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Peep-show boxes were first made in the late 1400's by Leon Battista Alberti, who, in the process of studying optics wanted to create an illusion of a three-dimensional space with a two-dimensional surface. Alberti's sketches for the boxes existed for a long time but unfortunately no actual models survive. In the 17th century as more people began to have more time for leisure and entertainment, more boxes were built and made available to a wider audience. Traveling musicians and artists began including these in their repertoires: through the small peep hole ordinary people who might otherwise never have seen the ocean, or mountains, or a distant city or a jungle could for a small price transport themselves to a wonderful far-away place, where they were suddenly free to explore this new world alone, and in whichever way their imagination wanted.



A few surviving ones are in Vienna – feature fancy balls and royal parties – events to

which most people would not have had access, but could experience them through the little viewfinder.



Peep show boxes were pre-cursors to many visual systems we had and still have in our lives. One, would be the magic lantern. The shadow art of a focused light beam was combined with the peep-show box to create the pre-cursors to a movie projector, and, eventually, the television, and more recently, many aspects of the personal computer and all the small personal devices we use for communication, investigation, and entertainment.

I believe that human beings have an insatiable hunger to peep and look and investigate, and imagine whatever information was included in our field of view. The parts that we superimpose onto the viewing experience are deep inside us, are there

because of our experiences, our thoughts, or knowledge. As we explore, we create an internal map, more accurately known as a mental map, which connects the information in the world we are seeing with the information already inside us. The act of mapping allows us to explore a new part of ourselves, and our world.

There is a “space”. That space is everything that makes up the real and the imaginary of our world. We perceive the “space” through observation – I use the word associated with sight, but lets allow for observation through any or all of the five senses. As we observe, we try to make sense of that which surrounds us, and that which we are part of. We do this, among other means, by externally and internally mapping the sensory input from our experiences. We also map our relationship to the world and others that surround us. As we map our personal experiences, we create new “space”. It is different but related to the original space we analyzed to gather initial data for the mapmaking.

The process as I see it is as follows:

[Being in a “space”] → Observation → Mapping → Making a new a “space”

(hypothetically there then exists the possibility of observing and mapping the “new space” – therefore creating a meta-new space, and/or connecting the new space to the original space).

While the initial diagram might sees simplistic, it acquires many levels of complexity

when viewed from the perspective of artists/theoreticians working with various technologies of visualization. The nature of the inquiry is such that it is not simply aesthetic, philosophical or scientific; it is scattered, rhizomatic, and essentially unpredictable. While the data considered might be scientific, the method is by no means such.

In this paper I will examine the process and details of the sequence described above – the ultimate goal of which, I argue, is to place ourselves on the infinite, multi-dimensional plane of our present reality, or simply put, make meaning of our lives while we are here and using the various combinations of technology and philosophy we have at our disposal. I discuss a number of artists working with such things as geography, surveillance, locative media, digital arts, and other forms of new media. One artist I discuss in greater detail is Jordan Crandall – whose work analyzes the exchanges between people in his environment and defines the concept he introduces and develops in his work “Showing”, of a “conductive”. He also records the exchanges and perceptions in personal hand-drawn diagrams, and digital photographs. The other artist is Trevor Paglen, who re-defines geography by combining traditional definitions with contemporary reality as well as makes a deeper inquiry into the meaning of space.

1. Observation

It is winter in Moscow, and the windows are covered with a thick layer of lacy frost.

Sitting on the windowsill, I take a small coin, blow on it, and press it against the glass. I

learned this trick from Andersen's fairy tale, *The Snow Queen*. In a few seconds a tiny hole is formed. A tiny peep-hole. I can see the dark street below now. It is close to the New Year and the building across the street has a running row of lights just below the roof. Bundled people walk through the large yard in big fur hats. Adults pull their children in sleighs through the snowy sidewalks. Behind me my grandmother is cooking something and the kitchen is filled with steam and flavor. I can feel the life behind my back, but I have traveled through the hole outside. Maybe I am flying with the dancing snowflakes. Maybe I am running across the tightrope of light. I am very much alone, yet a part of the world. It is a paradox I slowly become aware of, but at the age of five it does not seem so bad to be alone. The world is my home.

