PHILOMÈNE LONGPRÉ

Philomène Longpré is an artist as well as a multisensory media researcher and SIP PhD candidate at Concordia University in Montreal. Since 1999, she has been conducting research on video screen's, specifically on how a screens materiality, interactivity, and spatiality can augment an individual's sensory, affective, and cognitive experience of a moving image. Longpré has developed a series of responsive systems that juxtapose virtual characters, video displays, digital interfaces, and abstract sounds in order to intensify the visitor's bodily experience. Her systems have been exhibited at digital arts festivals internationally, including VIA, EXIT, Nouveaux Monstres (France), Looptopia (USA-Hong Kong), Coprecupa (Italy), BUDi (South Korea), FILE (Brazil), and NEXUS (Thailand). Exhibitions have also taken place at contemporary art galleries and museums, namely the Parisian Laundry, DX Center, Oboro, Beverly Art Center, LIFE Museum, Saw Video, 101 Gallery, and the Society of Art and Technology in Montreal. Longpré holds a Master in Art and Technology Studies from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and has pursued her research on responsive membranes at the DXARTS Center in Seattle, Washington. She also obtained a BFA in Digital Arts from

Philomène Longpré, Octopus, 2003, Interactive Video System. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Concordia University in Montreal. In 2003, she received the Prize of Excellence from the Hexagram Institute for Research-Creation in Media Arts and Technologies. She was also accorded with the 2008 Octas Award in Digital Art, the 2005 Judith Hamel Award, and the 2004 Alfred Pinsky Medal. Longpré has taught in the Bachelors program in Art and Technology Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, as well as at the University of Washington in Seattle. Within the SIP PhD program at Concordia University, she is currently conducting research on video screens as matrixes of sensations: A Multisensory Approach to Responsive Video Membranes.

The Various Contrivances of Philomène Longpré
Alison Syme

Xia. In a darkened gallery space, on a luscious, luminous carnation ground, a velvety black charcoal bloom—like the dusky, polleny heart of a poppy—is both the setting and the trace of a captive's struggle. The caught creature's body is sheathed in pale pink; periodically a dark vermilion wing unfurls from the body or curls around it. In a state of rest, she appears to float weightlessly in her dusty den, but she springs into activity as the viewer approaches. Legs scrabble; head and arms jerk mechanically; hands reach out to either side as if to ward off something or someone sensed but unseen. Whether curled up in a fetal position, slowly turning, or writhing, the near-weightless being remains trapped in her flowery prison. The sounds of crickets, water, creaking wood, industry, and traffic accompany the life-sized, astonishingly three-dimensional figure's contortions; her identity oscillates between swirling dancer, suspended siren, and franticly fluttering bird or butterfly. Incalculable time passes as we watch. As she moves, the creature becomes more and more coated in black

Philomène Longpré, XIA, 2011, Interactive Video System. Photo: Barbour

Philomène Longpré, XIA, 2011, Video Still. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

disappearing under a velvet mask. At moments she vanishes, flickers out of sight; at others she freezes in strobe light. As though a microcosm enormously magnified, the figure in her radiant carnation snare seems like a close-up from a nature film. The tableau is beautiful and harrowing; lured into its floral world, we are captivated by this scene of capture.

The orchidaceous contrivance of Philomène Longpré's Xia is not anomalous in the artist's oeuvre: her other video systems also stage natural historical allegories. In Formica (Latin for ant), a tethered red figure writhes as more and more shiny lashes bind it in place. In Octopus, we encounter a grey-sheathed creature gradually ensnared by sticky, white, tentacular filaments. The figure is projected onto a mobile screen composed of dangling, transparent ribbons. As its struggle to free itself reaches a climax, the screen itself starts to move, swaying like seaweed in a strong current; creature and environment dance together as the figure shakes itself free only to become tangled once more. Most relevant to our understanding of Xia is Cereus, named after a large, night-blooming cactus (Selenicereus grandiflorus). The Cereus installation takes the form of a large but delicate transparent flower. Its petals slowly open

as visitors approach; they are also the membranes onto which the image of a miniature figure is projected. In its pellucid floral prison, this character is a mirror image of the viewer: Longpré has compared Cereus's visitors to the sphinx moths that are drawn to the nocturnal blossom.

