

Not *This Image* : Reflections on Jean-Françoise Cote's Work

An expression of the virtual

While Jean-Françoise Côté's practice can be easily classified according to his mediums, as either photography or video installation, it is not so evident that his installations are in fact mechanisms to intimate a different kind of image. The "image" that Côté made palpable does not in fact belong to any particular medium or dimension, it is neither photographic nor videographic. Hence, I propose that it is best conceived as a "virtual" image, one that perpetually passes through, and does not lodge in determined modes of representation and dimensionalities. What I mean by virtual is that the image in question has yet to be materialized as a phenomenon, that it has yet to be made available to vision, as something already constituted as an artwork. In essence, the virtual image necessarily escapes circumscription within the visual field, even while it transpires to express itself through Côté's installations in novel ways.



1. *L'Ombre Survivante*, 2003

L'Ombre Survivante

Take *L'Ombre Survivante* from 2003, for instance. The installation is comprised of a series of landscape photographs, each measuring 3x4 feet, of a scenic spot on the east coast. When presented together as an ensemble, these individual panels loosely approximate a panoramic view of the coastal subject that envelops the viewer on three sides of the exhibition space, leaving the "back" wall open. While this set-up is familiar enough, it would be a grave oversight to regard *L'Ombre Survivante* at face value, as an installation of landscape photography. As we shall see, the subject of an open, unbounded strip of coastal landscape occasions another, looser, and still more open image of reality.

In *L'Ombre Survivante*, photography is set up not as an end for contemplation, but rather to produce an occasion from which the virtual image might come to pass. Two important strategies are at work with respect to this end. The first being the inclusion of the photographer's shadow in the photographs: each photograph is strategically augmented by Côté's own shadow captured in the act of photographing the landscape. The second is the mounting of the photographs on supports with varying thickness that project the photographic images into the physical space. This protrusion in physical space thus invest the photograph with more or less material presence in "real" space". Working in tandem, these two critical manoeuvres dislodge both the artwork and the viewer from their prescribed spatial register of two and three dimensionality. I will discuss the mechanism of these manoeuvres in detail below.

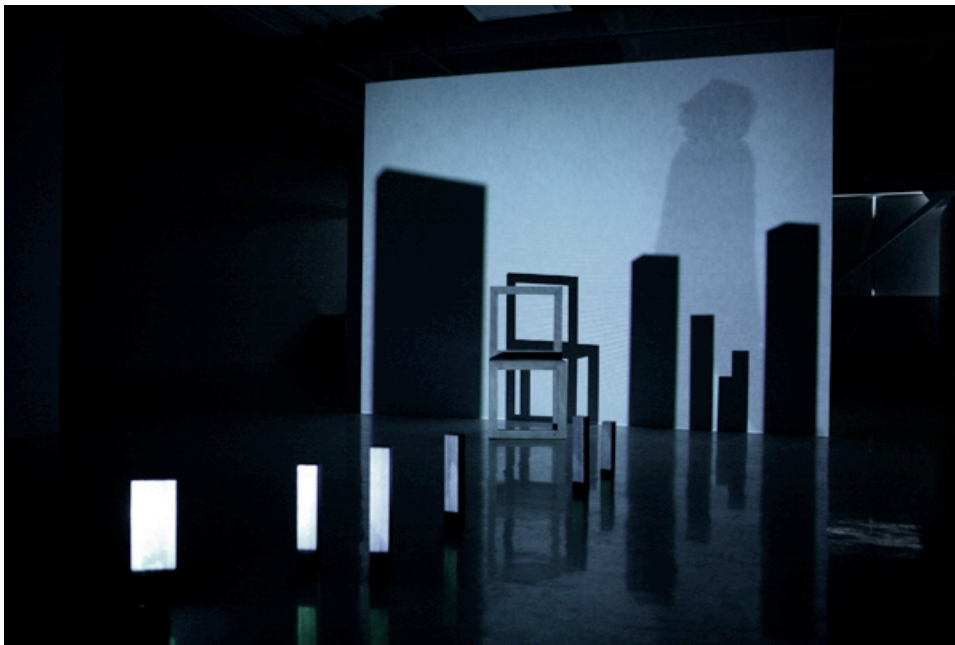
Upon entering the installation, through identification with Côté's shadows projected within the photographs, the viewer is, in effect displaced across the threshold of the "real", three-dimensional space of the gallery and implicated into the illusionistic, two-dimensional space of the photographs. The effect is as if, on the one hand, the viewer has crossed over the pictorial threshold and entered the landscape, and on the other hand still remains fully aware of his continual presence and occupancy in the physical space of the gallery. In such a scenario, the body is experienced as simultaneously fictive and real. Here, traversing that which are normally irreconcilable spatial registers, the shadows function as a kind of "link" or interface that enfolds the viewer between them. The effect of this is to facilitate a passage, an inexplicable movement, between spatial distinctions i.e. real/illusion, 3D/2D. In other words, dimensionalities are demonstrated to be not absolutes but a matter of difference of degrees and intensity.

