

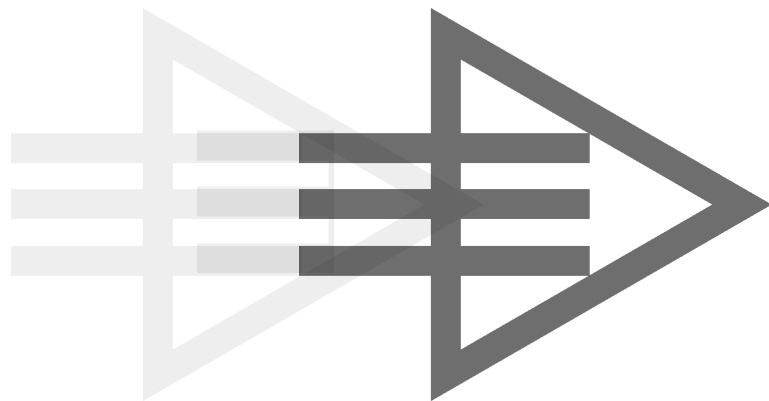
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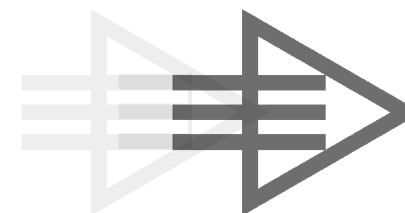
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Rémanences Bertrand R. Pitt

June 4 - 8 2007



Bertrand R. Pitt

For nearly ten years now, Bertrand R. Pitt has been presenting videographic installations where sobriety of devices rhymes with powerful effects. The exploration of unexpected connections between sound and image and their place in space are at the heart of this practice aiming at questioning our perceptual habits.

Projections, screens, objects and reflecting surfaces immerse visitors into an experience which amalgamates contemplation, doubt and fascination. Afterglow was presented for the first time in Montréal in the spring of 2005. Bertrand R. Pitt is presently working on a new interactive video installation.

Depuis près d'une dizaine d'années, Bertrand R. Pitt propose des installations vidéographiques et sonores où la sobriété du dispositif se conjugue à l'efficacité des effets déployés. L'exploration de rapports inattendus entre les sons et les images et leur mise en espace sont au cœur de cette pratique qui tend à interroger nos habitudes perceptuelles.

Projections, écrans, objets et surfaces réfléchissantes forment des environnements quasi immersifs dans lesquels nous sommes invités à vivre une expérience où s'entremêlent contemplation, doute et fascination. Rémanences fut réalisée et présentée pour la première fois à Montréal au printemps 2005. Bertrand R. Pitt travaille actuellement au développement d'une nouvelle installation vidéo interactive.



Rémanences (Afterglow)



Photographs so often leave their viewers in a state of longing. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes described photography as “the impossible science of the unique being”. No other medium has the ability to record its subject with such precision while failing to capture the essence of the person photographed. This unattainability is coupled with the undeniable evidence that something, some aspect of the person in the image was present when the shutter opened.

Barthes described this essence as *punctum*, the moment when something in the image breaks free from the surface of the photograph to puncture the heart of its viewer. It is the indescribable something that causes us to say that one picture “looks like” its subject while another does not.

With digital technology, the ability to translate traditional photographs into a series of ones and zeros that can be endlessly replicated, adjusted, taken apart and put together, is *punctum* any closer? In *Rémanences*, Bertrand Pitt investigates the question.

The artist places a photograph of his father, who passed away in 2003, on the glass of a flatbed scanner. It is a formal portrait, probably taken in a studio, of a handsome middle-aged man in a neat 1960s style suit. Pitt has chosen this photograph from a handful of others. What is it about this particular view of the man that has struck his son?

The light of the scanner passes over the image, illuminating it for a brief moment. All too soon, the original image is gone, leaving a negative version behind. The shadowy form lingers on the screen, fading very slowly to black. Like the ghost images left on overused computer monitors, it is unclear whether something is still there, or if it's only an effect of memory.

