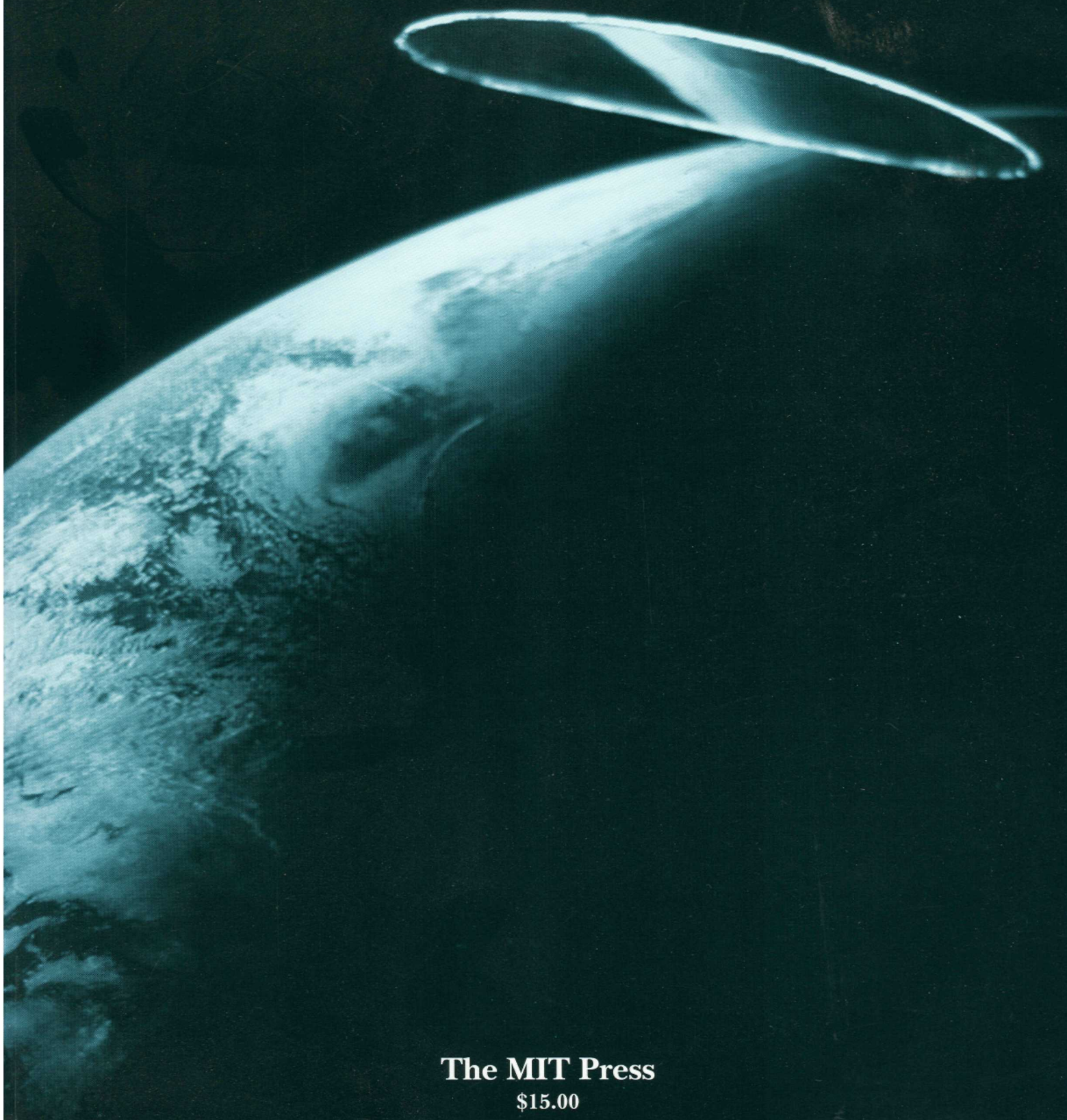


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WEB SITE

SHADOW SERVER

by Ken Goldberg. <http://taylor.ieor.berkeley.edu/>

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When one reaches the first page of the Shadow Server web site, one gets this user's guide:

The apparatus is housed in a light-proof box that contains physical objects, some of which move of their own accord within the apparatus. Viewers can interact with these objects via buttons. Viewers can select any combination of five buttons and then Cast a Shadow, which activates a combination of lighting devices and returns a digital snapshot of the resulting shadow. Each combination of buttons produces different lighting conditions. Certain random combinations will provide clues which lead to a mysterious Sixth button. The Sixth button illuminates hidden secrets in an alcove of the apparatus . . .

The title says this is a "server" and not a site, and this is exactly what it is: something which delivers things to the user. By following the instructions for Shadow Server, one receives images of the shadows of unidentifiable objects.

This work is remarkable in at least three aspects: its singularity among the art projects and sites on the Web, its

statement about the web and about telepresence, and its aesthetic qualities. Shadow Server goes against current trends in web design: there are no flashy images, no Java applets, no little animations all over the pages. It is not a participatory work where the users are invited to input text, images, sound and profound inner thoughts, it has no links and the user does not get lost in a rhizomatic hyperstructure. It is in black-and-white and there is basically not much to see and very little to do. However (or maybe because of this), the site is tremendously powerful and keeps the user glued to the computer screen for hours.

This work strongly questions the tendency of the past few years in electronic art, which has been to "make visible the invisible." Shadow Server makes that which is usually visible invisible and shows the user only the shadow of the object. The "thing" is hidden, the "real" objects are no longer available. The shadows themselves become interesting and relevant, conveying a certain kind of information about the "thing." One has no way to get information about the objects themselves and the shadows have become the "thing." What do users usually get on the Web, or what do they think they get? The "things," or only their "shadows"? This work draws attention to the belief that what is put online is the "truth." Is Shadow Server really working as it says, with real objects that one lights in a different way, according to combinations of different buttons, or is it just a databank of randomly provided images? How does one know that one is really telepresent in the room of the apparatus? One does not know. But, interestingly enough, it is not just a matter of trust but the strong suspicion that faking a telepresence installation would require more time and much more complicated work. In some cases, as in this one, it would make no difference because the installation has achieved one of its goals, which is to raise issues about belief in what we see and what we receive through the remote media of communication and information-delivery systems.

But what makes us return again and again to the Shadow Server are its aesthetic qualities and its relations to philosophy and art-history. We cannot help but think of Plato and his allegory of the cave. Ken Goldberg, in a kind of reversal of Plato's situation, demonstrates here that the shadows are as important,

if not more important than the objects and he strengthens the twentieth-century notion of the disappearance of objects in art.

From an art-history point of view, the images on the Shadow Server resemble Moholy-Nagy photograms, capturing light in a delicate and subtle way and bringing it to the computer screen. These images re-introduce contemplation, freezing light and time in a fragile balance in a medium where flow and movement are the norm. After a short while, one no longer wonders about the nature of the objects behind the shadows, or about what would bring the "Sixth button." One just enjoys the complexity and simplicity of the shadows, getting lost in their depth. The computer screen has become pure light, a shadow.