Holography and the Imaginary Double: The Image of Body

Philippe Boissonnet

Duplicates, imitations, pretenses, copies, reproductions and the like are often part of our visual experience and daily social environment. Artistic productions of the last decade have engulfed us with a type of art that values and develops the fake, the simulated, inspirations and 'neo'-isms of all kinds. This state of mind, which has a tendency to oppose all that is linked to the modernity of the period from the 1950s through the 1970s, has permitted the development of an art that has no real dominant current. An interdisciplinary approach has succeeded the purist reductionism that once defined the limitations of each medium, so that at present the polymorphism of an artwork is often accompanied by a kind of hybridization of types, styles and materials. We may never have seen as much use of borrowing and quotation as we do now.

It is in relation to this general concept that I have been interested in integrating holograms into some of my artistic works [1]. Having always been concerned about the relationship between reality and its representations, and even more precisely between the notions of model and of reproduction, I have chosen to explore some of the formal characteristics of the hologram in terms of its conceptual implications, these being the ideas of simulation (from the natural to the artificial) and of cloning (from the unique to the multiple).

THE INSTALLATION: L'OMBRE D'UN DOUTE

One of the principal qualities of holography is the ambiguity between presence and absence. This is especially evident when holographic images are compared directly with other types of representation of the real or with the real itself; the play of difference and similarity in holography extends far beyond simple reproduction. The group of works that I produced in 1987 and 1988, which consists of nine pieces under the title L'Ombre d'un doute (The shadow of a doubt), explores this ambiguity by means of such dualities as model and double, truth and falsity, tradition and innovation (here, painting and holography), and uniqueness and multitude.

In an installation exhibited for the first time at the Cité des Arts et des Nouvelles Technologies in Montréal [2], I arrived at the formation of a composite space whose formal plurality brings forth the impression of an unstable and ambiguous balance. This involved the creation of a unity of relationships formed of tensions between harmonies and discordances, between similarities and differences. For example, it united the material and the nonmaterial (light), opacity and transparency, uniqueness (painting) and multiplicity (holograms), the manual and the automatic [3], and two-dimensional space and three-dimensional space. All the holograms in this series, whether white-light transmission holograms or white-light reflection holograms, were made from the same master image [4]. These holograms are placed on glass supports that measure 40 x 30 cm; they represent, with much realism, a woman's nude torso in a classical pose, which reminds one of the familiar Greek statues of Aphrodite (Fig. 1).

Of the four principal pieces (see Color Plate B No. 2), three are similar in that the hologram, fixed on transparent plexiglass, is combined with a painting or drawing on canvas. In each of these three pieces, the hologram is placed about 50 cm in front of the canvas and interacts visually with the painted image through the transparency of the colors and forms (Fig. 2). There is always a point of view, corresponding to the image's perspective, of the hologram in relation to one of the painted figures.

The fourth piece, which is the central element of the installation, is distinguished from the whole in many ways. It consists of a group of three transmission holograms placed in relation to their own reflections on plexiglass surfaces. These identical holograms are aligned on transparent vertical supports in front of a series of four parallel plexiglass surfaces (left-hand side of Color Plate B No. 2). This piece is completely luminous and yet truly sculptural because the holographic images are visible from almost all directions; furthermore, the spectator can slide between the plexiglass and the holograms. The holograms can even be made to move because they are suspended above the floor.

The walls surrounding this installation were painted black, and the limitation of space was intentional. However, the effect produced by this ensemble upon the spectator was one of interaction, to the degree that the spectator's own image was often reflected on the plexiglass, as were the holograms or the paintings.

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THE HOLOGRAPHIC AMBIGUITY

The presence-absence of the hologram, which essentially is an unsubstantial image, gives it a kinship with hallucination and mirage. To establish a parallel between the hologram and the idea of doubt, I tried to use the body's holographic image in such a way that one might have the impression of being sent into an interspace, a space between the visible and the invisible. One slides a hand behind the plexiglass, trying to capture the disturbing image, but the hand penetrates and crosses it without affecting it. The figure is always there, even if one cannot touch it; but at the same time, it is never there, because there is no tactile certainty of its presence. Therefore the tension is alternately created and dissolved according to the position of the spectator.

