

## *Reflections of Our Selves—The Art of Scott Snibbe*

**Catalog Essay by Christiane Paul, Adjunct Curator of New Media Arts, Whitney Museum of American Art  
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Plato's famous *Allegory of the Cave* describes the existential predicament of a group of prisoners trapped in a cave: a gigantic fire at the cave's entrance separates the prisoners from the outside world while a wall in front of them provides the 'screen' for the only image of reality they know—the shadow play created by the people moving behind them, in front of the fire. Plato's story essentially is one of enlightenment, of the ability to grasp the invisible truths underlying the apparent surface and reflections of the world surrounding us.

The (deceptive) nature of the surface and the reflection also play a central role in Scott Snibbe's art. At the core of his work are the complex relationships between reality and representation, our bodies and their shadows (as imprint and trace of physical presence), the self and the other. Snibbe's projects question the qualities of temporality, movement, space, and light and reconfigure conventions of perception. If one would update Plato's allegory for our media age, one might replace the cave with a movie theater, the fire with a projector, and the wall in front of the prisoners with a screen. The origins of cinema in moving silhouettes and shadow projection, as well as surrealist films are one of the obvious influences that can be traced in Snibbe's work.

Snibbe's *Screen* series—consisting of the works *Shadow*, *Impression*, *Depletion*, *Compliant*, *Concentration* and *Shy*—questions the cinematic status of the screen as a mere surface for image projection and turns it into a (re)active player in the representational game. Rather than simply being represented *on* the screen, the viewer's shadow is being recorded and played back *by* the screen (*Shadow*), changes the screen's rectangular outline (*Compliant*), or erases it or "paints" across it (*Depletion*, *Impression*). The *Screen* series explores relationships between bodies, light, and shadow by reconfiguring cinematic conventions and allowing us to experience the nature of the image in new ways: while re-presentation is still inextricably bound to the process of recording, projecting, and doubling, every aspect of the representational process becomes a reconfigurable, seemingly active entity. However, Snibbe's projects are not necessarily cinematic in the original sense, but owe as much to the subtle interventions and manipulations of light undertaken by artists such as James Turrell.

A more detailed investigation of the shadow as double and imprint unfolds in the projects *Deep Walls* and *Cause and Effect*, which both create a temporary collective memory of viewers' shadows by recording them over time and arranging them on a grid of small screens. Together, the screens form a record of shared presence in space. While *Deep Walls* emphasizes the function of the cinematic loop—each of the accumulated little shadow films has a precise and different duration—*Cause and Effect* subtly underscores causality by letting the individual screens displace each other and showing the effects of each participant's actions on the assemblage of other shadow recordings.

The relationship between the self and the other, be it another person or 'that which resides outside ourselves,' is another prominent narrative in Scott Snibbe's work and surfaces in different manifestations. Snibbe's *Boundary Functions*, for example, visualizes the usually invisible relationships between individuals in physical space by demarcating the space occupied by people in a gallery as lines on the floor that adjust to their movements. Using analytical methods from biology and mathematics, Snibbe's software detects and demarcates the usually invisible limits

that outline personal space and separate the self from the other in social relationships. Disembodied information about our bodies takes a concrete diagrammatic form. The translation of physicality also informs *Blow Up*, a project that allows the audience to blow into a grid of small impellers and then 'plays back' and amplifies their breath through a wall-size array of large fans. Again, the basic functionality of familiar devices, such as the screen or a fan, is erased and replaced with almost organic qualities that react to the audience's input. Breathing as a natural, life-sustaining function tends to naturally blend with the environment, blurring the boundaries between the body and its surroundings. In *Blow Up*, breath becomes an 'other,' disconnected from the body and directed back towards it. While the title of the project quite literally describes its functionality, it also references Michelangelo Antonioni's film of the same name and the 'blow up' as a familiar cinematic and photographic strategy. Both in Antonioni's film and Snibbe's project, meaning unfolds only through a mediating function, a representation.

Snibbe's recent *Visceral Cinema* series marks a departure from his previous explorations of representation in that it more explicitly investigates narrative. In *Chien*—based on a scene from Buñuel and Dalí's surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou*—the viewer's shadow becomes a character in the narrative and influences its course according to parameters set by the artist. In the more elaborate *Shadow and Substance (Mary Baker Eddy)*, the participant interacts with scenes from the life of Christian Science's founder, Mary Baker Eddy. The connectedness of body and mind that is central to Christian Science is echoed in the effects of the viewer's silhouette, which is both immaterial and bound to the physicality of the body.

Recording, translation, and amplification—all of which are a form of mediation—emerge as key elements in Scott Snibbe's body of work. While digital technology never moves to the foreground of the artwork, it is nevertheless its essence: through the use of technology and software as artistic medium, Snibbe investigates humanistic and social concerns. The custom software and hardware that he develops is not primarily a tool but forces the medium to reveal its mechanisms as well as its social and aesthetic agenda. His projects point to the multiple translations, visualizations, and interpretations that any set of (digital) data enables—often in the context of individuality and personal 'marks,' such as our shadow or breath. At the same time, Snibbe's works radically question familiar notions of interfaces, expanding their functionality and revealing their social impact. Scott Snibbe's works are reflections of our selves that explore both the effects of our mediated bodies and the process of mediation itself.