Our susceptibility to sensorial wiles is part of the flowery nature of perception. The imaginative consequences of the "antecedents of human perception in the membranes of plants" have been elucidated by Elaine Scarry: she describes the way petals function imaginarily as figures of the "mental retina" on which images are formed for us. Cereus offers us such a floral model of perception, one in which the viewer's own capture is foregrounded. Drawn to the beauty of the strange blossom and riveted by the ephemeral figure seen on a fragile membrane, the viewer is caught, like a pollinator, by the flower's contrivances. Perception of the visual field inevitably entails recognition of that field as a trap, full of lures.

But Longpré's works are not pure nature poetry; on the contrary, her sophisticated, sensitive systems are technologically driven. Cereus's cable-stem holds up a cluster of sensitive artificial membranes at the heart of which is a laser projection device; the whole contraption is, in Longpré's description, "a robotic structure driven by pneumatic actuators." Reed switches activate the kinetic structure of Octopus. Xia incorporates infrared and ultrasonic sensors to detect the presence, position, and sounds of visitors, and the illusion of the fairy's three-dimensionality is achieved by layering HD video to create a holographic effect. The cyborg scenes Longpré orchestrates not only draw us into the visual field but also inculcate awareness of the mediated conditions of perception itself, of our immersion in an environment in which nature and artifice are inseparable.

Unsurprisingly, given Longpré's investment in both the nature and technologies of perception, the artist's conceits are medium-specific. In Octopus classic film is the snare: the greyish submarine figure is projected in black and white on the stripy screen, accompanied by the sounds of sped-up film reels and the clicks of projection. The grey-scale image suggests the muted coloration of the underwater realm and the temporal depths of old cinema, while the luminous filaments ensnaring the figure, like light spots on damaged celluloid, threaten not only the character but the narrative with break-up. In Xia the paper screen and lush charcoal are both vegetable substances. The carnation ground unfurls onto the gallery floor, tempting the viewer to step into the floral trap. The viewer's condition is like that of the projected figure who, flitting and wallowing in her powdery lair, is ethereal fairy and mud-painted native, Ariel and Caliban at once. Drawn to both the dream of flight and the gorgeous color, we are caught in nets of light and stained with our own desire.

