

Freeze Frames: *plus qu'une surface, moins qu'un volume*

Charles Stankievech

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Since the end of the 19th century, we have become addicted to interfacing with reality in ever increasing time-slices. E.J. Marey and E. Muybridge triggered this shift, but we quickly passed cinema's normalized 24fps, beyond the 10,000 fps used in laboratory tests to record explosions and are now exploring the drift in electrons for creating images at the timescale of attoseconds (10^{-18}). The point for an artist however is not to chase after an accelerating resolution race. The world is *already* in full resolution, supplanting the need for it to serve as an end in itself.ⁱ Instead, a certain pleasure arises from the inverse experience of *not* seeing the whole, from feeling the gaps between the frames, the flicker in the darkness, the rhythm of absence. Framed as a Modernist project, David Spriggs's sculptures tap into a parallel phenomenon. Particularly, the essential aspects of his work can be traced back to three important inventions that crystallised around 1890: cinema, x-rays and psychoanalysis. All three inventions created machines for seeing a reality that subverted the skin of the image—a line of thought continued in Spriggs's work today.

In a gesture to freeze time, David Spriggs jams the film projector to create a new type of machine that transfers the principles of cinema into the axioms of sculpture. Freeze the frame. Cut the filmstrip. Stack the negatives. The narrative of cinema morphs into the suspension of sculpture—both backlit with mental projections from the spectator. Everyone knows that moving pictures do not move—that is the magic of cinema. The spectator imagines movement out of a mechanical series of still images. In other words, the fundamental phantasy of cinema for the spectator is *motion*. On the other hand, for Spriggs's spectator, the fundamental phantasy is *volume*. To begin with, the glass vitrines that act as the outer membrane of the work demarcate a space and hence suggest an object inside, *but the film planes suspended in the vitrine act in the same manner; in a sense they serve only as recursive extensions of the vitrine*. Which is to say, the drawings on the clear film again delineate another volume—the volume of an image, a strange mental image that is "plus qu'une surface. Moins qu'un volume."ⁱⁱ However, as soon as the spectator moves to the left or the right of the work, peering in from the side, he or she quickly witnesses *all that is solid melts into air*.

In the traditional movement of Modernism, the object becomes subjective, and the subject becomes objectified. It is a simple but effective subversion: the subject matter flips between object and subject. The human subject becomes *subject* (literally thrown under) the object. It is not so much a hierarchy of position, but the movement in position that is key. Spriggs's sculptures, though stationary objects, activate this movement much like a minimalist sculpture by Donald Judd. Unlike in cinema where the body remains static and the images move, in Spriggs's cinematic sculptures, the body moves and the images remain static. Thus the single plane of film not only creates an x-ray slice of the interior of the object, it also slices the subjective experience of the spectator, revealing the construction of the virtual in a cold diagrammatic drawing stratified and separated. Ironically it is the gap between the x-ray slices that allow the spectator to see into the interior of the subject matter, for in none of Spriggs's work would a single plane be sufficient. Alone, a single sheet would simply be a partial drawing—an image only composed of surface. It is the multiple plateaus of x-rays—and the gaps between them—that constructs the volume, just as it is the movement of the body that deconstructs

the volume. With a normal sculpture it is the multiple perspectives of an object that create a virtual sense of space, but in Spriggs's case, the multiple perspectives erase the object.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this sense, the volume's disappearance is not a disappearance of the work, but rather is the final rendering of the work. Hans Holbein's use of anamorphosis in the *Ambassadors* is a helpful point of reference. The *memento mori* in Holbein's 16th century painting can only be seen from the side, when the body moves to view the painting from a skewed perspective and thus is "looking awry." An important psychoanalytic concept, "looking awry" gives us the language to connect Holbein's *Ambassadors* and a work like Spriggs's *Paradox of Power*. In such rubric, it is only by looking at something from a particular position can the meaning become clear; "if we look at a thing straight on, i.e., matter-of-factly, disinterestedly, objectively, we see nothing but a formless spot; the object assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at it 'at an angle,' i.e., with an 'interested' view supported, permeated, and 'distorted' by desire."^{iv} Such a function, which is the basic production of symbolic value, is also the same machine that can reveal the construction of the image. Looking awry is a spatial way of seeing that provides a stage where the body plays an important role in perception. And as the body moves, so does the mind; a shift in space results in a shift of consciousness. By simply walking around the sculpture, the layers of the image (both physically and symbolically) are at one moment aligned and at another separated. At first, the viewer might think Spriggs's work flips the looking awry mechanism on its head, but this misses the point entirely, mistaking the work to be about the image, when it is really concerned with vision and embodied consciousness. In short, the work is not a sculpture but is a *codec* that *compresses* and *decompresses* the codified image.^v

As a result, the *fin de coup* in Spriggs's work is not in seeing the illusionary production of volume, but rather in the experience of volume being destroyed (and then recreated and re-destroyed and so on)—hence the artist's fascination with such Dionysian subject matter as explosions, hurricanes, and cosmic forces. And as he continually re-focuses on such nebulous spaces & accelerating forces in his work, we must continually remind ourselves not to mistake the works as illusionary objects suspended in space. Spriggs creates a vision machine that reveals how we perceive the world around us as quantum frames of information constantly in flux between existence and non-existence: images oscillating between matter and anti-matter.

ⁱ "Reality itself is infinitely resolvable. Therefore ultimate resolution is a function of scale. Magnify reality and you move through planes of meaning" in Bill Viola, "The Visionary Landscape of Perception." *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973-1994*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995. p. 232.

ⁱⁱ I am thinking here of Deleuze and Guattari's description of a theoretical Sierpinsky Sponge in *Mille Plateaux: Capitalisme et Schizophrénie 2*. Paris: Les Edition de Minuit, 1980. p. 608.

ⁱⁱⁱ While the early content of Spriggs's work included the direct rendering of an x-ray of a suitcase (apropos customs or museum security technology), his more recent work uses 3D animation software to first design the subject in a completely virtual field, which can be dissected and stratified infinitely at will. It is the transfer, however, from the virtual space of the screen, to the still virtual space of his sculpture that creates a friction and gives the work its 'paradoxical power.'

^{iv} Slavoj Zizek. *Looking Awry*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991. p. 11-12.

^v In image processing software, the algorithm that processes the image is called a *codec*, which is a contraction of the prefixes *compression/decompression* or *code/decode*.