This implication of the viewer in this continuous oscillation between dimensionalities is further compounded by the varying thickness of the photographic panels. The differences in thickness situate the panels as being closer or farther away from the wall, making them more or less physical intrusions. Consider, then, the photographic surfaces as indicators that "slide" between the spectrum of two and three dimensionalities. Here, the perpetual displacement of spatial thresholds renders the question of how and according to what condition does one cross over from three to two-dimensional space and vice versa to be irrelevant. The point is that *L'Ombre Survivante* enacts a different way to picture dimensionalities as a process of unfolding variations and intensities. That is, instead of falling into a conventional mode of thinking in terms of distinct dimensions and then attempting to connect them, *L'Ombre Survivante* releases a more mobile conception of reality that unfolds by degrees, by variations and intensities that "surround" and pass through determined spatial registers.

Imaging a mobilized reality

Thus, one might ask, what might the "image" of this mobilized reality be? Especially a reality that does not resign itself to either two or three-dimensional representations, but instead passes through these spatial / representational registers by complicating their constituencies i.e. photography, the physical space and the viewer, within its process? Perhaps such an image can be fathomed in its manner of exceeding known spatial registers and perceptual horizons that are constituted by the human subject. For example,

viewers of *L'Ombre Survivante* report that even though the back wall is empty, they are able to “sense” the landscape/horizon in the photographs present behind them. This sensation of an extended horizon has no reference in the photographic images, yet nonetheless survives as a kind of a phantom presence in the gallery. Surely, this spectral image of the horizon, though not available to reason or to sight, is nonetheless felt to be “there”, surrounding *L'Ombre Survivante* and its constituents within its virtual presence. One might say, that in *L'Ombre Survivante*, the various constituents (panels, photographs, shadows and the viewer) are in fact permeated and “surrounded” by virtual images that together, the “ensemble” expresses a mobilized reality. The title of the present article, *Not this Image*, testifies to the new sense of the term “image” in Côté’s practice. His is an image that escapes indexical rule: that one can neither point to, nor at it precisely because one is already implicated as a variant within Côté’s expanded concept of the “image”.



2. *Cités*, 2007

Cités: starting from the other end of the spectrum

Take another example, a video installation entitled *Cités* recently exhibited at the Santiago Biennale. Metal blocks were set up to cast large shadows representing those of tall buildings on a projection wall. These cast shadows are overlaid on another projection on the same wall : a video of Côté’s silhouette strolling, stopping and looking. The combination of the blocks and the video thus contextualizes Cote as a pedestrian, a sort of flaneur in an imaginary urban environment. The third essential component of *Cités* is that of the viewers’ shadows, which are also cast into the illusionistic “cityscape”. The viewers’ meandering through the small metal blocks in the physical space of the gallery thus become complicated with the stroll of the flaneur in a flat, two-dimensional city situated on the projection wall.

In *Cités*, the resultant two-dimensional image on the projection screen is a composite of both two and three-dimensional components. As in the case of *L'Ombre Survivante*, the viewer is implicated in both dimensions simultaneously. The difference is that in *Cités*, the virtual image unfolds from activities in three-dimensional space whilst *L'Ombre Survivante*, virtual images are extrapolated from an encounter with photography. Viewers in both works are moving *within* an image that is neither seen nor represented.

Regardless of the starting point, Côté's program is in a sense working through the material images of photography and video, in order to evacuate from them and thus redeem the virtual image that moves through them. Insofar as the overall orchestration implicates photography, video and the body, it is only in order to escape their finality and inevitability. In this text, I hope to clarify that which is merely shown in Côté's work does not comprise the whole picture. In Côté's program, photography, video and the viewer are deployed as engendered instances through which the engendering power of the virtual image may come to pass.

yam lau
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