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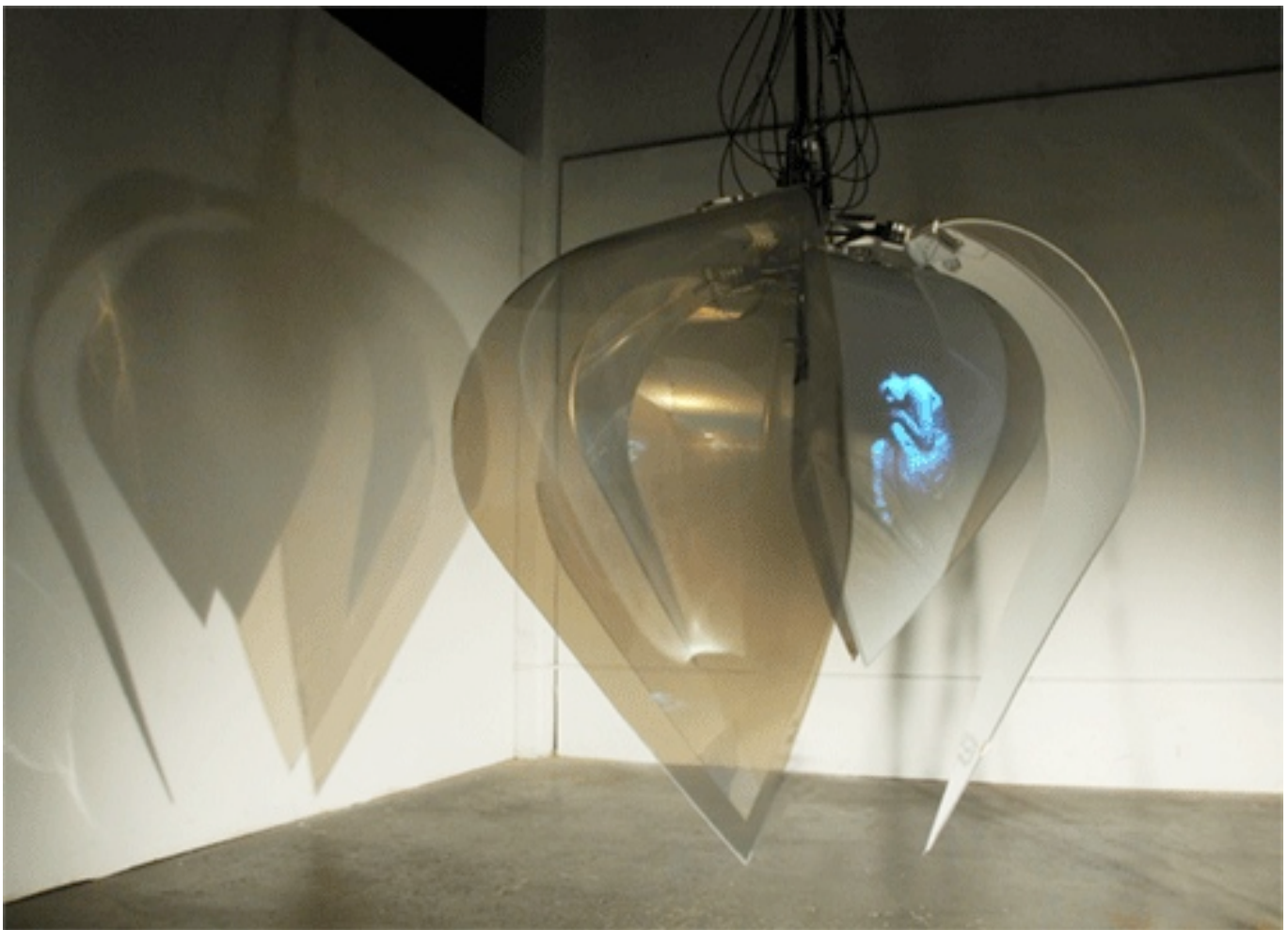
Philomène Longpré, Cereus, 2012, Interactive Video System. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Cereus: Queen of the Night
Guillaume Evrard

Over two hundred years ago, in his publication Species plantarum, the Swedish naturalist Linnaeus described for the first time the Selenicereus grandiflorus. Today, the artistic commitment of Philomène Longpré refreshes this spirit of humanity's proclivity to explore the unknown and the mysterious, by pushing the limits of the artistic, physical and visual.

The flower of the Selenicereus grandiflorus blossoms during the night: vanilla, sweet, and colorful. She becomes the queen; white, bright, orange, lemon, rose, attractive. Fresh and alive, thriving in the midst of thorns in the vast desert. The butterfly sphinx relays the victory of lightness upon gravity, drawn by the fragrance of the triumphant flower during its nocturnal flight. The ephemeral queen quickly succumbs to the force of attraction that connects us all to the ground that bears her presence.

The imperative constraint of the field of gravity on the human condition and its environment stimulates the philosophy behind Philomène Longpré's interactive video system Cereus. It renews the iconography of a theme that has preoccupied mankind since its earliest days,

from the Antique myth of Icarus to the dream of levitation by French artist Yves Klein.

In the 16th century, Peter Bruegel depicts the fall of Icarus as he sank into the sea, his wings plucked, while the farmer ploughs his field. This iconography teaches the lesson of modesty: gravity, unavoidable. Beyond the seasons — of humankind and the universe, fertile seed in the furrow, indifferent. The relationship between body and space, lightness and emptiness, fascinated Klein, who rushes into the void in 1960: weightlessness, thinkable.

The boldness of the mythological hero finds his equal in the technological ambition of Philomène, dealing with intricate computer programming and techniques of her video system, a conceptual labyrinth whose enigma she had to solve. The sail of Daedalus' boat, floating and vibrant, is mysteriously duplicated in the interactive membrane of Cereus.

Beyond the artistic and physical limits, Cereus explores the visual limitations of our contemporary society in a subversive spirit related to the Lettrism movement. Message and media re-appropriated, Cereus questions the role of the screen, its operation and its purpose: Is it just a showcase? For whom and why? Is it an interface to exchange, to

communicate? What is the content? The goal? Faithful to the Lettrist reassessment of cinematic established conventions, Philomène Longpré takes risks by redefining the answers

Philomène Longpré, Cereus, 2012, Video Still. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

to these questions.