The ways of looking, surveying, watching, and examining, as well as having those acts performed back in the direction of the subject are numerous and very complicated. One important concept to remember when considering observation is that of the Gaze. The French philosopher Jacques Lacan coined the term in the 1950's and it describes the power advantage of the "looker" over the "looked upon". The idea of the gaze has been used in various philosophical and social discourses, and many of the artists I discuss or mention in this paper use the gaze as a basic principle of their theory and final creative product. The other concept is that of surveillance. While the act of surveillance is often practically similar to the act of looking in other ways, it is also unique in many ways. Surveillance art, made possible through the versatile technology addresses the many issues of power, exposure, invasiveness, information exchange, and privacy that are becoming increasingly volatile in our world in interconnectedness through media. At the

same time both the gaze, and surveillance offer numerous opportunities to see interaction in a non-oppressive, and non hierarchical way, as all the players in this game have equal power and ability to operate in multiple directions.

An artist who addresses surveillance from various perspectives is Jordan Crandall. Crandall, a true renaissance player of contemporary reality, engages in what I call *liquid philosophy*; his work is a little bit of everything – video, photography, installation, science, technology, literature, poetry, psychology and sociology. While he is at the center of his work, the different flares and arms that extend from his process do not necessarily connect or mesh with each other – the bodies of work are like solar clusters that swirl in their own areas of the universe. Lev Manovich , media critic, critiques Crandall's work:

*“Between machine vision and a database, between art world, critical theory and new media, between a screen and a mobile vehicle, between art practice, writing and net-dialog, between the network and the cinematic, between theory and visual poetry -- Jordan Crandall's works strike at the most critical conceptual knots of our computer culture.”*¹

One body of work by Crandall that addresses the issues of surveillance and observation of inner and outer worlds, is called *Showing*². *Showing*, like his other works is comprised of many parts. The first part is a film script in six parts (the work is still in progress, so the film, named *Heat*, is yet to be shot). The second part is a series of first-person narratives describing personal encounters and the social and erotic manifestations

¹ Review of Crandall’s work by Lev Manovich, Professor at UCSD, quoted on jordancrandall.com

² Jordan Crandall. *Showing*. Art Journal

of those encounters. The encounters take place in intimate, private settings, and solely with the subject matter create an atmosphere of invasion of personal space – the readings bring us into situations to which strangers are usually not invited, unless for a fee. The third part is a long definition of the concept of a “conductive”. The conductive is a sort of mechanism that allows for “things to happen”: “a signal conduit, erotically charged, that exists somewhere between action and thing.”³ There is another part to this work, on the artist’s website, that further describes and defines various aspects of it. I suspect, when the work is complete, the discourse with other artists and critics will enter the body of work as another component.

The personal narrative component of *Showing* is highly erotic. I would argue that one reason for this, in the context of surveillance art, is that through his writing Crandall is showing us something we are not really meant to see, but have exposure to all the time through the possibilities presented by the internet and DIY (do it yourself) technologies. Crandall explores the “ambiguous zone between autonomous agency and vital or obsessional compulsion as they emerge in the use of networked devices he calls “vehicles” [the “conductive” being one of those]⁴. Surveillance, in Crandall’s world, is a two-way mechanism, in which the watcher, and the watched, play equally important parts, and neither one holds more power than the other;

In our cultural landscape of blogs, webcams, profiles, live journals, and lifecasting, the intimate lives of everyday people are on parade for all to see. One could say that a new culture of erotic exposure

³ *Showing*, p.73

⁴ Brian Holmes, “Jordan Crandall: Driving Images”, *Parachute* No.100, pp. 56-69

and display is on the ascendance, fueled by the impulse to reveal the self in ever-higher degrees of definition and transmission, enabled by DIY media technologies. In many ways this culture would seem to be less a representational than a presentational one, where we are compelled to solicit the attention of others, act for unseen eyes, and develop new forms of connective intensity -- as if this were somehow the very condition of our continued existence, the marker of our worth.⁵

