

ART
INTERACTIVE

PRESENTS

SHADOW PLAY

APRIL 23 – JULY 3, 2005

Deep Walls (2003)

Interactive Video Works by
SCOTT SNIBBE

Curated by Molly Polk



Visceral Cinema: Chien (2005)

Shadow Play presents four interactive video installations by Scott Snibbe that invite viewers to improvise—walk, dance, jump, move—in an open, sensate field composed of screen, camera, computer, and projector. In each work, the casting and re-casting of viewers’ shadows on white, wall-mounted screens propel the interactive experience. Snibbe has made the means of activation direct and intuitive, underscoring the essential role of the audience in the realization of his artwork. Immediately, viewers see and feel the results of their play; as their shadows appear and re-appear on the screens, the formal qualities and narrative sequences of the emergent imagery evolve in response.

Picturing shadows has long been a subject in both Western and Eastern art. Indeed, it is said that the first paintings were of the human shadow—taking not the body directly but its silhouette as their subjects. Scott Snibbe, with his masterful explorations in electronic, interactive media, picks up on this rich history and at the same time pushes the representation of shadows in new expressive directions.

The subject, projected into the frame with the weight of his matter, inscribes his double there enlarged and of free existence.

Michel Leiris, *journal entry, Oct. 16, 1924 Journal 1922-1989*, ed. by Jean Jamin, 1992

Shadows are an inherently interactive phenomenon. In light’s path they follow us, we follow them, a re-doubling back and forth. Outside our body, they are nonetheless of our body—traces of our presence that simultaneously highlight our absence from the precise space they occupy.

Even more, cast shadows are evidence of real-ness. In front of a light source, the material, three-dimensional form of our body is re-figured as a dark, though flattened, likeness on a nearby surface. Our shadow’s imprint proves that we are there; we are present, corporeal, in the flesh. But shadows, themselves, are fleeting and

immaterial. Though intimately connected to us, we cannot possess our shadow, touch, or hold it.

Seeing the projections of our shadows in Snibbe’s work and the resulting effect that they (as we) have on the flow of screen images, we are made acutely aware of our body’s real presence and trajectory through space. The shadow as a signal of real-ness, however, is called into

question, for the cinematic performance engendered by our shadows follows not from our body alone; rather, it is dependent on our complex interaction with the screen, camera, projector and computer. The space and terms of our shadow play are reactive as much as they are interactive, seamlessly constructed by Snibbe to produce an experience that is extraordinary. At the same time, Snibbe probes the illusory nature of shadows by enlivening the shadow image. In each of his screen works, shadows become active agents with apparent substance and form. The boundary between what we take to be “real” and “unreal” is thus porous and constantly in flux in Snibbe’s projections, stirring us to examine our assumptions about our bodies and our relationship to the environment in which we act.

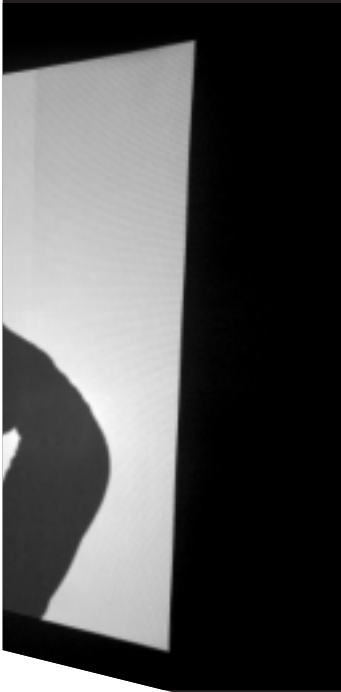
Centered in a large rectangular screen is a smaller rectangle of soft, white light that is **Compliant** (2002). As we move into the frame of the camera and projector, the small screen responds to our shadow’s “touch”; at the points where our shadow body connects with

She was with me all the time, but I couldn’t look at her. I could only feel the shape of her presence: a hollow shape, filled with my own imaginings.

Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 2000

Scott Snibbe

Shadow Bag (2005)



Compliant (2002)

points where our shadow body connects with its edges, the screen yields—indenting, sinking in, complying. Even with minimum “contact”—using the tip of a finger, nose, or elbow—our shadow can push and mold the screen form as if it is made of clay or rubber. But the rectangle of light always evades our grasp and, if prodded enough, moves out of our reach entirely. We can use our shadow to try and hold the white screen, but like a mime shaping a cube of air, our hands remain empty. Snibbe empowers our shadow, giving it a measure of agency and control, but ultimately, our shadows can only chase the light.

