

JERRY PETHICK: BIAS ARRAYS

by Barbara Fischer

*Boats in motion on the still water,
skimming across the sky.¹*

When in the early 1960s Jerry Pethick became interested in virtual space as a medium for sculpture, everyone else so it seemed was abandoning it. Virtual volume, in its traditional role as illusion of anthropomorphic interiority or as the simulation of internal life emanating outward (such as in Henry Moore's primitivist figural sculpture or even in Naum Gabo's Constructivist abstract geometries), were seen as "no longer credible."² The aim was to free sculpture, to rid it of all internal, part to part relations, of all representation and pictorial illusionism, including even colour because the optical element was seen as "subverting the physical."³

The new work, beginning with Minimalism, consisted in the move from virtual into actual space with an emphasis on sculpture as inert material, and on the viewer's direct as opposed to represented or mediated experience. And while the meaning of sculpture came to be seen in terms of the particularities of the viewer's experience — "within the user's own time, in the temporal openendedness of its use, thus sharing in the extended flow of duration"⁴ — sculpture was not only seen as directly opposed to "virtual space" (in and of representation), but also as the lever by which art could "resist" the ever greater, malevolent encroachments of representation through photography. The experience of the new work, according to Robert Morris, was a way of avoiding photography's "cyclopean evil eye" (even though that very sculpture was largely disseminated by photographic images).⁵

While Jerry Pethick began to work as an artist at the very moment when Minimalism was first formulated, his work struck a direction which fit neither into traditional categories of representational work, nor into the now hegemonic history of 1960s minimalist sculpture. Bebopping between ready-made purchases and recycling methods, glass art and holography, and integral images⁶ and junk sculpture, Pethick's work plays on ambiguities and connections rather than opposition between sculpture and image, and real and virtual space. Its subject are tenuous perceptual realities — the instability of the visual field, and the distortions or "biases" of the process of perception, which includes memory, imagination and the influence of technology. As Pethick put it, in 1976:

"Our bias is not constant, but veers about in erratic fluctuation, handling the information, accelerated through process, persistently imprinting sensation. [...] 'The sense impressions do

not come to the brain as blank signals, but as elaborately pre-arranged and biased messages.' [...] Once there, their shadowy journey to our consciousness or from our memory, completes the personal order of the distortion that we inhabit.”⁷

TRANSPARENT SOLIDS

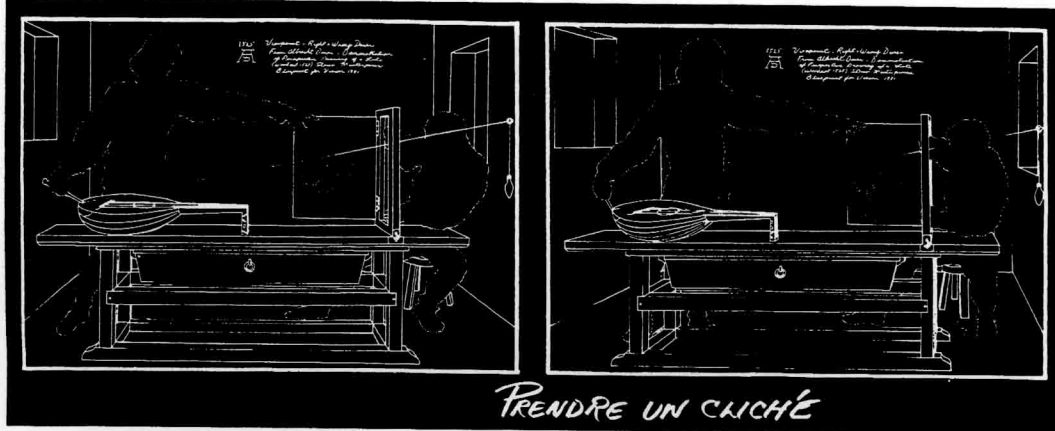
Yet, in its playful density and idiosyncratic iconography, Jerry Pethick's work only superficially betrays the precision of the development of its themes and structures. Throughout, for instance, some of the most important and recurring elements are materials and objects whose qualities shuttle between solid and virtual, transparent and opaque, reflection, refraction and visual distortion — hand-blown glass, bottles, light bulbs, plastic, even photographs, distorting mirrors, lenticular and Fresnel lenses or image projecting devices. As he would later write of these materials:

