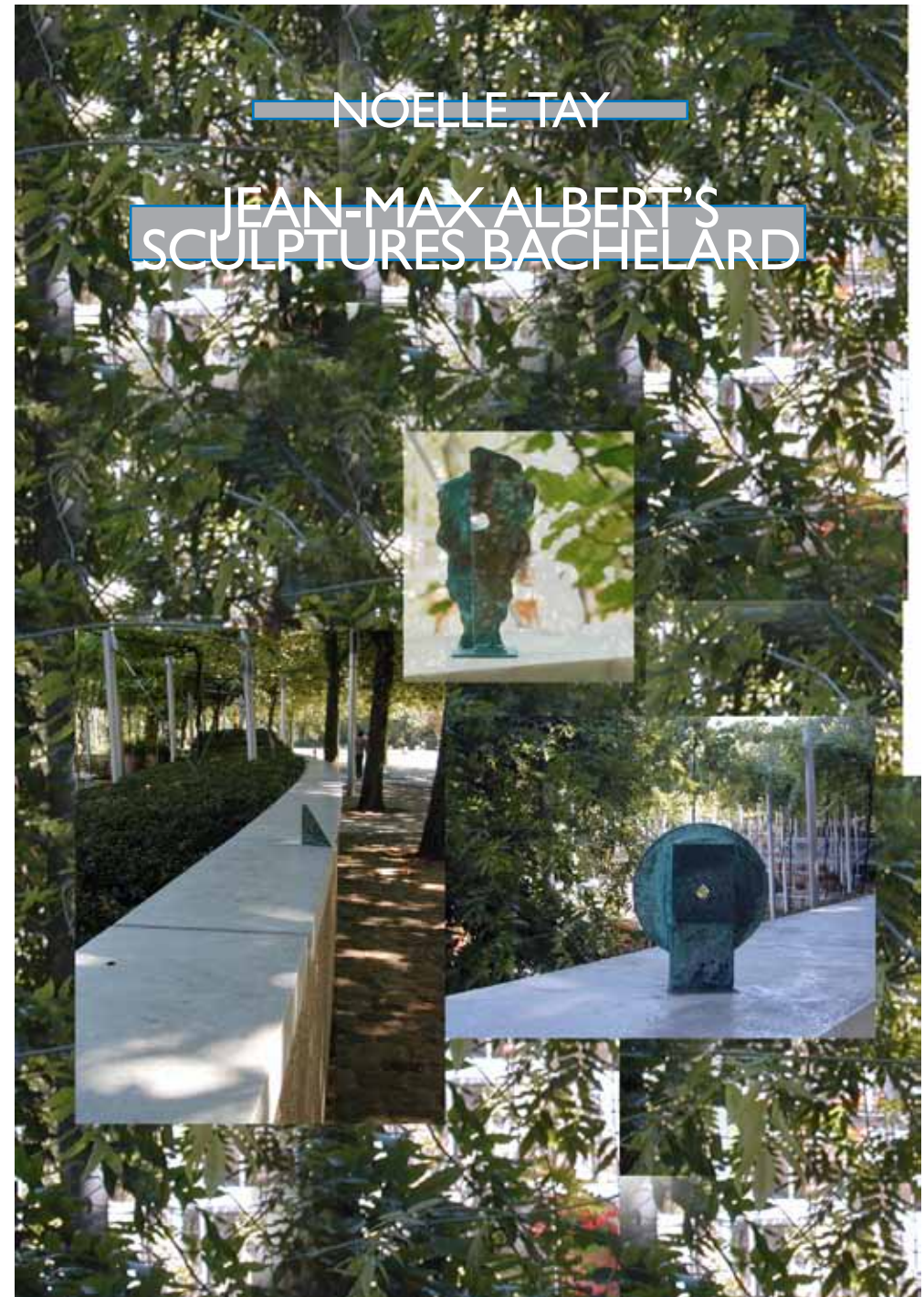


Jean-Max Albert's
Sculptures Bachelard

By
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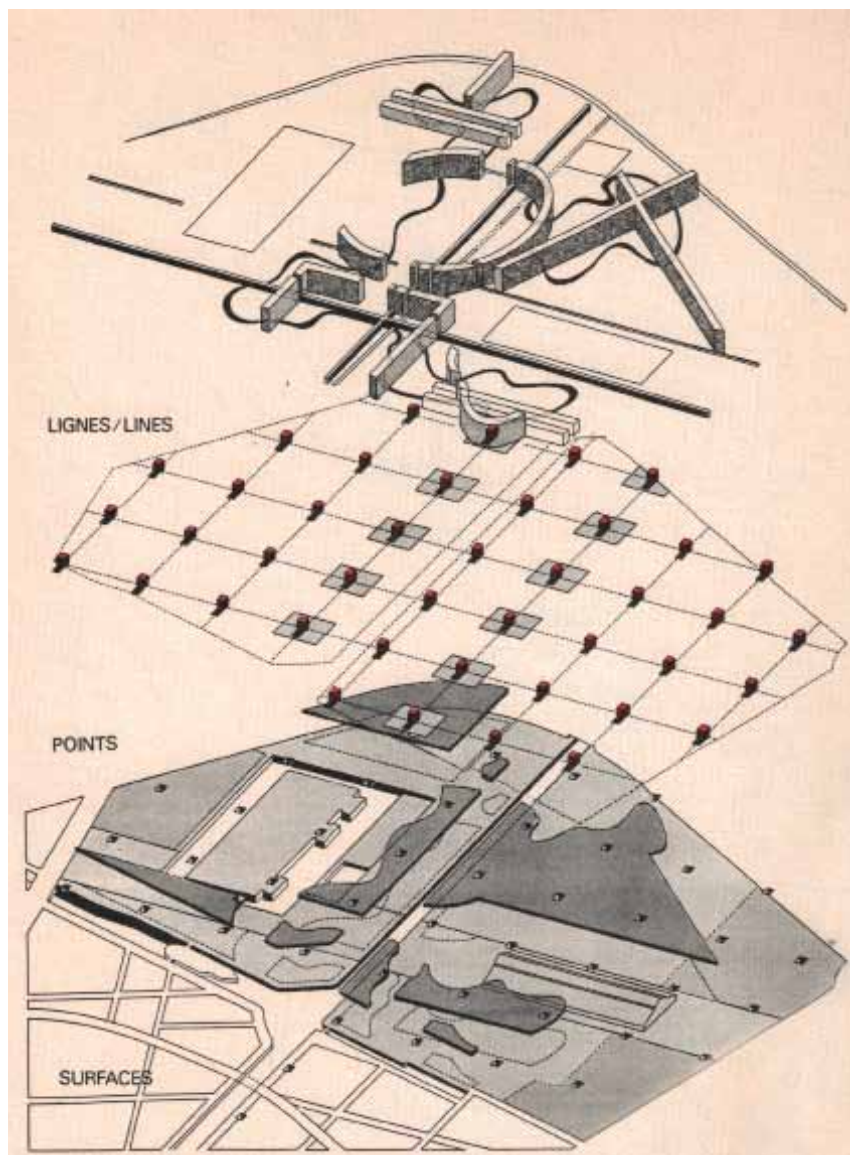


Figure 1



At times referred to as key-holes, other times as cameras, Jean-Max Albert's Sculptures Bachelard are consistently alluded to as apertures that we look through, rather than at. Yet, despite being only knee-high, their bronze cast affirms their massiveness and permanence, their hewn edges inviting touch and interaction, their thickness occupying three-dimensional volume. These key-holes ask the question, what does an object which exists from only one point of view look like? In this case, the object is architecture, specifically Bernard Tschumi's Parc de la Villette. Alternately, the