I am developing a new multimedia narrative environment, entitled *Retraction*, about anticipation and the passage of time. Comprising several video and sound-equipped rooms connected by closed doors, *Retraction* engages the viewer by means of fictional characters. A visitor to this artwork begins by witnessing an apparently live video of events being played out in another room. Once the viewer has entered an adjacent space, it is clear that he or she is now standing in the room just seen on video. This process of seeing a space on a video screen before entering it repeats itself in successive spaces. The pattern gradually shifts, however, to include video views of rooms already visited, implying a connection to either the present “elsewhere” or to the past. Eventually, events are revealed occurring in real and imagined locations far outside the installation’s boundaries. All video and sound in this piece will be synchronized, triggered by numerous movement and touch sensors.

*Retraction* declares its structure early in order to build both true and false expectations about time and space. As models for this project, I considered crowd management for blockbuster museum shows, as well as the narrative paths of carnival attractions and indoor Disney rides. Each of these forms determines a viewer’s experiences in a prescribed order. My intent is to critique and violate the notion of control by engaging the viewer as an active participant. By allowing for freedom of movement and interaction, this piece relates to walking tours of living history sites, except that the narrative of *Retraction* is abstract and open-ended. The lack of neat resolution allows the viewer to take a more proactive stance. I want to isolate the individual by speaking to both his or her intellect and emotions.

The title *Retraction* refers to something that has been denied or taken back. The installation will retract some conditions and statements that may appear at first to be true, and then further retract its own retractions.

**Building upon earlier works**

This is one of several projects I plan to do over the next few years, building on my earlier anticipatory and largely psychological works involving successive rooms such as *Airlock* (2004), and on sensor-based works that embroil the viewer in a relationship with a video character, such as *Love Disorder*, which was commissioned for the 2008 Zero1 Biennial Superlight at the San Jose Museum of Art. I also mounted a larger version of *Love Disorder* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland in January 2009.

The performative, narrative and subversive aspects of my work are a reaction to structuralist and conceptualist trends that culminated in the 1970s. Influenced by body and performance...
artists such as Eleanor Antin and Chris Burden, I was grouped initially with other artists who used personas. I was in the vanguard of young artists that included Jeff Wall, Cindy Sherman, and others who took a directorial or staged approach to photography, moving the medium into the art mainstream. To my knowledge, I was the first artist to use video and audio to power the narrative aspects of physically immersive environments. Over time, these hybrid works have become increasingly complex in their narrative, performance, and architectural content. More recently, I’ve utilized sensors, robotics and control software to contribute to an interactivity that is predominantly physical and psychological.

**Grounded in the vaguely familiar**
These immersive works grew from my early photographs, bringing narrative and hyper-reality into three dimensions. Energized by video and sound, these “narrative environments” reference other types of spaces, grounding themselves in the vaguely familiar, using beauty, humor and psychological tactics in service of sociopolitical aims. A calculated structure or conceit is usually central to each of my projects. The most striking and singular aspect of my environments is their relationship with narrative and audience. Sound and video provide a cultural backdrop, emphasize the passage of time, and point to physical indicators that cue interaction, giving the viewer a role in a scenario.

Two previous narrative environments of mine are particularly relevant to my proposed project. *Airlock* (Figs. 1, 2), mounted in Minneapolis in 2004 with a McKnight Foundation Fellowship, took the ideas about audience to an extreme, drawing the viewer through spaces and events linked by proximity and video. Because the three videos in *Airlock* are looped, and the viewer enters and exits at will, there is no beginning or end to the narrative. A viewer may hesitate to proceed or return through the environment, even though he or she knows the space is safe and the video is prerecorded. Viewers are meant to discover their own willingness to accept a fiction.

*Figure 1: Detail of first room in Airlock*  
*Figure 2: Video scene from Airlock*

*Love Disorder* (Figs. 3, 4) was the result of the work I did for my 2007 Fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation. It is a one-room interactive environment, in which a video character talks to visitors and responds emotionally to their movement in the space. Upon entering the installation, a viewer sees a 12-foot-high video screen at the far end of the room. On the screen, a huge face says, “I’ve been waiting for you”—or one of several other greetings. Art reviewer Katie Lampert described her experience in *Love Disorder* thusly, “He was aware of my motion throughout the space. The fact that I could interact with this video character made the piece so potent that I began to become connected to this person due to his display of intense emotions . . . .”

Eight pairs of infrared break-beam sensors are embedded in the wainscoting of *Love Disorder* to determine human movement direction and proximity. The computer program Max/MSP/Jitter controls the video reactions. Based on where someone is in the room, the
program will instantly call up a video clip and seamlessly move to it, as soon as the previous one has finished.

**Shifting expectations**

Like *Love Disorder*, *Retraction* will use sets of sensors to determine human movement direction and proximity. It will utilize controlled electronic media within a more disparate array of spaces and play with relative perceptions of distance, time, potential confrontation and direct experience in a more complete way than either *Love Disorder* or *Airlock*. Moreover, this installation will employ separate video monitors in four separate, enclosed, but interconnected spaces. Most of these will show pre-recorded video filmed in parts of the environment and elsewhere. Others will show live video “surveillance” in other parts of the environment.

This project also asks viewers to invest their imaginations in order to interpret the work. Expectations are likely to shift once a viewer has gone all the way into the installation. As more video narrative data emerge during the trip back to the exit, the meaning of the piece is altered further. The audience is encouraged subliminally to reconcile contradictions that I have set up and to attempt to fill gaps in the logic of a narrative in which there is some natural ambiguity. I mean for viewers to feel personally implicated by what my scenarios signify, to come to a sense of emotional recognition and to continue puzzling out the meaning of the work after they leave. This work will be disorienting and will disturb the viewer’s sense of time, location, and reality. It will be subject to individual interpretation by design. In an era in which many aspects of day-to-day perception are disrupted routinely, particularly through mass media and advertising, I hope that this piece will open a door for the viewer to take action in the real world.

**Additional information**

Virtual tour of *Love Disorder*:

http://www.vimeo.com/album/47357

Additional images and information:

http://www.brucecharlesworth.net