

Reflexion.

Henry Lewis: X-spaces (for European Photography)

We experience space thanks to our legs, we seize it thanks to our hands, but our eyes cannot see it. The reason is that eyes can only process rays which have been reflected by surfaces; we see surfaces only. But are there not X-rays which pierce the surfaces and advance toward the inside of bodies? X-ray pictures should permit us to see spaces? This is the sort of question Lewis is facing.

This is a far-reaching and deep question (to apply space categories like "far" and "deep"). The fact that we experience and seize space, but cannot see it, is very uncomfortable for a culture as addicted to vision as is ours. The history of the West may indeed be understood to be a progressive attempt to imagine our space experience and our spacial concepts. As for space experience, phases like projection of shadows, simple and multiple perspectives and other *trompes l'oeil* may be taken as attempts to visualize space within an image. With space concepts this progressive attempt becomes breath-taking; first, space is imagined as the "above" and the "below" of a geographical plane (as "heaven" and "hell"), then Earth is imagined to be a body within an infinite space dome, and finally attempts are made to imagine space as curves with wrinkles (not to mention alternative "non-Euclidian" spaces). It cannot be said that those attempts at rendering space imaginable have been very successful, especially since we have seized and are beginning to experience that space cannot be imagined without reference to time.

Ever since X-rays were "discovered" (rendered visible), a method seems to have been found to look into space through surfaces. Curiously enough however interest tended to concentrate (not on the space those rays traverse) but on those surfaces behind the pierced surfaces which do reflect X-rays, (for instance on the bones within the human body which are not pierced by X-rays). Lewis however does not approach X-Ray pictures from the usual, but from an artistic view point. He is not interested in looking behind the surfaces, but at visualizing his experience with spaces. Thus he becomes a pioneer in the progressive attempt to imagine space.

For this purpose he assembles specific contexts composed of materials to which X-rays relate in various ways. For instance of lead foils which reflect them, and lead covered tissues which partially absorb them. Thus he acts like a sculptor and has an experience with space through his fingers and hands which is very close to the space experience in sculpture. But his sculptures are not meant to be seen by eyes, but by X-ray apparatus. He transcodes his space experience into X-ray pictures. And he who contemplates those pictures is meant to be able to visualize the third dimension. The pictures are meant to be images of spaces.

This is fascinating for two reasons. First, because it shows a new attitude toward sculptures. If within our tradition a three-dimensional work is produced, it is meant to be looked at from various angles, to be touched, and to be stumbled against. But here a three-dimensional (although relatively flat) work is being produced which is meant to permit space visualisation within the surface of an image. The three-dimensional work is a pretext for the production of X-ray images. Now this poses esthetic questions which have not been answered so far. For instance: is the creative pleasure in the production of such pretexts less than with the production of permanent "monuments", or is it not possibly even greater?

The other reason for the fascination emanating from Lewis' pictures has to do with the difficulty in deciphering X-ray pictures. We know from experience that X-ray specialists are capable of seeing these things which we do not see. But here the thing goes deeper. We tend to look at those pictures as if they were photos, and thus we decipher within them a space as it is programmed within the photo camera in the form of a perspective, as a deception. But this is not so; in those pictures there is no optical delusion, but there is space as it is "seen" in fact by X-rays. To render the thing even more difficult, Lewis' "originals" (which are sometimes large) show his space experience much more clearly than do his diapositives (small slides), and when looking at those we can hardly distinguish between them and the optical delusions in photos. Now this is a fascinating problem because it questions if there is any epistemological sense in wanting to distinguish between delusion and non-delusion where vision is concerned.

Lewis' experiments are esthetically pleasurable, but they are much more interesting if taken to be problematic. They ask new kinds of questions, they pose new problems. It may be assumed that they are the initial phases of an entire future evolution. An evolution which, together with holography, may come to radically transform our space experience and space concepts, just as film and video did with our time experience and concepts.