object is actually the viewing subject. The retinal and kinaesthetic relationships these sculptures establish habits that form our memories about the Parc. Moreover, they also point to their utility as instruments that impose orientation lines on the living image, much like the Lacanian gaze through which the subject is captured. Indeed, the operation and formalism of the sculptures affirm their status as reconstructions

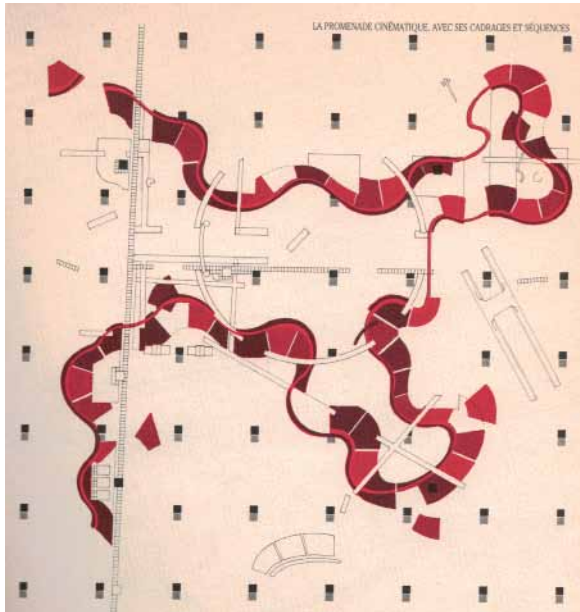


Figure 2

of Lacan's triangular scheme of the gaze in three-dimensional space. By restructuring space and its users in spatial and visual terms, they diverge from Tschumi's manifesto in concept and in experience, though both are contingent upon the lived body in producing a spatialized place.