As we enter each moment of this work in action – rather than on display, it is the spectator who must take risks in order to make the most out of the system.

Digital interface, virtual character, robotic video membranes and abstract sounds from field recordings of nature envelope the viewer completely, as they become unwitting actors by their own presence. The stems of the Selenicereus grandiflorus develop into mechanism, cables and tubes, while the petals become sensitive membrane. Reproducing the movement of the nocturnal curiosity of the sphinx butterfly, the spectators are visitors, attracted by the luminous night of Cereus.

The replication of the natural phenomenon enables the Cereus system to touch the limits of the visual experience. The sphinx sees the flower as taking up ownership and behaves in ways to transform its existence. The viewer sees the technical interfaces necessary for the robotic system to function and interferes in its development: the work blooms without a hitch and the precise distinction between its being and the spectator disappears beyond the sensitive membrane to involve the visitor in its organic development.

As the painters of the Renaissance and their successors were searching techniques to overcome their condition and transcend the representational system at their disposal, as Klein was studying the saturation of the color blue to achieve the representation of pure space, Philomène Longpré broadens the scope of possibilities. After the wall, panel, canvas, cinema screens and television, her system could be the origin of a new medium. It offers a multi-sensory experience based on the specific use of a new sensitive membrane that responds to movements of a virtual character as well as

the visitors through a complex set of sensors and reactive pistons meticulously positioned. Cereus defies the constraints of the terrestrial gravity field, when it occurs, between heaven and earth, between life and death, between light and darkness.

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Power of Illusion – Illusion of Power?

Designed in Chicago, the installation Illusio originates from the environment of the Midwest capital city and its perpendicular grid characteristic of modern urbanism. Between Lake Michigan and Chicago River, the passer-by appropriates the space of the street, the avenue and the park. Or would it be that the skyscrapers' silhouette and the rigorous delineation of the blocks dictate the passer-by's behavior and which way to go? Passer-by, environment, image, movement: the interactive video system Illusio draws its patterns from everyday life, our everyday life.

Passer-by, a person who goes by, who happens to pass, on foot. In the middle of the metropolis, in the dark, the passer-by comes to meet up with Illusio, another (kind of) passer-by projected through a suspended punched acrylic structure. The visitor prompts various atmospheres in which the virtual character develops amidst a multicolored infusion. This character is captive. From real to virtual, the meeting seems limited, if not impossible. None the less, as a fruit of this encounter, it reacts to every change in its environment which the passer-by motivates by entering the enclosed space. Infrared and ultrasound sensors allow the beginning of a communication. Once within the volume included in the interactive video system, the passer-by becomes a spectator and then swiftly an actor in a unique relation with Illusio. Like two strangers passing each other on the street, the visual interaction between the spectator and the character awakens memories, feelings, thoughts and emotions.

Environment: physical elements and phenomena. In the urban environment, in the 1960s, Kevin Lynch already drew our attention towards the necessity for our well-being of being able to read the urban space from our everyday life viewpoint. Power of illusion of being able to understand an urban setting which others have gone all over, others have designed. Illusion of power within a predetermined grid, where voids and fills make their presence felt without any possibility to avoid them, only to go round them. Power of illusion to get in contact with Illusio. The infrared and ultrasound sensors make spectator and video system commune with each other. The illusion of communication arises from the digital interactivity. Illusion of being able to influence the machine within its sensorial extensions. Therefore, Illusio strongly

questions the relation between the spectator and its immediate environment, their relation to surrounding images, which they sometimes prompt, either intentionally or involuntarily. Very close and distant, the buzz of the metropolis, changing, moving, wraps up the impromptu encounter.