An impression of doubt is also accentuated by another effect, that of simulation, adding to the *trompe l'oeil* of all holograms. In realizing the hologram of the female torso, I have employed the continuous wave laser technique by using a plaster mold, touched up with paint, that I have preformed from a live model. The first impression is one of a hologram fabricated with a pulsed laser. The softness of the grain and the slightly unfocused quality create the doubt and even let the image express the body's true sensuality. So if there happens to be doubt at first glance as to the nature of the model (alive or not), it is not to deceive or mislead but rather to create ambiguity: the hologram represents a double of a double. The truth of this forgery of the model, of this reduplication of the real, must be apparent to every careful viewer in such a way as to enable him or her to remake in the opposite direction a part of the process of creation. For this reason, indications of faking have been left spontaneously perceptible: some paintbrush traces can be seen on the torso at the neck and the pubis.

If the use of a continuous wave laser in this particular hologram has contributed to the effect of ambiguity, it has no influence on the perception of the image of the Double. On the contrary, I would say that the images fabricated with a pulsed laser have a greater chance of suggesting the Double, not only because they appear more realistic but perhaps also because they have been directly realized from the real presence of the live figure, without any other intermediaries. In this case, they reveal in a much more crude way the absence of the model's body.

THE ONTOLOGY OF THE MODEL

In the case of holograms made according to classical optical procedures [5], and especially in the case of those made by pulsed-laser holography, the mental association between the theme of the Double and the ghostly immateriality of the image leads one to value even more the specific characteristic of all photo-
graphic images, which André Bazin characterized as "a transfer of the reality of the subject onto its reproduction" [6]. In fact, "the image may be out of focus, deformed, discolored, without any documental value; it proceeds by its genesis, the ontology of the model" [7]. This thought has been a fundamental one in the elaboration of my actual research concerning the holographic image of the figure and of the imaginary Double.

I particularly rely on the distinction between the two following understandings of the notion of the double. The one that I write with a lowercase d concerns an objective and rational concept of the idea of double as duplication, that is to say, as a concrete object that has been reproduced or simulated as the image of a model. On the other hand, there exists also a more subjective and irrational concept making special reference to our collective imagination, to that which without doubt has been stamped on the unconscious since the beginning of time and which corresponds to an archetype of human thought. That is why I write this second one with a capital D. The Double, as a mental figure, is multiform, nonrepresentable and immaterial, even though our imagination makes it cohabit from time to time with humans. Literature, theater and cinema offer important evidence of the persistence of this figure.

Every holographic image of the body—given that this medium is strongly mimetic—conveys an ambivalence that may have unintentionally stimulated certain controversies about holographic portraits. When Jean Baudrillard [8] predicts "the end of the imaginary" with the advent of holography, it allows us to wonder if we do not find ourselves precisely one century behind the time when Charles Baudelaire disparaged photography and its crowd of Narcissuses who rushed to see their own images.

Concerning mimesis, one might mention the interesting example of the hyperrealist sculpture of Duane Hanson and John De Andrea. Although each has followed a different intention, both have succeeded in reducing to a minimum the interval that has always existed between the real and its representations. (Duane Hanson has even gone to the extent of using actual objects, like Marcel Duchamp did with his 'ready-mades'.) But I should like to limit myself to the questions of imitation and of the tight relationship between the model and its double. These hyperrealist sculptures are perfect transfers—meticulous reproductions of the body in its exact dimensions, forms, pigmentation and texture—but in my opinion they do not convey the idea of the imaginary Double better than a pulsed-laser hologram. These petrifying images of the real remind us rather of Medusa and her withering eyes. Hyperrealist sculpture recalls, almost exclusively, the notion of the objective double, mentioned earlier; this potential image of the Double is made ordinary by its materiality as an object that is totally part of our tactile space.

