Now you see it — now you don't

Ihor Holubizky
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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 construc-
tion to determine vertical and horizontal angles in the
landscape; and the first gramophone produced in
Canada.

The selection of subjects, although not in-
tended to be rigidly chronological or held up as 'major'
achievements of technological invention are, nonethe-
less, 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 con-
victions 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
graphy 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 achieve-
ment 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 mys-
tique of light phenomenon and the transient moment,
and is more connected to the case of operation (the “one
shot”) and the service provided by “one hour” process-
ing labs. The picture becomes incidental, but we have
been convinced that our memories are somehow con-
ected.

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 watch-
dog 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 Bear-
ings, will remove it for a “renovation” of this exten-
sion. No formal explanation was given to the artist,
other than that the recently designed space was to be re-
designed. 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 contem-
porary 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 address 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 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 transi-
tory conditions of the site to the advantage of his work,
but Bearings will disappear before its full meaning can
be appreciated.

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NOTE

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