“[p]hysical solidity and space exist theoretically in a juxtaposition, [with] physical transparency being a visual buffer state between the physical solids and space itself. Consequently there is a fascination with solid transparent objects which create a prismatic break-up of light or a tenuous appearance.”⁸

Dürer Woodcut from his book „Unterweysung der Messung mit Zirkel und Richtscheit in Linien, Ebenen und ganzen Körpern“, Nürnberg 1538, 5 Books were printed. Isabel Stroebe



*Stereo Masterpiece Series (Blueprints), Prendre un Cliché 1/8 1980 190 x 90 cm,
After a Dürer woodcut print of 1525, Photo: Bob Cain*



Essential to the material elaboration of “biases” of perception, these material concerns are already to be found in a series of works from an extended stay of study and work in England (1957-68). Drawing on a tradition of pictorial thinking in sculpture — the concern with negative and positive space, empty hollow and full solidity as equal means of plastic expression⁹ — Jerry Pethick used transparent plastic to extend opposites into a play of multifaceted varieties.¹⁰

In “Head, Cornucopia, and Boulders” (1965), for instance, a voluminous plexiglass, upside-down bowl shape is physical support for a strange and spatially utterly discontinuous array of forms and figures. Found, sculpted, pressed, pushed, squeezed, these peculiar shapes and things are at once suspended by the transparent volume as they dissect, cut across and into it — as though it was the immaterial medium of air.

More than merely a material play, however, the collision and merging of solid materials within an immaterial medium parallels the Futurist Umberto Boccioni’s explorations of movement and the consequent meshing of visual realities (i.e. “Head + Window + Landscape”).¹¹ As an analogy for the process of perception, “Head, Cornucopia” similarly depicts a state where observer and observed are no longer separate, categorically distinct entities. An “x” taped to the surface of the transparent plexiglass bubble seems to refer to a fixed location, position, or point of view — a place, in short, from where reality could be sorted out and put into a rational order. Yet, the certainties of “here” are an illusion: without gravity or ground, the point of observation is suspended in a convex/concave transparent surface which offers not clarity, but a burlesque play of distortion and transformation. “Here,” the point of a perceiving consciousness perhaps, is a place littered with a debris of forms, the exploded results of a collision or intersection between the head and its surroundings (or the “head” and “boulders”, as the title humorously implies): the immaterial cornucopia of an imaginative mind.

VIRTUAL SPACE

Equally recurrent throughout Jerry Pethick’s work, however, is the presence of illusory matter — a medium between dematerialized physical mass (images, reflections) and materialized space (sculpture) — seemingly made possible through the emergence of holography. In fact, following perhaps Duchamp’s example, who in 1909 had declared that the spinning aviation propeller had made painting obsolete, Jerry Pethick speculated in 1965 that holography would eventually render sculpture obsolete. Although realizing that it was a limited medium (with perhaps too literal effects), he nevertheless saw in holography

“the idea of solid, projected illusion [that has been] an ever present ghost of the mind” [...T]hrough the invention of holography, [solid, projected illusion] has become a visual reality within the bounds of changing technology; creating non-physical solids, perceived as solids, or an illusion of space which is tangible ... with more resolution than our vision.”¹²

It also represented the possibility of furthering a materialization of immaterial realities in sculpture, a means whereby “perceptual volume had a presence of its own, malleable and usable as other tangible material”.¹³

