

THE VIRTUAL BODY, Catherine Richards, 1993

Description

It is a cabinet, reminiscent of the column stereoscopes of the mid 1800's, when the new optical instruments were part scientific instrument, part aesthetic object and part perceptual media. *Virtual Bodies* occupies this ambiguous ground of instrument and object.

The wood cabinet stands on a platform in the middle of the room. As spectators enter they see, on top of the cabinet, a miniature glass room. The walls are semi transparent and illuminated. Approaching they see that the images in the hand blown and liquid crystal glass are of a Rococo room. These richly coloured images glow with light from the patterned floor within, a computer pattern on a monitor.

Steps to the platform beckon for a closer look. Standing next to the glass room spectators notice a brass peekhole, in the top/ceiling. Peering inside they see, momentarily, the Rococo ceiling, in fact a reflection. But just as it appears, the ceiling image seems to be interrupted by the floor image on the monitor and this floor image, in its turn, is again overtaken by the ceiling. The space in the miniature room destabilizes.

On one glass wall of the room, where a knob on an instrument might be, is a hole to put one's hand inside the room....to enter. With this intervention by the spectator the third state begins. The glass walls of the miniature room suddenly become opaque and lose all their transparency and detail to anyone standing on the outside. Meanwhile the peering spectator stares down at their hand spread across the room's floor, the monitor. The floor pattern on the monitor begins to move away from him. In a few moments the spectator begins to sense a body illusion: a displacement of his body, an illusion of motion. His hand appears to be infinitely travelling away from his body. Then the arm begins to take his body with it. It is as if miniature space is folded into infinite space, as if stillness is folded into motion. The body loses all references: inside / outside; giant / miniature; spectator / object; part / whole. The spectator becomes an instrumental site of the technology, caught up by the dispersion of events.

As the spectator withdraws the transparent miniature room reappears, glowing once again. This Rococo room (Eldorado, Antwerp) is an illusionistic box designed to surround, overwhelm and trick the spectator just as in it's own way many new technologies are committed to creating a simulated sensorium, enveloping all the senses. But there is a significant difference. In the Rococo space the floor remains firm for the spectators while all the surrounding visual intoxication is oriented towards them. But in the Post Modern, virtual world the ground is no longer there, the floor destabilizes taking any sense of the separate self along with it. This piece explodes the room's one surface, the floor, which remained grounded in the Rococo room.

First the piece takes the Rococo room and makes it a object for the spectator....Then the piece turns these relations inside out taking up the spectator within this simulation. Instead of the spectator being central to the room's perspective, standing under an interior sky, a model of order.... the spectator taken in, dispersed, positionless yet everywhere.