

PHILIPPE BOISSONNET : In-Between

By Louise Poissant (1997)

Between light and shade

“It is through the eyes of the viewer that a work of art takes shape”, declared Marcel Duchamp, one of the first to recognize the essential interaction between art and viewers. And this is precisely the theme that pervades Philippe Boissonnet’s work. Over the past ten years, he has used multiple devices for articulating various scenographic proposals and postures, both physical and psychological, both in and in front of holographic installations, eliciting both surprise and astonishment from viewers. Adopting a two-sided approach — the principle of holography on the one hand, and the arrangement of holograms on the other, Boissonnet has succeeded, subtly, in introducing and incorporating new spatiotemporal parameters into art. Understandably, the viewer never anticipates the blends, mixtures and challenges the viewing experience has to offer. He has come to view something and is satisfied he can interpret the images he sees according to the classic model of art interpretation. But he is subtly led to discover other dimensions of the work as well as of his own sensitivity.

Combining the tools and dynamics of technological arts with a long-standing tradition of artists who have chosen to work with light, Philippe Boissonnet adopts a two-pronged approach: representation and interaction. On the one hand, the world as it unfolds, a simulation of things seen or imagined by the artist who delivers and shares his emotions. On the other, the world about to unfold, the stimulation of the viewer now being called upon as a participant in the global process of the aesthetic experience.

The principle of holography

Holography is perhaps the most evanescent form of photography, a form of light in every step of the process involved in creating and reconstructing an image. First, a laser beam is projected onto holographic film along with the reflection of another beam on an object. Holography captures the image or object to be recorded in three dimensions. Then, the thin film on which the image is fixed is laminated on a transparent base, either glass or plexiglas, which is exposed to light, making it possible to reconstruct the object floating in three dimensions, defying gravity. When viewing a hologram, its luminous and undulatory nature becomes readily apparent; light, that usually invisible filter, is constantly present therein. In fact, it is well known how holography renews a very old fascination for the universal medium, the very condition of visibility itself, through which forms and colors naturalize. These holographic images can capture and record a ray that makes it possible to reconstruct a three-dimensional object. In this sense, and perhaps even better than any other form of artistic expression, holography echoes Roland Barthes’ sentiments about photography when he says: “From a real body, really there, rays came and touched me, I who am here; no matter how long it takes the rays to travel, the picture of the person who was here comes and touches me like the deferred rays of a star”.¹

¹ Translation from: Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire*, Paris, Gallimard Seuil, p. 126.

A hologram is an even more faithful representation of reality than a picture or a painting because it simulates the space occupied by an object as if it extended beyond its real depth. This illusion is further strengthened by various processes that give the impression that the image takes shape behind its support or, on the contrary, that it is moving toward the spectator, leaving the image plane, reaching out to him. This is why, as attested by current research in kinetic holography (holographic cinema, holoclips) and teleholography, which makes it possible to transmit holograms at distance, holography is a simulation technique whose resources have not been yet fully exploited.

Representation is a central theme in Philippe Boissonnet's works. It is in fact one of the essential elements of his iconology. Boissonnet makes implied reference to the classics, to works of transition (like Michelangelo's Adam in the Sistine Chapel, Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*), to a few pictorial genres, especially the self-portrait, to objects traditionally associated with the representation register (the painter's palette, the terrestrial globe, the refracting telescope, the easel, etc.) In his works, these subjects take both a critical and poetic meaning. Holography becomes a comment on painting, art history and representation, but it also asserts its strength as an artistic proposition through a medium which literally opens up brand new perspectives. It is worth noting that holographic art did not easily win its letters patent in the classical network of art diffusion. For many reasons, especially its electronic facet, the battle for recognition was tough. Boissonnet's choice of subjects is not a mere accessory, but rather a way to establish a certain link, a certain familiarity with the artistic field. In a more profound way, he illustrates and sets the limits of the subtleties of representation as well as the possibility for art to be something more. This is what holography has become: a place where the dynamic participation of the spectator is constantly renewed.

As opposed to other artistic forms, holography requires the active participation of the spectator. This is vital because, as in the anamorphosis and a few trompe l'oeil, the spectator can only perceive the image by moving around and looking at it from various angles. In fact, there is no ideal position for viewing a hologram, for as a viewer moves around, different parts become prominent. Captivated by this gradual unfolding of the image, the spectator constantly changes body postures without even realizing it. This is a more or less deliberate exploratory action that Boissonnet has put into his scenographies which require the spectator adopt new attitudes toward the hologram.

Scenography

Several theorists and many artists have tried to explain the important role of the viewpoint in art. The way works of art are interpreted and, more importantly, the way we perceive them depend on it. Painters and sculptors have represented, allusively or metaphorically, this intrinsic dimension pertaining to the aesthetic experience and status of art. With holography, this central issue is not only dealt with, it is literally experienced because the way one perceives a work of art depends on many factors: posture and movements, distance from the work, height of the viewer, his field of vision, his position in relation to the light that illuminates the hologram, etc. The uniqueness of the viewpoint

means that a hologram is properly lit when it is in fact an other that is visited. The predominant viewpoint is no longer upheld, but rather replaced by an interplay of complicity, or coincidences when the spectators participates unwittingly in this sharing of the light.

In-Between is a work designed to facilitate interaction and cooperation between spectators. In this way, it can be said that this recent series by Philippe Boissonnet, this particular work more than any other helps the spectator realize that he “is the real content of the artform or the installation,”³ as Derrick de Kerckhove so rightly observed. It is true to say that the spectator is involved in a dynamic he gradually discovers. His mere presence and an inquisitive attitude no longer suffice. When he realizes his movements trigger the lighting of a hologram, he also discovers that his position and his actions do not coincide with what he wants to see. To satisfy this desire, he needs other people. Finding the privileged position implies a modulation of his movements in relation to those of the other visitors.

The images he discovers reinforces this two-way, three-way, multiple-way relationship. One of the holograms displays the at-sign, that universally-recognized symbol and required component of any e-mail address, the symbol which, needless to say, links the cybernaut with his host, the traveler with his home base. On another hologram, jumbled letters very quickly form two French personal pronouns "je" (I) and "tu" (you), two short words serving as the foundation of the dialogical and subjective relationship. On the third hologram, can be seen two faces, a man and a woman, as it happens the artist in a tête-à-tête with a female companion.

In-Between depicts and materializes what it takes to initiate communication, to begin a relationship with others. But, in a more profound way, it probably illustrates that it is through the interstice, in the passage, and through the flow of the elements that the true meaning surfaces: between interlocutors, between the artist and the viewer.

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- There are two spectators in either A or B, C is lit.
 in A and C, B is lit.
 in B and C, A is lit.
 - There are three spectators or more, everything is lit.

³ Derrick de Kerckhove, “Earth Thinking: On the Art of Philippe Boissonnet,” *Philippe Boissonnet, Galileo and Other Uncertainties*, Fundación Arte y Tecnología, Madrid, 1995.