The earliest work included in this exhibition, “Intersection” (1971), presents the beginning of a series of experiments which are reconciled in the most recent, large format array photographs

that pass some limitations of holographic space. It is a rudimentary version of producing integrated imagery as utilized in fly's eye lens photography, which is also a representation of the holographic recording process.¹⁴ A site-marker consisting of two intersecting planks was laid on the studio floor and recorded by taping still-life "intersections" onto a large sheet of vinyl, one still-life into each one of numerous circles stacked in an hexagonal pattern. The systematic record of different points of view on one surface is akin to integral photography. But, without the use of lenticular lenses (which in later works would pull the separate views together into one three-dimensional voluminous view), each intersection in this hand-drawn array remains isolated. It is left to the viewer's imagination or "hallucination" to complete the three-dimensional effect.

A year later, in "Mt. Tamapais" and "Margaret, Yana and Century Plant," both from 1972, Pethick took this process further by using photographic images — as opposed to a hand-drawn array — of a stationary object. Using some 256 transparencies that had been left in strips, in the first, and positive, black & white transparencies in the second-mentioned work, the transparency of the medium in each allows for the appearance of an immaterial presence of the scene made of light in space — in a way which may remind the viewer of Duchamp's "Large Glass." While these early excursions into integral photography were produced by literally moving the camera (or the eye) into a different position, in the 1980s Jerry Pethick devised an "Array Camera" (a camera housing with several lenses arranged in a diagonal grid) which enabled him to photograph a particular scene in one shot, such as in "Studio Light" and "Self Portrait with Abdomen of an Ant," both works from 1988.

BIAS ARRAYS

The element of a transparent surface, screen, or veil of glass and lenses structures many of Pethick's works. But, more than simply a formal element of material fascination, its structural use refers to the relation between perception and representation as constructed in the perspective trellis — such as depicted, for instance, in Albrecht Dürer's famous, 1538 instructional print.

Unlike in Dürer's instructive set-up, however, in Pethick's work the screen is not an element to assist the translation of three-dimensional objects onto a two-dimensional surface. Nor does representation adhere to the order of perspectival, analytical geometry. Instead, with its manufactured optical materials, serial imagery, composite images, light diffraction, and parabolic mirror reflections — the screen, or veil, is itself the place of the materialization of certain perceptual realities and distortions, including, as we have seen, that of three-dimensional volume.

In fact, in the later 1970s and early 1980s, Jerry Pethick increasingly focused on the representation of immaterial perceptual realities, and on memory in particular, thus severing his obligation to observable phenomena. In a series of fifteen works called "Optical Tapestries" (and "Memory Blanks"), for instance, Pethick used reflective, mirrored, inverted, negative and positive space, as well as coloured and clear, transparent spectrafoil specifically to "re-present" particular memory images ("My Grandfather's Barn," "Waterworks Park," "Giant Flower") in the form of optical tapestries: a densely woven fabric of refracting light and coloured volumes to capture the curiously real experience of remembered, eidetic space.¹⁵ This series continued in 1975 (the year he moved to Hornby), and throughout 1976 (in works such as "Iceberg Mirage,"

“Horseshoes at Dusk,” and “Red and Lotti’s Trailer”), but by utilizing etched mirror and diffraction grating — “a man-made ornamental material capable of iridescent qualities similar to fish scales, butterfly wings, or abalone shell.”¹⁶ Diffraction grating, with its capacity to create coloured spatial volume changing with the viewer’s every move, adds an even greater sense of volume, and emphasis on the ethereal nature of the experience of memory space.

In 1979, however, Pethick’s way of looking at and visualizing perception, would also come to include an exploration of its specifically cultural, as opposed to natural peculiarities and determinants. A series of works shown under the title “The Eskimo/Krieghoff Proximity Device: A Cultural Osmosis,” took the idea of space as constructed in different cultures and technologies. Taking his cues from Cornelius Krieghoff, the 19th century European pioneer-chronicler of the settling of early French colonies in Canada, on the one hand, and Peter Pitseolak, the first Inuit photographer to document Inuit life, on the other, Pethick created an “interface” (or interference) between different spatial realms. Using transparent and reflective materials, with overlaying intersecting, and montaged images, these works consisted of a complex layering to represent perception as both projection and reflection, such as in “Woven Realms” and “Krieghoff painting Chief Tanaghte.”

