

## The Visionary Cinema of Scott Snibbe

Catalog Essay by Tom Leeson, Director, Cal Arts Center for Integrated Media  
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"We so often find ourselves at complicated crossroads which lead to other crossroads, to ever more fantastic labyrinths. Somehow we must choose a path. In other words, by tracing apparent causes (which are really no more than accidents), we can travel dizzily back in time, back through history—all the way back, in fact to the original protozoa."

-Luis Buñuel "My Last Sigh", 1982

Scott Snibbe's vision grows out of cinema, the "original protozoa" art form of the twentieth century and reflects the medium's avant-garde traditions of Buñuel, Frampton and Brackage. However his work veers away from a pure cinema and allows us to peer into the potential of the moving image, one that retains a spectre of the past while embodying the qualities and technology of the future.

The contemporary mechanics that underlie Snibbe's work conjure up an ancestral cinema from the nineteenth century's fin-de-siècle when the moving image apparatus itself was the subject (and object) of experimentation and invention. As a contemporary artist Snibbe uses light, the primal source of cinema, to create visual histories that are projected as phantasms across his screen. Through his process Snibbe inverts the light from a positive to a negative, allowing the histories to be told via the trope of the silhouette.

At first glance the screen seems to serve its traditional function, simply hosting the silhouettes on its surface, but over time our assumptions are subverted and we recognize that there is a contradicting quality abiding in the work. There is something going on here that goes beyond the mundane projections of light and shadow. As we probe the work, the enigma arises from his installation strategy.

The layout of the installation forces the viewer to walk in front of the projector and break one of cinema's most time honored social taboos. Snibbe's digital cinema captures our reflected light exploiting a technique of vérité in its most raw form. There is also a little anarchism hiding out in his motivation, as he encourages his audience to misbehave and play in front of the seemingly passive projection apparatus. As we interrupt the projector's beam and transgress its normally sanctified space, we realize that Snibbe's apparatus is hardly passive. He is using a camera and computer to capture our movements; an algorithm to manipulate them in real time; and the projector to display them as silhouettes. We become co-conspirators in his interactive design as we discover the artist's motivation and our relationship to his scheme.

Through our actions and interactions with the elements of the installation, the viewer sheds the passive observing role and becomes an active performer entering into a digital vaudeville of sorts. By encountering the work in this way we develop a sense of agency<sup>1</sup> that allows us to be an active part of his creative process. Snibbe provides us with this agency so that we can begin to deconstruct traditional cinematic illusions and see our own observations and actions as mere confabulation<sup>2</sup>. As we observe ourselves in this way we become immersed in

Snibbe's arcade like environment allowing us to interpret the work from two different views: reflection and paradox.

By violating the cinematic space, we enter into the installation and begin to see characteristics we would normally associate with sculpture. The sculptor Robert Morris and his late nineteen sixties minimalist white cubes comes to mind as we navigate the space of the projector and screen<sup>3</sup>. Morris was concerned with the visual experience as the viewer's body encountered the relationship between the sculptural object and its space. Snibbe composes a similar gestalt as Morris, allowing the movements of the viewer to provoke perceptual tensions between multiple spaces that are contained within the overall boundaries of the installation.

The installation utilizes an interior space which is rendered as two dimensional figures displayed on the screen in the form of digitally manipulated shadows. There is an exterior space that is three dimensional and defined by the cultural and physical boundaries of the screen and the projector. We perceive yet a third space, an in-between space that contains the light source of the projector. By analyzing the way Snibbe presents space and light, we begin to entertain multiple readings of his work similar to Anthony McCall's nineteen seventies film installation "Line Describing a Cone."

By playing with the work we also see embedded meanings that lie simultaneously both in the installation's physical objects (light, projector, screen, computer and image) and the interactive creative process. A situational context emerges to form the basis of the work rendering the author as a diminished authority and empowering the viewer through the role of active collaborator.

Film critic and cultural theorist Paul Arthur refers to a process of shifting metaphor from an "idealized imagination" to a "material metaphor" when discussing the work of Structural Filmmakers from 1967 through 1972.<sup>4</sup> Snibbe expands upon Arthur's definition of material metaphor deriving meaning not only through a process of visual perception but also by viewer activity and interaction. Snibbe's art synthesizes the two-dimensional moving image and the three-dimensional aspects of sculpture with the intervention of performance. The work liberates us from the confines of traditional linear interpretations through the timeless nature of his interactive design.

Notes:

1) "Hamlet on the Holodeck" by Janet Murray, 1997, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. pages 110 and 126

2) "Is the Visual World a Grand Illusion?", by Alva Noë, Journal of Consciousness Studies, 9, No. 5-6, pgs. 1-12

3) "Notes on Sculpture" by Robert Morris in "Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology" Edited by Gregory Battock, EP Dutton & Co., 1968

4) "A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965", by Paul Arthur, University of Minnesota Press, 2005, page 80