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Scott Snibbe's *Deep Walls* : A Close Reading

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Abstract

Deep Walls (2003), by Scott Snibbe (see interview), consists of a camera and a rectangular screen which is divided in 16 smaller rectangular screens. The camera records the projected shadow of the viewers who move in front of the screen, and each of the small screens plays one of those recordings over and over until a new recording replaces the oldest recording. The piece is set up in a way that the viewer is not aware that she is recorded; she only realizes that her oversized shadow is projected onto the big rectangle, not knowing that when she leaves her action materializes as a looping silhouette in one of the small screens. Given the inexplicitness of the grammar of interaction, in many cases what is recorded is the attempt to figure out the grammar of interaction. This can be considered a metacommentary on interactivity. However, there is much more symbolic in this installation.

Scott Snibbe: Deep Walls (2003)

Deep Walls (2003), by Scott Snibbe, consists of a camera and a rectangular screen which is divided in 16 smaller rectangular screens. The camera records the projected shadow of the viewers who move in front of the screen, and each of the small screens plays one of those recordings over and over until a new recording replaces the oldest recording. The piece is set up in a way that the viewer is not aware that she is recorded; she only realizes that her oversized shadow is projected onto the big rectangle, not knowing that when she leaves her action materializes as a looping silhouette in one of the small screens. Given the inexplicitness of the grammar of interaction, in many cases what is recorded is the attempt to figure out the grammar of interaction. This can be considered a metacommentary on interactivity. However, there is much more symbolic in this installation.

Deep Walls has a vital cinematic aspect and actually is "particularly inspired by the surrealist films of Jan Svankmajer" (Snibbe 2003). It creates, as Snibbe notes, "a projected cabinet of cinematic memories" (Ibid). However, not on the aesthetic level but on the level of interaction, one may also consider *Deep Walls* to be a bulletin board where people communicate with each other. This especially comes into mind when the piece is exhibited outside the gallery context, in an environment frequented by the same people again and again.[1] Here people can leave visual messages – a funny or irritating shadow play – for their friends and colleagues who would search the screen for a familiar silhouette and respond with their own little movie. But even though users do not have specific addressees in mind, the movies generated suggest that users do understand this interactive installation as an arena where they can stage filmic messages for the next users. Thus, one finds movies where people (or, rather, their silhouettes)[2] obviously talk to the audience, or where two people get involved in an argument and finally turn violent. *Deep Walls* not only requires its audience to act – in front of other people or unobserved[3] – it also inspires them to act in terms of both past and future: The silhouette recordings already playing inspire the current viewers, who may then create their own. However, those new viewers do not only embody inspiration from and appreciation for the existing movies, but also their potential deletion. The moment of recording clearly exists in relation to past and future. Its future is to become past.

In a certain way, a recording is always about the past. With respect to photography, Roland Barthes states that every image represents a *here and now*, which has become a *there and then* (Barthes 2003: 120; Barthes 1984: section 33). Once, the photographed really was in front of the camera; the photograph is a proof of its existence in that historic moment.[4] However, it is also a testimony to the moment's past. The possibility or certainty that the photographed does not exist anymore at the moment the photographed is perceived causes the melancholia of photography (Barthes 1984: section 33). According to Barthes and phrased with McLuhan, the message of the medium photography is "the return of the dead".[5]

Barthes also notes that, historically, photography began as an art of people: their identity, their social status, their body per se. (Barthes 1984: section 33) According to mythology, this is also true for painting, whose origin goes back to a maid of ancient Corinth, Dibutade, who traced the shadow of her lover onto a wall in order to remember him during his absence. In that sense, painting actually started as photography because the presented really had been there and his image was a truthful copy of the original, which is what the shadow Dibutade traced and the shadows in *Deep Walls* have in common. Apart from that, they relate to each other like Romanticism and Postmodernism, because the old setting comes to a simple, happy end (one maid, one lover, one room, and one shadow, which lasts forever), while *Deep Walls* reveals how remembering turns into forgetting: every new silhouette recorded makes one old silhouette disappear.

Thus, Barthes's notion about photography and death becomes an even stronger idea in *Deep Walls*. New visitors provide the shadows with an audience, which may be inspired by those shadows – observation confirms that many interactors mimic the actions they were watching on the screens as they perform for the camera. But this audience—inspired, witnessing—is also a competitor for public visibility and eventually replaces previous shadows. This seems to be the major facet of the grammar of interaction: the interactor has a chance to have a moment recorded, but only to see it vanish. One may read *Deep Walls* as a work about time passing by, about death and about the decay of our traces. The actions of the former generations – represented in movies of silhouettes – are inspiring to the next and may survive in their actions, though the record of it may finally get lost. That this loss happens as a joyful, pleasurable play makes the piece even more melancholic, or rather suggests seeing the inevitable decay with the necessary distance and, at the same time, urges to seize the moment.

