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Henry Lewis: X-Spaces

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? Should not X-ray pictures 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 ours. The history of the west may indeed be understood to be a progressive attempt to imagine our space experience and our special concepts. As for space experience, phrases 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 breathtaking: first, space is imagined as the “above” and “below” of a geographical plane (as “heaven” and “hell”), the 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 as imaginable have been very successful, especially since we have grasped and are beginning to experience that space cannot be imagined without reference to time.

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 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 in visualizing his experience with space. 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 as 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 sculpture are not meant to be seen by eyes, but by X-ray apparatuses. 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 space.

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) is being produced which is meant to permit space visualization within the surface of an image. The three-dimensional work is a pretext for the production of X-ray images. Now this poses aesthetic 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 possibly greater?

The other reason for the fascination emanating from Lewis’s pictures has to do with the difficulty in deciphering X-ray pictures. We know from experience that X-ray specialists are capable of seeing things which we do not see. But there 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 “seen” in fact by X-rays. To render the thing even more difficult: Lewis’s 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’s experiments are aesthetically 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 concepts.