As each consecutive pass of the scanner brings us closer to the face of the man in the photograph, each image becomes less and less clear. The artist's intense investigation does not reveal more detail, but less.

Finally, an eye fills the entire screen. It seems as if the meaning of the man should be found here, but there is only a collection of blurred pixels. Then, with a startling chord, the eye shifts and blinks – *punctum*. The eye is Pitt's own - he has penetrated the surface of the portrait in his struggle to connect to it. This intimate gesture embodies the dichotomy of *punctum*.

Though photographs may seem to reach out and affect us, it is in fact the viewer's memories that bring still, flat images to life.

From the blackness, the lines of a silent white sonar wave stretch across the screen. These morph into a strip of lapping water; then a dark lake that is twisted into a turning globe. The shapes of these continents on this globe are unfamiliar though. The source of the images appear at the right of the screen – the arc of an ultrasound display. It is an early photograph of Pitt's son. The sound of a heartbeat fills the air.

The scanner beam passes back and forth across the screen again, sweeping the images away. Waves of white light immerse the viewer and fracture into shifting planes of luminous colour accompanied by a soaring soundtrack.

The basic ingredient of photography, Barthes found, was the significance in light. “A sort of umbilical cord links the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.”ⁱⁱ

Indeed, photographs serve as an important connection to others. They are talismans that reassure us of our place in the world and reiterate links to the people we hold dear. Think of the images you carry on your cellular phone or keep as computer screen savers at work.

They are comforting, but they are also a sign of absence. Susan Sontag describes them as “both sentimental and implicitly magical: they are attempts to contact, or lay claim to another reality.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Family albums perform a particular social function, especially in an era when portability is valued and disconnection from home, friends and family is common. Sontag noted that since its invention, photography has been used to “memorialize, to restate symbolically, the imperiled continuity and vanished extendedness of family life.”^{iv}

Pitt shares a few excerpts from his family album - moments from his father's life and his own. They play like a home slide show where the slides have jammed in the projector. One negative image appears on the dark screen only to have another one superimposed over it. Soon, the layers of shadow and light are muddled, but no matter.

Though these photographs are very personal to the artist, their formats are universally recognizable. A snapshot of children playing in the garden can be made out, as well as one of adults seated around a living room and an image of the whole family gathered on the lawn.

This is not a well organized “portable kit of images”^v meant to lay out a neat diagram of family connections. Rather, this montage echoes the fallibility of human memory and the complexity of our relationships. Traces of a history are written over and over again until the story is illegible.

Preservation is also a concern when it comes to family albums. Sontag notes that they are “generally about the extended family – and, often, is all that remains of it.”^{vi} With digital technology though, reproduction is the most common form of preservation. Pitt scans his photographs, and he can be seen cutting each image from a sheet of printed photo paper. The artist recreates them as closely as possible, trimming each image to its original size.

What is the future of these carefully made replicas? Are they copies to be used in Pitt's projects, the originals to be stored in safety? Perhaps these will be passed on to the artist's son. Whatever the purpose, these images have already become talismans, as Pitt sorts through them one by one, over and over again.

The relationship between photography and mortality is a strong one. Nothing else presents such a heartbreakingly precise record of life captured in the moment just before irrevocable change. Barthes went so far as to describe photography as “flat death”^{vii} while Sontag stated that “All photographs are memento mori.”^{viii}

Death, but also evidence of a life - Bertrand Pitt's father visited a photographer's studio that day. He smiled as a flashbulb popped. A photograph of a person is a symbol of their presence, but also a token of absence – intimacy and separation. Pitt keeps and studies this image, though his father is only present in memory. *Rémanences* is a poignant reflection of the bittersweet, divergent pulls of a photograph.

-Jennifer McVeigh is a writer and artist living in Calgary.

- i Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Noonday, New York, 1981. (p. 71)
- ii *ibid*
- iii Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York 1977. (p. 16)
- iv *Ibid* (p. 8)
- v *Ibid*
- vi *Ibid*
- vii Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Noonday, New York, 1981. (p. 92)
- viii Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York 1977. (p. 15)