If we were to consider our interaction with these sculptures in relation to the rest of the Parc de la Villette, we see a reversal in operations carried out between Tschumi and Albert. In line with his conceptualization of the event, Tschumi's space moves with the body, and "all the architect does is establish the game board, a few pieces, a few rules, and let the user start to play." The park was the result of a systematic mapping of event space, a project started with the Manhattan Transcripts, which deployed photographic fragments to diagram architectural program and to temporalize space. Tschumi sought to "take a program and dismantle it, cut it up, and reconfigure it" with the same freedom as one could



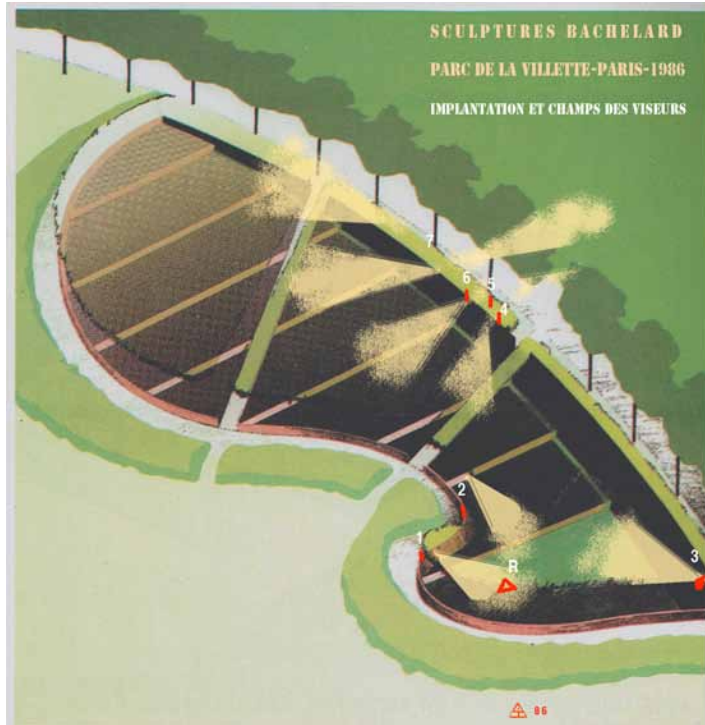


Figure 3

with visual media. Adopting Michael Hays' reading of his work, Tschumi's goal is thus to establish an "architectural DNA", a generic system whose parts can be readily permuted to facilitate the spontaneous temporalization of space. What Tschumi pursues is an "architecture of pure becoming, something emergent rather than final", where we hold onto instantaneous memories of activity "before it slips out of our perception". What then is the role of the key-hole for the event? If we look at the sculptures and Parc globally, it would appear that they are extending the role of the grid in further "[specifying] the site" by acting as additional nodes of "flickering functions and microperformances." The sculptures and their view corridors establish a three-dimensional ruled surface over their context, counteracting Tschumi's grid as an alternative arrangement of the void and charting different loci of activity (fig. 2). However, a contrarian reading based on observing how we





interact with them reveals that the sculptures are actually stops in space, freezing the body in a state of immobility rather than facilitating its dynamism. Albert thus adds a complementary dimension to the Parc by granting us “a way for the eyes to gain access to a space where the body cannot go.” If Tschumi was trying to tackle a void by structuring by movements, Albert opts to represent a void structured by stasis, and animated by implied axialities.

If the Parc de la Villette was Tschumi’s take on the opposition between architecture as an autonomous mental construct and a contingent corporeal experience by staging architecture as an outgrowth of imagination and its own kind of Imaginary, then Jean-Max Albert’s sculptures complement this task by thoroughly corporealizing architecture in the construction of memory. For this, we shall look to phenomenological physicalism as a counterpoint to the thread of thought that “[subordinates] all discrete phenomena to the mind” and assumes that the mind is the “sum total of representations”, so described by Edward Casey. Tschumi’s architecture falls under the latter classification, where it “has everything to do with a particular impulse finding its representation... and is only contingently related to the composition of a building” (Hays, 2009). His use of known and familiar architectural parts to fabricate new unknowns in the form of follies is evidence of “imagination [impregnating space] with purposefulness.”

