

ETC



Now you see it — now you don't

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Numéro 12, automne 1990

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/36226ac>

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Éditeur(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (imprimé)

1923-3205 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Holubizky, I. (1990). Compte rendu de [Now you see it — now you don't]. *ETC*, (12), 38–39.

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Stacey Spiegel, *Bearings*, 1989. Installation view

**Stacey Spiegel, *Bearings*,
Toronto's Eaton Centre,
October 1989 —**

Toronto-based artist Stacey Spiegel has pursued various avenues in the intersection of science, technology and art. Since the early 1980s, he has worked with sculpture, site-work and installations, as well as with electro-mechanical, digital image and video information systems. Recently he incorporated holography into a public artwork commissioned and installed at Toronto's Eaton Centre in October 1989.

Spiegel's interest in holography developed as a consequence of his work with digital image transformation, but directly as a means to solve specific site problems. The site is relatively compact; a narrow pair of escalators connecting two levels of shops at the north

end of Eaton Centre. There is no vista in the approach that announces the space and, because of the length of the escalator, little time to consider or contemplate the subtleties of conventional media. Spiegel's solution was to develop a series of large-format holograms positioned in such a way that the images would appear in the viewer's field of vision during the brief journey up or down the escalator. Holography accelerates a synthetic approximation of a three-dimensional space. Spiegel's images appear at quick intervals, when you least expect them, to ambush the eye and attention. They are as elusive as their illusion.

The work, entitled *Bearings*, is composed of eight images or incidents, which form an abbreviated history of technological devices and instruments: a 17th-century sextant; one of the first radios commercially produced in Canada; a group of cameras, dating from 1869-90, with vintage photographs in the back -

ground; a research microscope circa the Banting & Best era (with the model of a protein molecule behind); a 19th-century nautical compass; a Georgian vintage brass telescope; a theodolite, used in railway construction to determine vertical and horizontal angles in the landscape; and the first gramophone produced in Canada.

The selection of subjects, although not intended to be rigidly chronological or held up as 'major' achievements of technological invention are, nonetheless, significant. Together, they represent devices that we have used to measure and articulate phenomena. This forms the basis of what Spiegel describes as the "ether of our existence". Apart from site and visual impact, he considered two other issues, position and framing, which though not immediately evident are critical in his effort to construct a complete and logical internal reference. The stainless steel armature mounts not only extend the holograms directly into an optimum field of viewing, but also suggest the appearance of technological instruments. Spiegel avoided the conventions of framing these images in the rectangle of a picture/canvas experience. The individual shapes are a geometric progression from a circle to a triangle; a reference to the shift from Euclidian geometry, and the curvilinear line, to the tetrahedron shapes of fractal geometry as proposed by American mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot in the 1960s. Fractals are not transitional geometric shapes but are complete figures that express chaos (relative to Euclidian geometry) as part of the natural order of things. So while Spiegel's imagery represents tangible invention and a means to record phenomena, the frames are a reminder of the theoretical constructs of science.

Bearings is a reflective moment in a mundane transition between two points in this site; a place of commerce, disposable consumerism, objects to desire and fast foods. Spiegel does not ask or expect the shopper to "stop and smell the test tubes" but rather provides a moment of recognition for the signs of higher aspirations. The celebration of such achievement has an ironic meaning in this setting. Many of these devices have been "refined" to the point where the object is its consumption and not its invention. Photography, for example, has lost the original mystique of light phenomenon and the transient moment, and is more connected to the ease of operation (the "one shot") and the service provided by "one hour" processing labs. The picture becomes incidental, but we have been convinced that our memories are somehow connected.

There is another aspect to Spiegel's work, one that concerns the dynamics of public art, the politics of the artist/patron relationship and, in this instance, business. The controversy over the proliferation of public art in Toronto, which has appeared in the local press over the past few years, has its bureaucratic

counterpart in the Public Arts Commission — the watchdog of taste. Given the time, expertise and energies expended, why is it that public art has had so little impact? Regardless of the intent and expectations (and those expectations are distinct agendas for artists and patrons), public art is powerless to change or correct dismal design or the misunderstanding of what public space is. Too often art is treated as a cheap design solution (compared to the cost of the work of an architect, designer or landscape architect), setting up the mistaken belief that art is wanted or that culture can simply be commissioned. The business of the mall is shopping and aesthetic concerns serve as a lubricant to this economy and can be consumed in a similar manner.

Cadillac Fairview, who commissioned *Bearings*, will remove it for a "renovation" of this extension.¹ No formal explanation was given to the artist, other than that the recently designed space was to be redesigned. The lesson is that art in public places is as expendable as surface finishes and design elements.

Bearings is an all too rare instance of a contemporary work that avoids the singular meaning. (I must emphasize that this is not the fault of the artist, but a result of limitations imposed by the patron.) Public art that serves as a symbolic monument to an event or person is ultimately lost over time, but has erroneously been commissioned to redress Canadian history after the fact; both the history of events and the history of art in this country. Effective public art has a hierarchy of meaning, one that does not not serve the moment or fulfill competition criteria. It is unfortunate that Spiegel's potent and evocative images will fulfill their own technological prophecy. Spiegel used the transitory conditions of the site to the advantage of his work, but *Bearings* will disappear before its full meaning can be appreciated.

Ihor Holubizky

NOTE

1. At the time of publication, the date was unknown