Unified spatial perception is further unsettled by the sculptural element which entered increasingly into aspects of Pethick’s work. In “Snow Knife, Floating in Memory,” for instance, a flat, transparent and vastly enlarged knife filled in with diffraction grating was hung into an open space to dislodge the viewer’s sense of scale. Utilizing a strategy of surrealism, or perhaps preferring to the way in which Inuit carvings are handled (without one, correct position), Jerry Pethick’s “Snow Knife” miniaturizes its surroundings and destabilizes one’s point of reference — but here specifically related to cultural geographies and thus to the idea of different systems of spatial awareness as they may clash or mesh, fracture one another or, interfering, produce new patterns.

LINES OF FLIGHT

While all of Jerry Pethick’s work shares the preoccupations with peculiarities of the boundary between immaterial and real worlds, the early series of works remained divided between pictorial, veil or screen-like presentation and sculptural objects. In the early 1980s, however, in particular in the series of exhibitions and installations of “Stratagems of Distortion/Sensations of Illusion,”¹⁷ Pethick began to integrate sculptural (three-dimensional) components with two-dimensional elements — a combination which makes up the structure of his most recent, ongoing series of works, several of which are presented in this exhibition.

Combining illusionistic and literal space, many of these works consists of numerous photographs (“a fly’s eye lens photography array”) of a single landscape or scene that are displayed against the solid ground. Seen primarily through a curtain of Fresnel lenses — through the shifting dance in front of the silvery, sequin veil of lenses on the part of the viewer — the photographs often open up suddenly and summon the mirage of three-dimensional hollow, immaterial, uncertain and precariously hovering optical, tangible volume. This illusory space, in turn, is related to sculptural elements, placed next to and in front of the lenses, so that the viewer often finds him or herself moving amongst them while watching the image unfold into space.

Sometimes the sculptural array belongs to the image as a reconstruction of a scene. "Altered Space: Niépce Reconstruction", for instance, consists of a sculptural window with table setting which, through the "window" of Fresnel lenses quite literally opens onto the section of landscape, as the French inventor of photography, Niépce, once photographed it, and as Jerry Pethick found it, in 1990.

But, more often, a given photo-array and the sculptural components presented with it, are linked in a way that is more akin to "imaginative" perception," where thoughts, as lines of flight, connect things unrelated in actuality in unexpected, unruly, yet intuitively perceptive ways: quicksilver sense. In "Notion of Nothing" the juxtaposition of the "empty" volume of sky or air and the fullness of the waters of an evening coastal inlet (as they appear equally opaque in the photo array) are connected to an object resembling a treasure chest, which might harbour emptiness as much as it may be full. If the sculpture is the physical realization of a containing volume, the image is its immaterial empty/full, hollow/solid counterpart. "Material Space/Star Light and Smoke" is even more complex in this regard, relating a large, slightly raised bale of compressed multi-coloured clothes to the elusive volume of a burning fire as it appears behind the screen of multiple lenses. Both, at the level of materials and subject matter, a variety of connections open between the softness and warmth of cloth packed hard by the bale, and the immaterial heat of (transparent, yet physically palpable) flames of fire as they burn solid pine branches and throw sparks into the opaque darkness of night. As sculptural space feeds into and is extended by the re-realized spatial volume of the image, their very opposition gives way to new-found richness of sculptural language.