Crandall writes that the ongoing assimilation to new media technologies, the distinctions between watching and being watched eventually break down, or as another critic, Margaret Morse wrote: “what characterizes [Crandall’s] work as a whole is it’s grand human scale and its attention phenomenologies and subjective human experience”.⁶

The process of (however subjective) observation and, I would argue, categorization of “all things human” – at the present moment – into a system (however amorphous and disjointed) is that of mapping. Crandall does his own mapping. In these images he traces the alleged path our eye makes while examining something that we see, and through the diagram connects it to the next level of inquiry:

⁵ jordancrandall.com/showing

⁶ Margaret Morse, quotes on jordancrandall.com



Jordan Crandall. Showing. 2008

2. Mapping

I am at the door of my Moscow apartment. I stand at the door, looking down the corridor one last time. I know that I am leaving forever. At the airport I look at my family who is staying behind one last time. As I watch them, they move back in time and space, obscured but a new map that is being drawn. We travel through new places, to new places, exploring, starting new. Sadness pulls me back, like silk thread, unwound from a worm. Sticky, barely visible, but strong. The strings of sadness make my web, my parallels and meridians. Encounters build continents, islands. Earthquakes change boundaries. Is every man an island? What about a ten year old girl?

“Mapping is intersubjective communication – the visualization or representation of information. The term “map” applies both to a clear representation and to the act of

analysis required to make such a representation.”⁷ This is a quote from s 2004 article *Mapping the Database* that explores emergent systems as an aesthetic process– where categories and data structures arise from the “bottom us” through collective [rhizomatic] usage. The article argues that that to “accurately map social and cultural experience requires infrastructures and interfaces that facilitate intersubjective communication, favor dialogue over monologue, and allow representations and interpretations to emerge and evolve – an infrastructure like a database”.⁸

These statements accurately describe the methodology used by many media artists. If we consider Crandall, his ways of perceiving, recording, organizing and cataloguing his experiences with the various aspects of the world around and within him, allow for the evolutionary process described above. In “Showing” he studies the social and cultural experiences he encounters, maps them into his various writings, diagrams and schematics, allowing them to evolve. In addition, his work, though firmly individualistic, is nevertheless a dialogue – with himself, with the media, with countless collaborators and correspondents over the internet, and with the subjects he studies – as her is studying himself and the workings of the world.

The other projects described in *Mapping the Database* follow a similar, even is simpler algorithm. One of the projects is called “Subtract the Sky”⁹. To “subtract the sky is an astronomical method for observing stars by eliminating the light from the ones they do not want to see. The project used the title as a metaphor for a process of collecting, authorizing and contributing data. The idea behind the project was to create a

⁷ Sharon Daniel and Karen O’Rourke. *Mapping the Database: Trajectories and Perspectives*. Leonardo, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2004. pp 286 – 296.

⁸ *Mapping the Database*, p. 287

⁹ *Mapping the Database*, p.288

collaborative system for people to build communities based on very personal aspects of their lives, see what connects and unites them, but still retain a high level of autonomy and individual expression. The project accomplished this through using cartographic software that used non-cartographic input from people to create maps that were made up completely original and unprecedented material. While technically maps, these maps elegantly addressed the individual situational experiences of the participants through new media technology, while making it easily accessible to everyone, and making the dialogue about the results as much a part of the project as the project itself.

The idea of creating dialogue and discourse about the results of the projects and revelations made possible by new media, as well as the fact that artists are multitasking as makers, thinkers and critics simultaneously, also creates a new space , a new dimension where all this is taking place. I will discuss this new space in the next section.

