

# TERRITORIES

VIRTUAL SPACE IN REAL TIME

## Notes on the Sculptures of Liisa Roberts

•••

BENJAMIN WEIL

1. The artist may construct the piece

2. The piece may be fabricated

3. The piece needs not be built

Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership. [1]

Lawrence Weiner

*"Nowadays, artists do not focus as much on producing images as they do on proposing new trajectories. [...] In a world that is saturated with images, the experience of reality is becoming increasingly scarce. Artists who interest me produce moments of reality, instants of concrete "real." This is what I refer to as Operating Realism, an art that perpetually oscillates between a requisite symbolization that is specific to art, and the will to create effective situations, on a 1/1 scale, as a map that*



*Betraying a portrait*, 1995. Installation view. Courtesy Janice Guy. Photo Greta Olafsdottir.

would be applied onto its concrete model. After all, representation is only a moment of reality...."[2]

Nicolas Bourriaud

## I

During the course of the Twentieth Century, the notion of sculpture has evolved, from naming a product that results from a specific process, to describing an intellectual construct. This term no longer defines a type of production; rather it outlines a field of possible experiences that are related to the comprehension of space. Images, in the course of the same period, have become the core constituent of our landscape. Rather than documenting an object, they have progressively superseded the actual matter which they represent, to become the base of our mental mapping: experience is informed by images; a layer of interpretation informs the way we perceive reality, the reality of the image-maker. Furthermore, as this layer has progressively become transparent (invisible to the viewer), the context in which images are experienced, becomes increasingly important in the process of interpretation. Similarly, different images projected in the same location may create very different cognitive receptions of the same space. Sculpture, at the end of this century, could be described as being the experience that results from the conflation of the art product –in whatever form– and the context in which it is to be comprehended –it shifts our reading from the locus to a larger understanding of context.

The work of Liisa Roberts takes its cue from this conclusion. Roberts uses film as a medium, however only in relation to the space of projection. The precariousness of the projected image as a form, is indicative of a project that is grounded in exploring the dynamics between context and content –or, the space in-between– as a sculptural form, following certain Minimalist strategies. The film serves as a pretext to posit a query about the mechanisms that inform our relationship to images.

Having chosen to use film as opposed to video, Roberts also points to the “physical” involvement of the artist in the making of the work –thus referring to a more “traditional” understanding of sculpture: film editing somehow remains in the field of analog processing. The support, celluloid, is literally handled by hand. In a sense, this choice can be understood as a questioning of the seamlessness of technology: in many instances, technology tends to remove the process from the set of elements that are given to the viewer to inform her/his viewing experience.

Viewing time, in the case of sculpture, is a factor that is left in the control of the viewer. The moving image on the other hand, presupposes a screening time, which is imposed onto the viewer: there is a start, a specific duration, and an end. The film

sculptures of Roberts do not indicate a specific length of viewing time: there is no beginning and no end; rather than unfolding as traditional narratives, they animate the space in which they are projected. Multiple sequences projected in different areas imply a movement of the viewer in space, a movement which echoes that of film projection. One is forced into re-assessing one’s relationship to the moving image as a narrative progression. Time is no more an issue than in the experience of sculptural work. In the case of the two most recent pieces by Roberts, *‘betraying a portrait’* [3] and *‘Trap Door’*, [4] the presence of the projector(s) in the viewing room further spells out the idea of sculpture, playing with the notion of its assumed object-like quality.

## II

In early Japanese screening rooms, the seats were placed perpendicular to the screen, so as to enable the film-goer to view both the projected image and the emitter. No specific guideline was given as to what was more important: the “origin” of the picture, and its ethereal evidence, were assumed to have equal importance in the comprehension of the moving image. Only later, did the Japanese adopt the Western arrangement, which tends to ignore the former dimension. In revealing the projector, Roberts seems to question this assumed hierarchy. The presence of the film projector in the viewing space may also equate the screening to performance. The beam is usually placed in such a way that the viewer has no choice but to interfere with it, thus giving her/him the possibility of becoming a surface of projection, as s/he sees a projection of her/himself directly affecting the projected image. Metaphorically, it also marks the presence of the artist in the space.

*‘a film by Liisa Roberts:’* [5] the projection is the evidence. No physical element informs the viewing of the projected images. The space is merely a screened space, an echo of reel space. In that environment, fragments of a narrative are left for the viewer to construct her/his own narrative progression.

*‘betraying a portrait:’* as the construction of the piece is revealed –a film projector, a slide projector, a scaffold –the projected pictures appear and disappear in a timed schedule that confronts the equipment, the space, and the images, questioning the fragility of this evidence. The viewer is confronted with having to assess priorities, with having to reconsider the hierarchy of importance between the evidence of reel time, as it is announced by the overwhelming presence of the equipment in an otherwise empty space.