**THE IMAGINARY DOUBLE**

The body's holographic image is linked instead to the subjective perception of the Double, thanks to its immateriality and to its versatility. The charm of De Andrea's nudes, for example, is immediately broken as soon as we approach them, even when the *trompe-l'oeil* effect is at its strongest. The operation of the holographic image is different: the formal characteristics (e.g. color, light, format) of the hologram leave no doubt as to the nature of what one may

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*Fig. 2. From the installation L'Ombre d'un doute, white-light reflection hologram on glass (40 × 30 cm) combined with painting on canvas, 1987. (Photo: Alain Dugas) Partial view of the installation. Total dimensions of this piece: 170 × 122 × 45 cm.*
see. We know right away that it has to do with a representation of the real and not with the real itself. The ambiguity, therefore, does not lie at that level. If the realism of the holographic illusion nevertheless fascinates us, it is less because of its trompe-l’oeil quality than because it makes us see that it is something without materiality, something that alternately appears and disappears, projecting us into an imaginary world of auras and beings of ghostly appearance. The holographic image, therefore, produces a dimension other than this third dimension, of which it recreates the illusion.

If the holographic image brings back to us this remote cultural reminiscence, it may also deceive us, when perhaps the image’s composition or the hyper-definition of the grain of the skin and hair gives us the impression of a wax figure or even a mummy. We may then try to understand that it was perhaps those first (purely technical) holographic portraits that impelled Baudrillard to write that “in the hologram it is the imaginary aura of the double that is, as in the history of clones, hunted without pity” [9]. I would prefer to think that if the imaginary aura of the Double sometimes has a tendency to disappear, this is not inherent in the nature of the medium but in the way one uses it. It is important to remember that whatever may be the technological medium used, it can never prevent the artist from making it express an imaginary dimension.

Any holographic image of the figure, then, should try to preserve the persistence of doubt between realism and unreality of representation, so as to maintain its power to suggest the imaginary. I hope that I have been able to achieve this goal, at least partially, in the installation L’Ombre d’un doux and that I continue to achieve this goal with my recent works made with the pulsed laser at the Fringe Research Holographics Laboratory in Toronto.

To conclude this brief consideration of the imaginary Double, I should like to make one last comment concerning the female torso hologram, which is already a reduplication of a double of the body, that is, a plaster cast. Also, it is important, in fact, to note that we are facing, if not a quotation, at least a borrowing that makes reference to another model, this one being of a purely cultural order. One automatically places on this anonymous torso the mental double of a familiar representation of the great tradition of the nude. Because, as we have already noticed, this type of hologram is relevant to the ontology of the model, it seemed evident to me to recall a cultural cliché that is a persistent model of the representation of the female figure and that could then take on an almost timeless value.

From the model to the remake, from the reproduction (double) to the Double, and from one kind of representation to another, there is an intense center where the prefix re finally becomes a focal point that draws the spectator into the shadow of a doubt, perhaps into the doubt concerning the reduplication of art and culture on themselves. This torso of Aphrodite is much more than an emblematic model of occidental culture and a place of articulation between tradition and innovation than a simple representation of a particular body.

References and Notes
1. I made my first holograms in 1984, while I was artist-in-residence at the Fringe Research Holographics Laboratory in Toronto, Canada.
2. The installation was part of the “Images du Futur 87” exhibition. It was also presented in France in 1988 at the “Festival des Arts Électroniques” of Rennes and at the F.A.U.S.T. (Forum des Arts de l’Univers Scientifique et Technologique) exhibition in Toulouse.
3. The term ‘automatic’, as distinguished from ‘manual’, refers to the degree to which the images are not realized directly by the human hand.
4. These images have been made with a continuous wave laser (helium-neon, 50 mW) at the Fringe Research Holographics Laboratory, Toronto, Canada.
5. This means holograms that are made by purely optical means—by the direct registration of the light reflected by an object onto an emulsion—which excludes any combination of computer images with holography.