>	2003	Lost <i>video</i>	2006
The Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, Colgate University, Harrison NY	2009	"Artists' Videos Concerning War in the Middle East," Scope Art Fair at Lincoln Center, New York NY	2009
"How Can You Resist," LA Freewaves Festival, Los Angeles CA	2004	"Jeanne C. Finley: The Non-Fiction Imagination," Austin Documentary Center, Austin TX	2008
Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco CA	2003	"Best of Selections from the NYUFF," IFC Center, New York NY	
Flat Land <i>media installation</i>	2006–2009	Skopje Film Festival, Macedonia	
"Freedom of Expression: Political Art in an Age of Uncertainty," Sonoma State University Gallery, Sonoma CA	2008	European Media Art Festival, Osnabrueck, Germany	2007
"Too Much Freedom?" LA Freewaves Festival, Los Angeles CA		New York Underground Film Festival, New York NY	
"There is Always a Machine Between Us," SF Camerawork San Francisco CA	2007	Portland Film Festival, Portland OR	
Koussevitzky Art Gallery, Pittsfield MA	2006	"Language is a Virus," Balagan, Brookline MA	
		"Truth and Reconciliation," SF Cinematheque/Headlands Center for the Arts, San Francisco CA	
		"For Life Against the War," Anthology Film Archives, New York and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley CA	
		"Relational Aesthetics," Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley CA	
		Clarmond Short Film Festival, France	2006
		"For Life Against the War," Collective for Living Cinema, New York NY	

FINLEY + MUSE

Jeanne C. Finley and **John Muse** have worked collaboratively on numerous experimental documentaries and installations. These works have been exhibited nationally and internationally, at festivals and museums, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Guggenheim Museum, The Whitney Biennial, San Francisco International Film Festival, Berlin Video Festival, Toronto, and World Wide Video Festival. They were featured artists at the 2009 Flaherty Seminar "Witnesses, Monuments, Ruins." In 2003 New Langton Arts mounted a mid-career retrospective of their work, entitled "Jovial Tales for Tragic Sensibilities." They received a Rockefeller Media Arts Fellowship in 2001. Additional awards include a Creative Capital Foundation Grant and an Artists' Residency at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center.

Finley, a Guggenheim Fellow and Alpert/Cal Arts Award winner, is a Professor of Media Arts at California College of the Arts. She was an Artist-in-Residence at the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France in 2008 and The Headlands Center for the Arts in 2005. In 2001 she received an Arts-Link fellowship to Sarajevo to create a film and website, *dom pramaha [house of drafts]*, with Bosnian media artists. She lives in San Francisco with her husband, daughter, and son.

Muse is an Assistant Professor of Fine Arts at Haverford College. In 2006 he received his Ph.D. in Rhetoric from the University of California at Berkeley. In 2009 he curated *among friends*, a week of performance and social practice projects featuring Harrell Fletcher, William Pope.L, Jennifer Delos Reyes, and Nao Bustamante. He lives in Haverford, PA with his wife and daughter.

The Patricia Sweetow Gallery in San Francisco represents their installation work, and the Video Data Bank distributes their films.

www.finleymuse.com

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Guarded installation photographs, pp 3, 4, 7, 10, 13, 25: Warren Wheeler, 2009