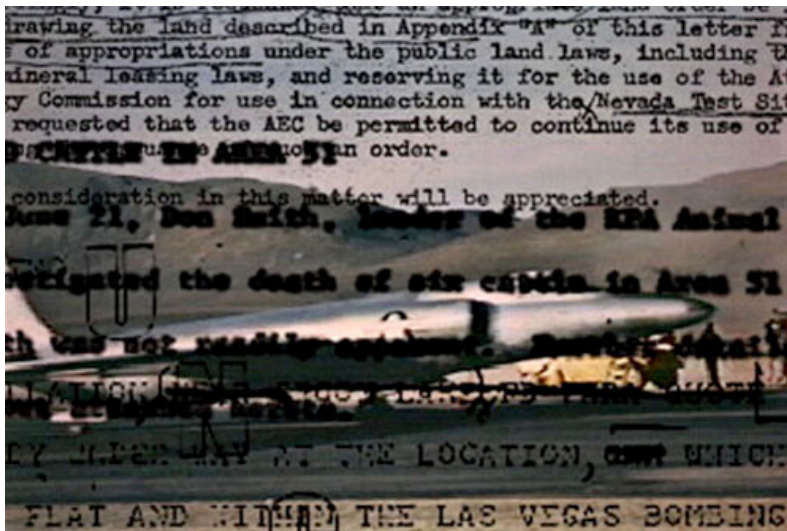
3. Creating Space

The space is inside a box. In order to see it, you have to close one eye, block the light on two sides with your hands, and peep in through a small hole. I look inside a large, beautifully illustrated book on the history of peep shows. I read the words: *Look around the room. Now leave the room, close the door, and look through the keyhole. See how dramatically the view of the room changes. The manipulation of space is very ancient.*¹⁰ I wonder how long it has been since I have seen a real keyhole. How long has it been since keys were round and key holes were possible to look through? There are peepholes on doors, but they are meant to be looked through, there is nothing stealthy or magical about

¹⁰ Richard Balzer. *Peepshows A Visual History* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1998), p.10

the experience. Is the computer screen the new keyhole? Are we peeking though to see something that is meant to be hidden, or are we passive spectators to a show ?

In his article *Experimental geography: from Cultural Production to the Production of Space*¹¹, Trevor Paglen makes an original and exciting argument: space is an infinite entity that gets produced through various means, and is not at all limited to the physical world. Of course, from the perspective of physics, there is nothing new or original about that – we all know that as the universe expands new space gets created that was not there before – but it is still something that boggles the mind. Paglen does not discuss astrophysics in his paper however, he is a geographer – and his work, though firmly in



Trevor Paglen. *The Secret Bases: Exploring the Pentagon's "Black World"* 2005.

¹¹ Trevor Paglen, "Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space" in *Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography, and Urbanism* by Nato Thompson and Independent Curators International, Melville House, 2009.

the realm of new media, has a geographer's perspective.

Paglen calls the cartographic phenomenon of contemporary time a renaissance. Through various online mapping applications people are able to explore the space that is created through satellite imagery, software, and personal computing. I would have to describe the resulting experience of millions of people exploring the space created through these technologies as very much intersubjective – each user (or “explorer” explores the same space, using the same technology, but the combined efforts of all the participants produce a completely new and unexplored experience. “...the production of space says that humans create the world around them and that humans, are in turn, created by the world around them. In other words, the human condition is characterized by the feedback loop between human activity and our material surroundings. In this view, space is not a container for human activities to take place within, but is actively “produced” through human activity”¹². Since in this human activity in question is that of art making, Paglin suggests re-phrasing the question – instead of asking What is art? he asks How is art? and thus re-frames the question in terms of special practice.