What Albert re-introduces onto the site is the significance of the lived body and the possibility of producing memory from its rituals and motions. The sculptures relocate the creation of place to the body by holding still what Tschumi had offered: a homogeneous field of actions. According to Husserl, “external space (der Ausserraum) is homogeneous... but the lived body and its bodily space break the homogeneity asunder.” The line of thought that



the lived body is the site for place-ness originated with Kant, who viewed the body – itself already divided into bidirectional dyads – as a corporeal pivot around which three dimensions of space arrange themselves. Despite Tschumi’s impersonal and self-referential grid of points of lines, to Kant “the most intimate as well as the most consequential inroad to place is through the body” (Casey, 1998). This spatio-genetic notion of the sensing and observing subject has similarly been touched on by Merleau Ponty and Whitehead, who point to the ability of our bodies to shape and support the particularity of place, “[laying] upon the universe the obligation of conforming to it.”

Hence, as viewers of architecture, we are deeply embodied subjects and not purely psychical ones, and it is our bodies that spatialize events in a world of geometry. For Tschumi, “it is less the diachronic than the synchronic that counts – less memory and its obverse, projection, than unexpected simultaneities” (Tschumi, 1999), and Albert’s sculptures bridge this dialectic by pulling together these instantaneous moments into fixed locations, where an apparatus for the sensory experience of place is the only basis for delineating position. They bring forth the importance of the lived body as the root of spatialization and connecting objects that are otherwise relegated to isolated positions in Tschumi’s homogeneous space.

Parc de la Villette’s architecture of events is by no means mutually exclusive from the lived body. Rather, the conjunction of the Parc and the Sculptures Bachelard bring about a complementary awareness of place and the habitual body memory. The Parc presents a site that is bodiless, acting as the blank canvas against which visitors can discover the place through the body, and where their kinesthetic sensations gathered at multiple nodes can activate a particular perception of place. It presents to us a field of infinite possibilities where “if move my body

a certain way, then things will appear differently” (Casey, 1998). The architecture of pure becoming implies that the very movement of its users brings the place into being without the need for figural geometry. As Casey describes, the lived body possesses a “withness”, in that we are always with a body, and therefore are always within a place. The lived body is a kinesthetic form of basic self-awareness that the body assumes, and around which everything it encounters is arranged and felt – it is the *stabilitas loci*. For Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, it is through our lived body that we access the surrounding environs, and it is this corporeal intentionality, as opposed to intuitive, which displaces any separation between body and mind.

In fact, the individual agency that the Parc seeks to set in motion shifts the onus of place from the architecture and author’s design intentions to the user’s agency in coalescing fragmentary appearances into a coherent world. For example, Casey emphasizes the importance of walking in elevating the body to a privileged position that is at once “a pivot and a prism” of its immediate surroundings. Casey extends the notion of the embodied place by claiming that it only arises when “our body as geared into it [does not] remain static, it must be in motion.” Walking enacts the act of unifying myself before my surroundings, as my body must be drawn together and composed in a total organism, its kinesthetic flow articulated through separate organs that act in concert to unify a spatiotemporal ensemble I pass through. Yet, motion must be held in contrast to the stationary position, symbolized by the Sculptures. In other words, motion is “unthinkable without rest.” The static points of the sculptures act to root the lived body, and function as the initial and terminal states for motion, giving rise to the “absolute here”. By imposing a stationary state on the body, it enforces the body as a “means of ingress into a familiar setting”, which to Casey, brings



about knowledge of place by persistent and direct acquaintance with them, luring visitors from unfamiliar, transitory fragments to the familiar. Hence, the Parc and the Sculptures act in concert to produce knowledge, and memory, of place in the form of familiarity. Space is neither a collection of sculptural points nor an amalgamation of grid relations, but an inhabited realm expressed, oriented, and known by the body.

Moving from a phenomenological analysis to a closely interrelated psychoanalytic reading, the Sculptures Bachelard are an acknowledgement that gaze is a privileged modality that orders the world, as the focal point of relations between me and that which surrounds me, bringing the latter to a standstill by trapping it in one viewing portal. Described by Albert himself as the “core” of a space, they “extract, specify, and establish” in space Lacan’s perspective cone, only that we now have the option of jumping out of our spot as the viewing subject, and walk around the three elements of screen, subject, and picture. In some cases, take *Espace détaché*, (Fig. 5) the sculpture resembles a telescope, exploding into a series of frames ordered along a bar, as if an invisible hand were positioning the frames and sliding them into alignment. Call it a sectional model of Lacan’s scheme if you will. This sculpture adds to this sketch depth, and we can quite literally see the instrument which flattened our view, our gaze, in profile.