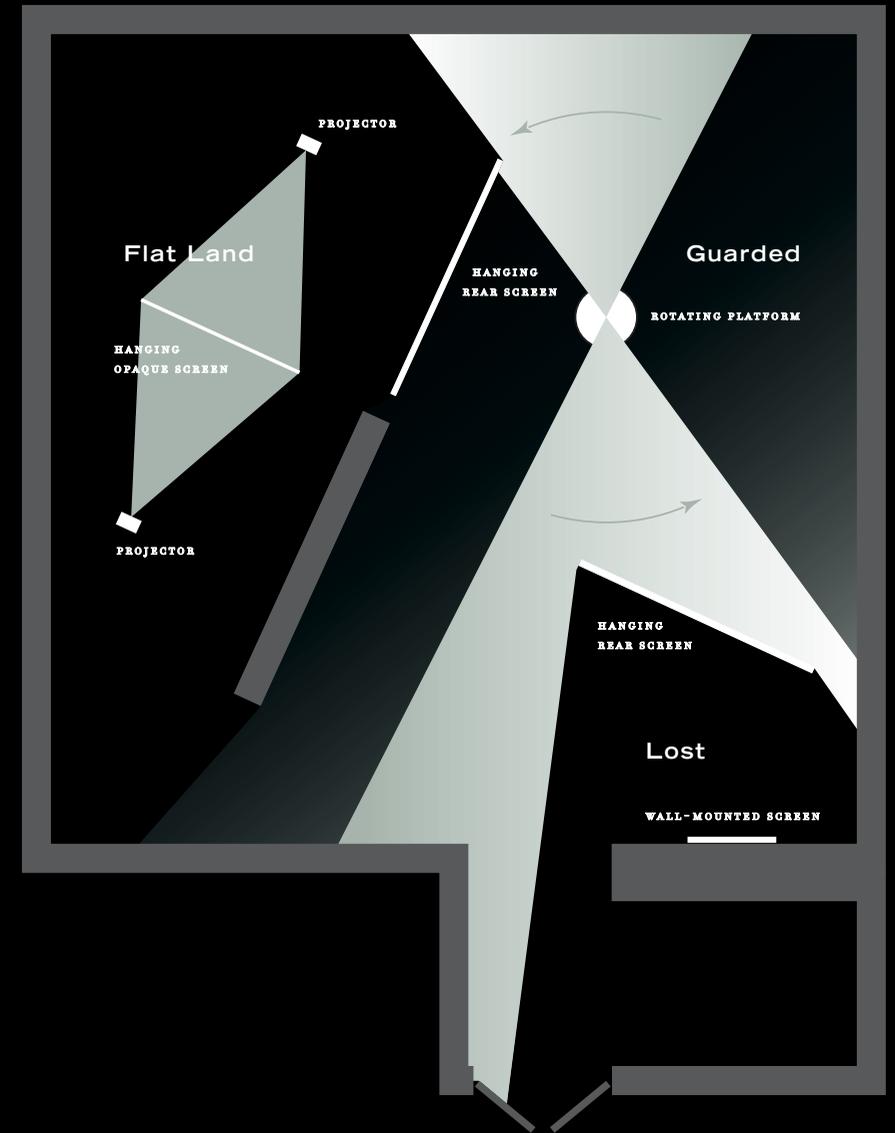
Internet sources for "flat daddy" and "flat Stanley" images, pp 15, 17, 19:

- 1 www.images.google.com
search results for "flat daddy"
- 2 www.images.google.com
search results for "flat Stanley"
- 3 "Desert Adventures of Flat Stanley":
www.polhemusweb.com/flatstanley/entry8.htm
- 4 "Flat Soldiers of 2008": www.me.ngb.army.mil/
Family/Flat Soldier Sitings/flat sldr 2008.htm
- 5 www.me.ngb.army.mil/Family/photogallery/
photo00005557/real_p.htm

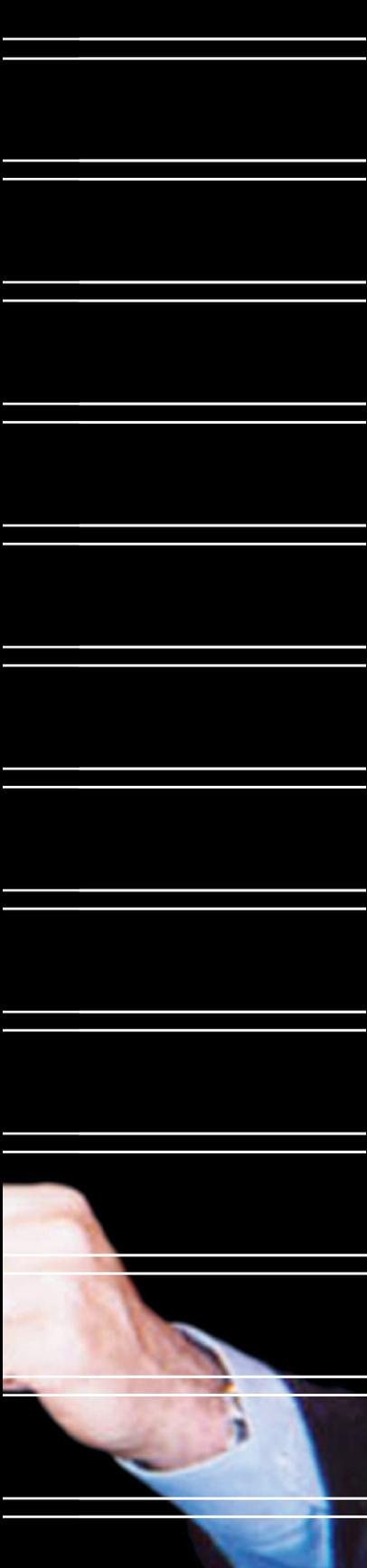
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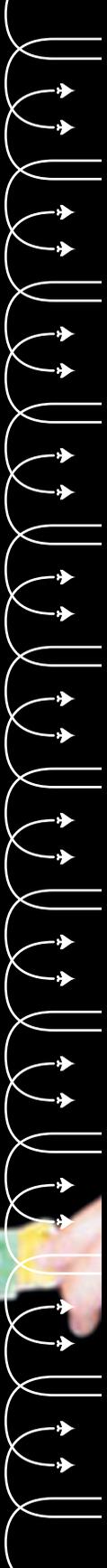
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Plan view, Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery



FINLEY + MUSE



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