I suggest that the question can even be asked in terms of *Where is art?* Given the inevitable integration of new media, which, in many ways, is almost exclusively covered by locative media. This view is in some way represented by various other artists and theoreticians. In the article *Locative Arts*, Drew Hemment argues that “all art engages in location to some degree, even if just in the way that that it responds to the space created by the gallery and the frame” but that various “...satellite mapping technologies have caught the attention of...artists and DIY technologists who are exploring the use of [the

¹² Experimental Geography, p. 3

technologies] for user-led mapping, social networking, and artistic interventions in which the fabric of the urban environment and the contours of the earth become a “canvas”.¹³

Following Paglen’s arguments, I would say that this “canvas” itself becomes is a new world to be explored, and, if we were to apply a segment of Crandall’s definition of the “conductive” – as a force that allows for this sort of multi – dimensional transformation to occur - it applies here as well: “the conductive harbors compositional forces and delineations. It sends forth a dynamic form. It contains organizational principles and procedures, which are able to influence the timing, movement, and composition of actors (human and nonhuman), to the extent that special, social, and somatic effects are generated, however illusory or fleeting”¹⁴.

Conclusion.

I am building a peep show box. I don’t recall ever seeing one, except for Marcel Duchamp’s *Etant Donne’s* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, but that’s more of an installation than peep-show box anyway. I am not sure where the knowledge of this art form comes from inside of me – but the process is almost intuitive, the wonderment and magic of peeping through a little hole and explore the vast unknown is almost unbearable. The box I am building is a map of my world, a self-portrait, a window into my life, my memories, and my history. It is also a comment on mankind; for three hundred years the Peep show – either traveling or stationary was at the center of

¹³ Drew Hemment. “*Locative Arts*”. Leonardo, Vol. 39, No.4, pp. 348 – 355, 2006

¹⁴ Showing, p. 73

entertainment of the masses. It lead to the development of entertainment technologies and practices we use today: (Edison’s first movie machine was in a box, before he decide to project the image into the wall). I am curious where I as an artist, and we as a people will go next – I want to be a part of the future and a part of the past. I want to connect time through the most predominant human traits – curiosity, a desire for discovery, and a search for knowledge.

In the book *The Peep Diaries* by social critic Hal Niedzviecki, an argument is made that we are now living in the historically unprecedented time of “peep culture” - when all different kinds of information is made available to us and about us, and there is a hysterical frenzy that gets created in the process of selling, buying and trading useless and often harmful material about ourselves, our neighbors, celebrities or random people in the street. In discussion of reality TV (a social phenomenon, arguably influenced and determined by much of the same DIY technology as new media art, the book presents as an echo on the philosophical and aesthetic discourse of Crandall; Nobody goes on reality TV or talk television to be reticent about their emotions. We want [people] to spill their guts, and they want to spill their guts. That’s not voyeurism. That’s Peep culture, a culture in which the desire to be watched and to watch others being watched pervades almost everything we do¹⁵

In other words a new world, a new space, which also encompasses the “art space” is being created right now, a new geography is being applied to the new space by the

¹⁵ Hal Niedzviecki. *Peep Culture: How We’re learning to Love Watching Ourselves and Our Neighbors* (City Lights Books, San Francisco, 2009), p. 111.

contemporary explorers on the intersection of many different disciplines. It is an interesting place, but the space is still dark and unknown, the new territory takes shape faster than the cartographers can map it.

I would like to end with a few thoughts from an article on Spatial Violence by Anthony Vilder. Vilder writes: Space in contemporary discourse is in lived experience, has taken on an almost palpable existence. Its contents, boundaries and geographies are called up to stand in for all the contested realms of identity, from the national to the ethnic; its hollows and voids are occupied by bodies that replicate internally the external conditions of political and social struggle. Techniques of special occupation, of territorial mapping, of invasion and surveillance are seen as the instruments of social and individual control.¹⁶

The geography of the space created by the social reality and artistic influence is volatile and vulnerable. As we can see there are different opinions and the status quo as well as the future; the artists investigate and try to understand, the social critics hope for best, and argue that the current developments are “uniquely human and feed our capacity to care without needing to know why”¹⁷ and yet other warn of violence, vulnerability, and possible danger of the new space we are creating. I am curious to peep into the future and see what happens.

¹⁶ Anthony Vilder. *Spatial Violence*. Assemblage, No. 20, April 1993, p.84-85.

¹⁷ Peep Culture, p. 278

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