This moment is about a kind of courage. As mentioned above, being recorded in front of the screen while watched by other people requires overcoming one's self-consciousness. Interactive art of such kind as *Deep Walls* and *Text Rain* by Camille Utterback requires the participants to make the decision not to be shy, but to step into the center of attention. On the surface level, this can be read as making a spectacle of one's self. On the symbolic level, this can – as in the case of *Deep Walls* –be read as the choice to get involved or stay behind, to engage and commit or just observe, i.e. two ways of connecting to time and society.

The grammar of interaction in *Deep Walls* has other interesting aspects. As long as a participant interacts with the piece, her silhouette is bigger than all the other shadows, and overshadows some of them; when she leaves the screen, her shadow is integrated to it, in its smaller, recorded version. The participant now can watch her own silhouette from behind, together with other people who may not recognize the silhouette's identity. Thus, one is arranged within a broader context and distanced from who one has been just a moment before. This is reminiscent of the

short life of most appearances of a person or topic in contemporary media.[6] Moreover the contextualization easily translates to the symbolic level of archiving and filing historical actions. Snibbe states about *Deep Walls*:

> The name of the piece is a design pattern from architect Christopher Alexander's 'Pattern Language'. His admonition to architects is to build the walls of homes thick, so that cabinets, drawers and windows can perforate the interior space, providing areas to store, display, slice through and ultimately provide more meaning within the home. In the spirit of Alexander, this work gradually absorbs the contents of its environment onto its surface. (Ibid.)

Snibbe continues: "By collecting the viewers' own shadows, the piece reveals how individual objects gain in symbolic meaning, while losing literal meaning, through organization, repetition and display." (Ibid.) The idea of a wall as an archive of its historical environment is surely close to anyone who, in front of an old building, has wondered what it (or one stone in particular, to make it more dramatic) has witnessed and would tell us if it could. Sometimes walls do tell by means of signs history has left on them: color, letters, plants, bullet holes, graffiti...

Taking into account the grammar of interaction in *Deep Walls,* one can certainly say that the wall/screen echoes the content of its environment and it does so longer than a mirror would do. Nonetheless, all in all the symbolic meaning in *Deep Walls* is not absorption but erasure. Strictly speaking, the symbolic meaning *is* absorption in addressing its erasure: By being about recording and erasure, the piece triggers reflections about absorption and preservation. However, this reflection may have its source in the participants' bodies to the extent that they do or do not absorb the shadow play of their predecessors and preserve it for their successors in their own shadow play. The metaphorical meaning of the shadow or silhouette becomes that of a trace, which survives, for a while at least, even after the shadow's owner and the shadow are gone.

Quite different is the way Edward Tannenbaum is using a similar technique to project the interactor's silhouette onto the wall. His installation *Recollections IV* invites the participant to move in front of a large video projection screen: "As the person moves, his or her image is recorded by a video camera and passed on to a computer with special image processing capabilities. The person's silhouette or outline is extracted, assigned a color based on the instant that it was recorded, and projected onto the screen. Over time the images build up, creating a painting based on the movement. Simultaneously the colors are 'rotated', creating an animation in 'real time'".[7] Tannenbaum notes that even the most inhibited people seem to rise to the occasion and create beautiful images. He adds: The piece is "an unforgettable experience for many, with educational benefits in the areas of color, form, movement, and computer graphics." In contrast to *Deep Walls* this work facilitates the participant's action by a sophisticated computer program that, with time delay

and coloration, creates fascinating effects even out of very normal, unobtrusive motions. Thus, the burden of coming up with something exciting is taken from the interactor. The focus of perception is the real-time action rather than any symbolic implications. Beauty, so to speak, trumps meaning.

Edward Tannenbaum: Recollection IV (2005)

References

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Barthes, Roland (1984): Camera Lucida, London: Flamingo.

Snibbe, Scott (2003): Deep Walls -www.snibbe.com/scott/mosaics/deep%20walls/deep_walls.html.

Notes

1. This was the case with the exhibition of *Deep Walls* I curated in the lobby of Brown University's CIT building in March 2006.

2. Although the artist himself speaks of shadows, one may more accurately call it silhouettes since a shadow cannot exist without the presence of its owner. (The reverse it true in Adelbert von Chamisso's novella *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte* (1813) whose main character sells his shadow to the devil and hence, as a person without shadow, loses his social reputation.)

3. The exhibition's location influences fundamentally the way people interact with the piece. In contrast to a busy lobby, a quiet gallery space where the interactor can generate a movie without being watched by others helps to overcome self-consciousness when interacting with the piece.

4. For Barthes therefore "the relationship of signifieds to signifiers is not one of 'transformation' but of 'recording'"; the true relation between signifier and signified or their identity respectively is the literal message of a photograph (the "message without a code") (Barthes 2003: 120 and 119).

5. "[T]he return of the dead" is "that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph" (Barthes 1984: section 4).

6. And of course, the fact that everybody can walk up to the screen to be displayed evokes Andy Warhol's famous notion about the 15 minutes of fame.

7. www.et-arts.com