Image: perceptible representation of an object. Within Illusio, the image is obviously central, projected from the computer core in the dark towards the white screen via the acrylic screen. The accumulation of screens suggests the very tangible existence of skyscrapers' verticals, sometimes opaque and absorbent, sometimes shiny and reflective. Is the representation loyal to the truth or a distorted reflection of the reality? The very making of the image of Illusio adds up the diagonal to verticals: diverging diagonals of the light beam breaking through the dark, diagonal of the gaze which scans the interactive system and follows its transformations, the same diagonal of the passer-by who attempts to make sense of their environment. In The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau emphasizes the importance of the passer-by's viewpoint in the urban environment. In particular, a distinction emerges between two diagonals, mirrored if not conflicting: the viewpoint from the street, limited, constrained, restrained, which can only with difficulty catch sight of the skyscrapers' top; and the viewpoint from the top of skyscrapers, enlarged, open, empowering, which can scan the townscape and make sense of its organization. These viewpoints entail a different relation to power while they also involve the production of a different image of a single physical environment.

Movement: displacement in relation to an immobile point. In the grid of urban roads, fixed points are numerous. In the interactive video system Illusio, infrared and ultrasound sensors and the projection system provide in their own way a group of given points which the spectator has to take into account – or decide to ignore – so that the system reacts to their movements. Is it about the loyal and perfect replication of a causal link which really exists in everyday life? Returning to the analysis de Certeau develops, the movement is so to say the strength of the weak, at the same time a confession of weakness within the symbolic and physical constraints of the environment, and acknowledgement of a potential strength with the capacity to appropriate the environment in circumstances and towards ends which were not thought of at the time of its design. Who is genuinely constrained? The character included within the video system or the spectator surrounded by the network of sensors?