A large white screen is split by thin black lines into a grid of sixteen equal-sized rectangles in *Deep Walls* (2003). When viewers enter the interactive field, their shadows are cast, momentarily obscuring part of the grid, and a camera captures and records any movement they make while in the frame. Once viewers have left the space in front of the screen, this recording is projected and replayed in a single box, looping indefinitely alongside clips of other participants’

silhouetted actions that play in adjacent boxes. In this work, then, our shadows become detached from our bodies, remaining on the screen and active even when we are no longer there.

Or, rather, pictures of our shadows remain—copies that, though reduced in size, otherwise bear a precise resemblance to the original. Now twice removed from the body, however, these shadow copies no longer possess the salient characteristics of real shadows. They do not function indexically—as imprints of the body, a mark of presence, but iconically—as products of artifice, an indication of absence. Embodiments of the past, the shadows that accumulate in *Deep Walls* are nonetheless linked to the present. The grid structure, lacking an outer frame, stops at the edges of the screen; by way of this open arrangement, the screen space seems to extend into the viewers’ space, establishing a sense of continuity between time before and time now. The body, its shadow, and the computer’s visual memory of that shadow circle back on each other repeatedly. Eventually outlasting the body, however, the shadow pictures are a reminder that the body, too, is ephemeral.

In *Shadow Bag* (2005), premiering at Art Interactive, our shadow becomes an entirely new character, separated from us as in *Deep Walls*, but also now fully distinct from us in its activity. Once our shadow is cast, it soon reappears—almost like us, but responsive in unpredictable ways. The shadow character may mirror or follow us (as well as our “real” shadow, which continues to be present as long as we are) across the screen space. Sometimes the shadows of previous viewers may emerge on the screen, and our own shadow character disappears. And when our original shadow converges with its quasi-copy, the latter occasionally collapses like an empty bag—a reference to the Jungian concept

The body is like an object on loan but for a minute.

Acharya Shantideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*,
trans. by Stephen Batchelor, 1979

that the body’s shadow is like a “bag” which holds our psychic detritus. By allowing for the shadow figure to be dissolved in this way, Snibbe seems to suggest that it is possible to re-imagine and continually re-negotiate the relationship between body and psyche.

Also premiering at AI, **Visceral Cinema:**

Compliant (2002), detail



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Gallery Hours
Thursday, Saturday and Sunday
12 to 6pm

www.snibbe.com

PUBLIC PROGRAMS:

Friday, April 22, 2005, 6-9pm
Opening Reception: Shadow Play!
Free and open to the public

Saturday, May 14, 2005, 4pm
Curator Talk with Molly Polk

Saturday, June 11, 2005, 2-3pm
Family Day
Movement workshop led by dancer/
choreographer Stefani Reitter

Thursday, June 16, 2005, 7pm
Dance Performance
featuring Stefani Reitter

Friday, June 24, 2005, 6-9pm
Closing Reception
Free and open to the public

EXHIBITION TEAM:

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videos that Snibbe is completing based on masterpieces of experimental film. Snibbe references the language and imagery of cinema throughout his work, but **Chien** is the first of his wall projections that takes another film as its direct point of departure. In this work, Snibbe re-imagines the 1929 surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou* by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali and establishes an interactive scenario in which we, again by way of our shadows, become integrated into a filmic narrative that plays out on the screen. As we come into the space of the projection, we see a man dragging a grand piano towards us; significantly, both the figure and object behind him are depicted as shadows. Our subsequent movement changes the story. If we walk between the man and the piano our shadow's weight appears to drive the piano back, and the man struggles and loses ground. If our shadow intersects the man, his solid shadow body dissolves into a swarm of ants that gradually fills the entire screen.

Snibbe's allusions to iconic scenes from *Un Chien Andalou* are reconstructed from his memory and are thus sometimes incorrect when compared to the original—a process that accords with the Surrealists' own practice of exploring the unconscious. Our memories, like dreams—indeed, like shadows—are only approximations; in them are elements both

real and unreal, interwoven and at times, as Snibbe's works reveal, inseparable. With this compelling new work, Snibbe investigates the very nature of representation—its beauty and its tenuousness—and in so doing he extends the possibilities of the cinematic medium itself.

Throughout Snibbe's works, the body's shadow is the site and catalyst of transformative experiences. In its simple, solid form, the shadow is open—a repository onto which we can project our desires and imaginings. And yet, unlike a mirror image that gives the illusion of three-dimensionality, the shadow image is what it is. Its absolute flatness expresses its truth as a two-dimensional representation. In picturing the body's shadow and emphasizing both its inherent mutability and its substance, Snibbe uncovers the space between the real and unreal and thereby powerfully links the body of the viewer with his projections—a connection that is vital to the very success of interactive works of art.

—Molly Polk, Shadow Play Curator

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