



PARALLEL DIMENSION

In a recent conversation about her work, Elizabeth Zvonar brought up a 1990 photograph by American artist Charles Ray entitled *Yes* as a point of reference. The life-size self-portrait shows Ray photographed from the waist up wearing a slightly wrinkled striped button-down shirt and looking preoccupied or perhaps distant. What looking at the image doesn't reveal is that the picture was taken while the artist was under the influence of LSD. The distortions in perception caused by the drug are referenced in the shape of the photograph: it is convex and mounted on curved glass (Paul Shimmel relayed in an essay on Ray that the experience of coming upon this photograph while it was mounted on a similarly curved wall was not unlike being under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs). LSD, first introduced in the late 1930s, was studied for its potential psychiatric and therapeutic possibilities and later banned when its recreational use outweighed its scientific potential. Its effects are not only sight-based but also cognitive: on the one hand its ability to alter perception is aligned to the "psychedelic," while on the other its effects on belief have been considered akin to spiritual enlightenment. The drug produces a chemically enhanced way of "seeing" and experiencing reality, whereby emotions, memories, time, and awareness are heightened and ordinary objects and experiences can take on altered appearances and different meanings.¹

It is fitting that Zvonar's recent installation at Art-speak is first and foremost about seeing and how subtle changes in everyday objects affect their meaning and the way they are viewed and experienced. Taking its cue from Ray's doubly skewed

portrait (experienced both by the artist in creating the image and the viewer looking at the warped result), Zvonar's sculpture looks to the distortion of reality and the ambiguity of sight. It is fitting that the work was situated in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, an area where the most disenfranchised residents often rely on drugs as a means of coping with everyday life. For her installation, the gallery's exterior was the site for Zvonar's work. She worked with a glass bender to customize a new window to replace one in the gallery's façade. The result was an exercise in subtle augmentations: the window had a nearly perfectly concave bubble about three feet in diameter at eye level. A material largely immutable and straight was made porous and malleable. Its final form was momentarily inconsistent with what we expected to see. Altering the shape of the glass had a direct effect on the material's translucency and its reflective abilities. While the unaltered section of the glass remained transparent, the convex bubble's reflective abilities shifted depending on the distance from which it was seen. Viewed up close, images were dark and skewed but at a distance of a few feet the reflected image would flip upside down to form a clear replication of the scene outside.

While the replacement and manipulation of architectural elements has its precedent with artists like Michael Asher (in 1979 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago Asher removed several large panels from the building's façade and hung them on an interior wall of the museum), Zvonar's work arises from another set of concerns. In a gesture more akin to the parallel universe brought about in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* than

CANDICE HOPKINS ON ELIZABETH ZVONAR

the recent history of institutional critique, Zvonar's installation alters formal elements to quite literally create a perceptual shift.

Prior to working with bent glass, Zvonar created a number of installations with mirrors. Each work in this series was comprised of two round mirrors, identical in size, which were mounted to face one another. The result was the creation of an infinite reflection. The viewer, in walking between the mirrors, was subject to an endlessly regressing image that became increasingly smaller to the point where it disappeared. At the same time that they reveal the three-dimensional world through their reflection, they also reveal their two-dimensionality as flat surfaces as the outer edges of one mirror is always visible in the face of the other. Mirrors have a narrative history of being portals, and as Alice discovered in placing her hand through the mirror in *Through the Looking Glass*, they are often conduits between one world and another. It is their ability to reflect that gives them an aspect of the "otherworldly." Through her use of glass on both a material and metaphoric level, Zvonar's works affirm a visionary, yet precarious state of existence that is focussed on the instability of the viewing experience.

The use of perspective and the creation of parallel dimensions in art history has its beginnings in Italy in the late 1200s when mathematicians and artists were starting to make radical shifts in how space was represented in two dimensions. By incorporating new geometric techniques—precursors to the seminal works on perspective by Dürer and Alberti—paintings were able to take on a virtual space where the division between real space

Elizabeth Zvonar, *Parallel Dimension*, 2007
Window installation detail
photo: Blaine Campbell

{often signified through the actual architecture of the building where the painting was housed) and the represented space (the painting itself) were blurred. Through the creation of this third space, the experience of looking took on the transcendental and the inability to discern between what was real and what was represented in a painting resulted in a suspension of belief. "By carefully manipulating images so that the actual point of view and apparent point of view were in conflict, the artist could shift the self outside of the flesh ... the point of such an exercise was to induce a spiritual experience"² perhaps aligned to much later experiments in with LSD. Zvonar's work plays in these spaces between perception and belief, where subtle changes in an object and its relationship to space and architecture result in another way of looking, the instances when truth becomes malleable and knowledge exists in a state of flux.

Candice Hopkins is a Vancouver based curator and writer. Her writing has appeared in C Magazine, Leonardo, and FUSE and in catalogues for the Walter Phillips Gallery, Museum London, Catriona Jeffries Gallery, and Kunstradio. She has curated exhibitions on the themes of architecture and disaster, time and obsolescence, shapeshifting and storytelling, and fictional identities. She is presently collaborating with Makiko Hara to curate a survey exhibition on the work of Afghan artist Lida Abdul.

¹ Wikipedia, www.wikipedia.org accessed September 10, 2007.

² Margaret Werthem, "The Illusionistic Magic of Geometric Figuring," *Cabinet* 26: 31, Summer 2007.