Inclusive of the technologies of representing space (including perspective systems, photography, holography, and even television) and as much concerned with mental images (such as memory) as with actual objects and physical space, sculpture in Jerry Pethick's work emerges as a precise discipline of "bridging" into the imagination, into the realm of "imaginary" objects and spaces drawn on the real. Affirming a space beyond the distinctions of representation, a matrix which has all but dissolved the frontal, linear, hierarchical dimensionality of perspectival yields, including the dichotomies of subject/object relations, Pethick's work reminds us of the complexities and pleasures of the imagination, where perception sparks eidetic memory and dream spaces, thought clouds and lines of flight, realms which, as he wrote, "let light in, let images in and by so doing, let man out."¹⁸

Endnotes

- 1 Jerry Pethick, "Bias Arrays: Un procès sans cesse," *Vanguard* (December 1976/January 1977): 4
- 2 Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965): 82
- 3 Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 1", reprinted in Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. (1994): 5
- 4 Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. (1981): 198
- 5 Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 3", op. cit., p. 27
- 6 Gabriel Lippmann published his first paper on integral photography in 1908. It was his term for numerous photo images that were all slightly different, and that when viewed through a screen of lenses formed a single composite image with a distinct spatial quality. It has also been referred to as a fly's eye photography.
- 7 Ibid., p. 4
- 9 One thinks of Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, Anthony Caro, Tim Scott, and William Tucker among others.
- 10 As Jerry Pethick remarked, these works were meant "to get rid of gravity" – though not through the muscular, gestural and illusionist anthropomorphism of welded sculpture – and thus went not only against traditional "virtuality" in sculpture, but also against the grain of the ontological dictates of Minimalism, namely that one of the conditions of "knowing an object (was) supplied by the sensing of the gravitational force acting upon it in actual space." Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 1", op. cit., p. 4
- 11 Jerry Pethick's works extend the experiments of the early 20th century avant-garde: the chronicles of the breakdown of the perspective apparatus, and the increasing interest in representing the instability or variety of perception. Pethick himself traces his alliances in direct homages to Seurat and Boccioni, Duchamp and many others, who explored the disintegration of perspective representation, and the pursuit of representing immaterial phenomena, such as temporality, motion and states of mind, as in Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism. Among these homages are, for instance, a 1983 work called "Still Life and Interior, for Madeline Knobloch" (Seurat's mistress); or the entire installation of *Traces of Discovery*, at the Vancouver Art Gallery, in 1984, which concerned "Brancusi, Léger and Duchamp's visit to the air show" and Archipenko's "cactus rage", among others. As Scott Watson also wrote: "Pethick is one of those artists who is returning to historical sources for his work (the period from Seurat to the 1909 Air Show in Paris). He is not doing this because he views modernity as impoverished. Rather the opposite; he is on a mission of rescue. (...) Pethick's concern ... takes him to the arche of our era to return us to the true possibility of history." Scott Watson, "Boccioni's Smile: Jerry Pethick's *Traces of Discovery*," *Traces of Discovery*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver (1984): 3
- 12 Jerry Pethick, "Bias Arrays", op. cit., p. 4
- 13 Jerry Pethick, quoted in "In the Eyes of this Beholder," *Jerry Pethick: Material Space*, Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge, Alberta (1991): 33
- 14 "Intersection" stems from that period of time when Jerry Pethick was living in San Francisco, where he had co-founded the School of Holography.
- 15 A lot of Jerry Pethick's work and documentation from the period prior to 1977 was destroyed in a fire that year.
- 16 The effect is created by imprinting continuous, microscopic spiral grooves on a metallized plastic film. See *Jerry Pethick: The Eskimo/Krieghoff Proximity Device: A Cultural Osmosis*, Vancouver Art Gallery, foldout, (1979)
- 17 Phase One of this project was shown at the Malaspina Gallery, Nanaimo; Phase Two at And/Or in Seattle; and Phase Three in the exhibition *Mise En Scène*, at the Vancouver Art Gallery, in 1981.
- 18 Jerry Pethick, "Bias Arrays," op.cit., p. 4