Passer-by, environment, image, movement: illusion of power or power of illusion?
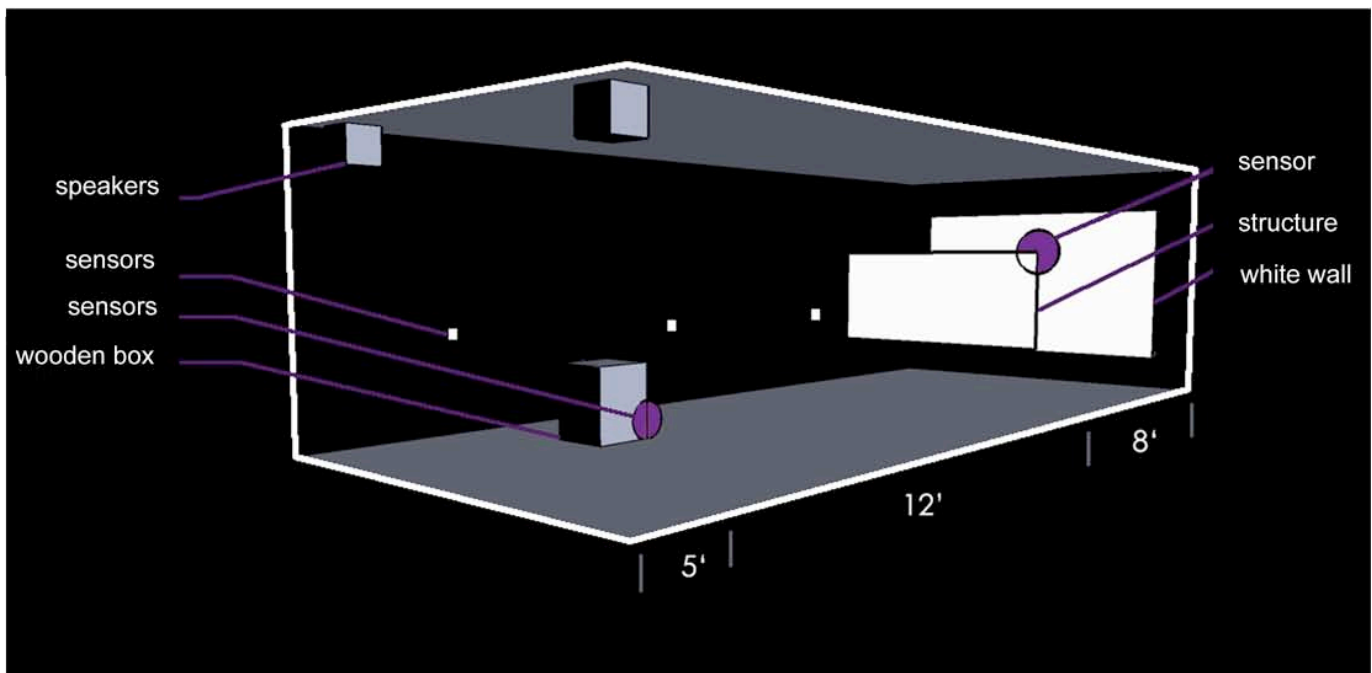
Philomène Longpré, Illusio, 2006, Technical File
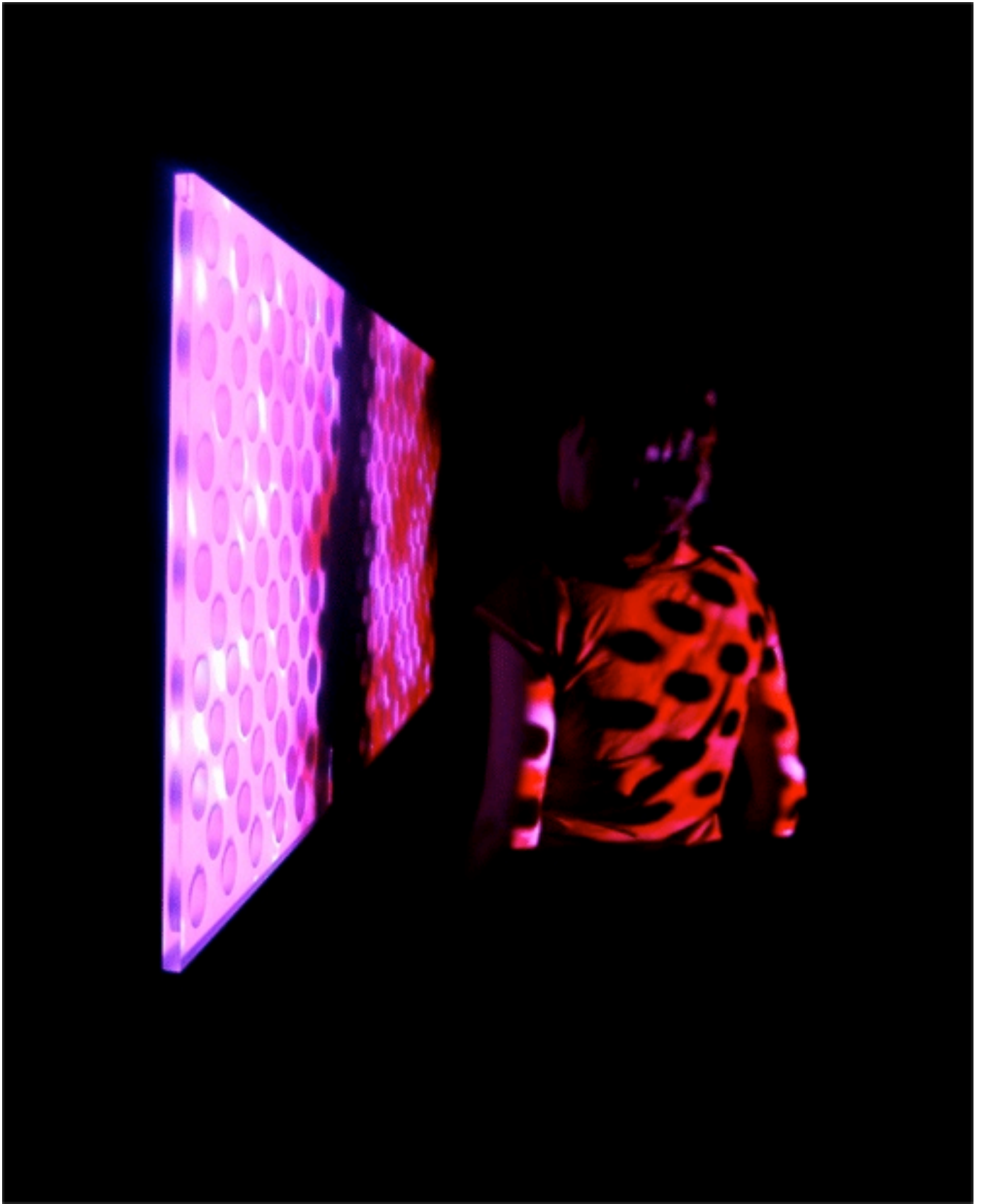
Philomène Longpré, Illusio, 2006, Interactive Video System. Photo: Claudio Pino