Moreover, given the origins of the Parc de la Villette in Tschumi’s architecture of Derridean deconstruction, we cannot escape a semiological reading of the Sculptures Bachelard as well. Famously said in *Learning from Las Vegas*, “spatial relationships are made by symbols more than forms,” and architecture “becomes a symbol in space rather than form in space.” As part of a larger landscape of signs, the function of the sculptures is also to be as visible as possible from multiple angles. By looking at his

other projects, we are clued in to Albert’s project of looking at one’s vision mechanism from without to achieve what he has termed a “global vision”, or the ability to simultaneously see an interior and exterior condition. In “A Ghost Cube” (fig. 4), Albert attempts to deconstruct the window as a “localized absence of matter” by “dislocating this absence, spreading it out”, leaving view corridors with sufficient material cues to trace planes and volumes. As eighteenth-century



Figure 4

painter William Hogarth observed, when we think of objects as a shell, “the imagination will naturally enter into the vacant space within this shell, and there at once, as from a center, view the whole form from within, ... as to retain the idea of the whole.” The mind completes our fragmentary mental images of the subject, rendering us into “masters of the meaning of every view of the object, as we walk around it, and view it from without.” The face of an opaque object facing the subject “is apt to occupy the mind alone, and the opposite, nay even every other part of it whatever, is left unthought of at that time.” In addition to fixing space occupied by the body, the Sculptures Bachelard also act to virtually split a discrete