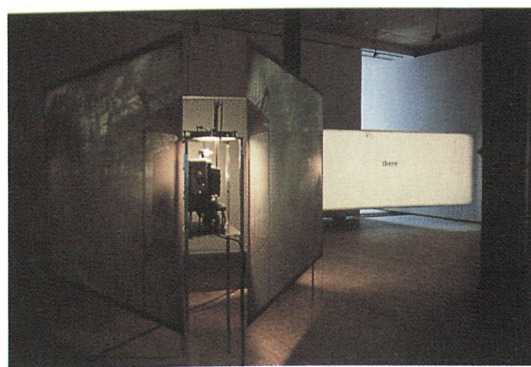
*‘Trap Door:’* here evidence is withheld, a hidden component of the exhibition, of the narrative. The more that gets to be seen,



the more information is offered to the eye, the less one can easily discern what is really happening.

These three sculptures function as three movements that explore the tension between the projected image and its obligatory mechanical counterpart. Gradually, the physical element becomes more present. In 'Trap Door,' one first encounters a projector, and then four screens. Three of these are arranged so as to constitute a triangle, while the other is aligned so as to form an architectural reference to the proceeding of time, some sort of elongated corridor. Whereas the structure of *'betraying a portrait'* evoked a constructivist monument, 'Trap Door' is a re-engineering of the space: the architecture of the piece is added to the existing architecture, hence creating another layer of experience. Yet another echo of the artist's presence?

'Trap Door' also addresses the issue of viewpoint. Whereas the viewer interferes with the projection on the large cinemascope screen –the footage is in fact presenting a sculpture that is filmed with a surrounding circular movement, out of which the triangular construction projects: the viewer is left out of the projection, and repositioned in a state of –passive?– reception. Here the emitters are hidden inside, giving the image a renewed preponderance.



*Trap door*, 1996. 16 mm. Film installation.

### III

In Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blowup*, the main character, a fashion photographer, believes he has incidentally witnessed a crime in a public park. As the film proceeds, the photographer's obsession is progressively revealed by a series of 'blow-ups' that he makes from an image, 'blow-ups' that lead the viewer to the conclusion that there was, indeed, a dead body in the bushes so compulsively enlarged by the photographer. As the film comes to an end, this assumption is forced into re-evaluation, as the photographer, now back in the same location, witnesses a game of tennis during which the players seem to mimic a game (with neither rackets nor balls), although one clearly hears the sound of balls being hit back and forth. Was there a body in that bush?

Virtual space is an illusory rendering of a three-dimensional environment, produced with two-dimensional images. In a realm mapped out of images, virtuality has become our reality. The film sculptures of Liisa Roberts re-organize our experience of a given space, blurring the boundaries between the actual space and the

virtual –projected– space, thereby revealing the mental mapping process that is informed by virtuality, and, consequently, positing real space as yet another fictional construction. Reel time intersects with real space, and the two are intrinsically conflated to create virtual space.

The narrative in traditional film structure tends to collapse space. Editing tends to collate different yet sometimes concomitant situations in different places. 'a film by Liisa Roberts' confronts this construction: composed of three projections that evolve on their own time frames, it addresses the notion of a "complete" viewing experience. The viewer becomes aware of the multiplicity of events that s/he would never be able to absorb all at once. This experience recurs in 'Trap Door,' in which four projections take

place simultaneously. Reel time is a construct that is meant to give the viewer the sense of a narrative progression that occurs over the course of a longer period of time than the actual screening time. In her latest sculpture, 'Trap Door,' Roberts reverses this effect, so as to expose that mechanism: since some of the projected film footage was shot at 500 frames or more per second, time is stretched, blown up. The slow-down is slick, "natural," and yet seems to

reveal elements that one would otherwise not see.

What the viewer can or cannot see is an issue raised by Roberts in the earlier sculpture, *'betraying a portrait,'* in which the experience of the projected image only occurs at a very specific moment of the day. The sculpture works with the "natural" evolution of daylight cycles: at the beginning of the show, the time-cycle of the piece enabled the viewer to only see a projection at dusk. As the exhibition proceeded, viewing time was reduced to a point where the projected images became totally invisible.

Was there a dead body in the bushes?

[1] Lawrence Weiner, in the catalogue of "When Attitudes Become Form," Bern, 1968.

[2] Nicolas Bourriaud. excerpts from an interview, in *Parachute*, (Winter, 1996-97).

[3] Installed at the Janice Guy gallery from December 15, 1995 to January 27, 1996. The treatment of the font in the title, lowercase and italicized, is used in print to single out an element within the text.

[4] First installed at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, the piece has since traveled to numerous places, including the Lehmann-Maupin Gallery, New York. It will also be featured at Documenta X, Kassel.

[5] Installed at the Bravin Post Lee Gallery, February 1995.