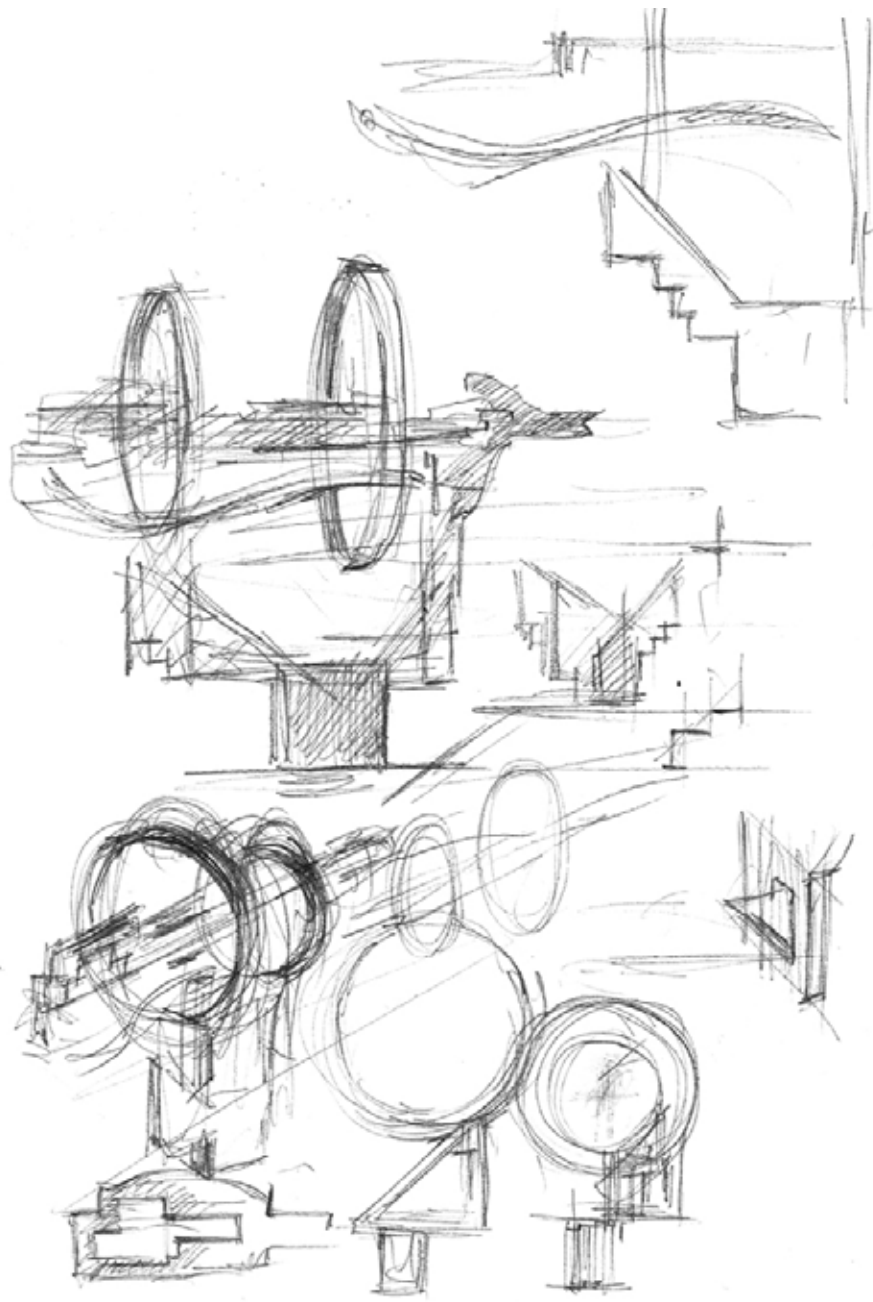


Figure 5



space of occupation and becomes a diagram where the knowing subject can achieve simultaneous vision of all the parts.

What remains to be resolved is the implication of the sculptures' actions on architecture: is architecture now the subject, or the screen? Perhaps the keyhole seeks to substitute for the absent "central field" in every picture, the "pupil in front of the gaze" which is reflected in the picture as a hole.

That the sculptures are positioned to also look back on one another implicates the superimposition of two or more perspective cones (fig. 3), again bearing semblance to Lacan's operational montage of overlaying two triangular systems to invert the status of the subject as a picture under the gaze. The sculptures are a spatialized reading of this operational montage: there is one position where I stand to look outwards, and another point from where I am looked at. Whether or not there is an actual person standing there, that the other keyhole is always present means that the subject is a picture under the gaze, and not simply the apex of the perspective cone. In Lacanian terms, it asserts that "I am a picture", and that "I am photo-graphed," under a gaze guarded by the artist, Albert. Lacan likens this to the turning inside-out of a glove finger, giving the illusion of a consciousness "seeing itself seeing itself", turning the structure of the gaze inside-out. It is perhaps no coincidence that the Sculptures Bachelard bear striking resemblance to keyholes, alluding to Sartre's imagery of a voyeur presenting himself through a keyhole, announcing the presence of others.

Furthermore, Albert exploits the nature of sculptures as geometric objects operating within the dimension of vision to impose a temporality onto the site. The visit of a building alone creates its own chronology of events, and when multiplied across various points and actors forms the basis of Tschumi's architecture of events. The follies for

instance invite us to move around them, momentarily making notes of what we have observed from different viewpoints, combining these angles into a singular image of an object. Albert's Anamorphosis destabilizes this static image of objects by creating opportunities of changing points of view as our body and the sun pass around the sculpture, and its image is projected onto surrounding pond (fig. 6). Like the anamorphic painting of Hans Holbein's Ambassadors, we are reminded that no matter where we are positioned, there is always another position we might occupy from where everything we now see would then become anamorphic. In the latter work, the viewer can only see the goods or the skull, but never at the same time. A viewer may only see the skull when he tries to look behind the painting, in which





Figure 6



case the rest of the painting disappears from the frame. Building on the voyeuristic implication of facing sculptures, there is always the position of an Other that is opaque to us.

However, unlike the anamorphosis of Hans Holbein's *Ambassadors*, where the image of a skull is distorted horizontally and vertically, Albert's anamorphic projection is animated and modified by the movement of the sun and the body, and the illusion of a circle in a triangle is formed by the coincidence of several non-coplanar surfaces. Lacan describes *Ambassadors* as a "trap for the gaze", and in one's search for the skull each of its possible radiating points will disappear, and the "subject is annihilated." This too applies to *Anamorphosis*, only that Albert renders the gaze as just another event in Tschumi's field of events, by associating its capture with a specific moment in time.



Though every spontaneous, contingent visit to the Parc de la Villette imposes its own chronology of events, and the memory we take away is composed of multiple fragmented spaces, it is through the lived body that these memories can become spatialized and tied to place. As spatial summaries, the *Sculptures Bachelard* invert the state of flux set in motion by the Parc's plan, fixing our and their own locations as points delineating a space that becomes familiar with time. This habitual body memory is not only the result of our corporeal selves projecting onto an objective place, but also instantiated by the movement of external bodies, consisting of others around us as well as natural elements.



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Figures

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 2. *Promenade cinématique*
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 4. *Ghost Cube*.
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