Overlapping Environments Made by Moving through Buildings and Paragraphs

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The surface glows, incandescent, the radiance of both what is and isn't.

The floodlit playing field reversed, internally dented and filled, rawlplugged, hammered, drilled, stained on the inside, stained with breath on the outside, upon the treasured cursor, neither inside nor out. Its movements, the violent predatorial shift from one area to the next, one click, one zoom, one pan out. A rectangular semi-opaque window tracing the surface, one word or one set of words, one pavement, one step, one step to the next. A body walking through this space of horizontal surfaces, searches but is restricted by its own limits. Those limits confront the limits of planning shaped by economics and the capability of the virtual, camouflaged by the shadow of councils, obstructed by bollards, so to speak. A body walking in accordance with town planning and the movement of numbers, neither inside nor out.

The issue at stake with surveying the environment when our environment is both what we are physically walking within as well as 'a space of information, or rather (…) a field of shifting data that lacked qualities of both time and space', where some part of our experience plays out in dataplasms, are the overlaps and the polyphony that result from the clash between the material and the image.[1] As the (East Jerusa-

1.
Seth Price, Fuck Seth Price, a Novel, Leopard: New York, 2015, p48/9

lem born) New York Based artist Seth Price so succinctly put it in his novel *Fuck Seth Price* - 'The allure was clear: didn't most people feel as if they, too, had passed through a magical portal, that as much as they were obviously still composed of flesh and blood they were also now made of numbers.'[2] The idea of a magical portal that transforms us into numbers and lets us pass into a numerical world establishes a new imagination of the environment virtual and real. As numbers we share a material ground with the data environment. We are composed of the same mathematical flesh. This articulates a new form of dematerialisation that is not the dematerialisation of something, but is embodied, and includes our own movements and needs. In the parity of numerical bodies in a numerical world we too are reduced to the quantity of information required to serve the function of the environment.

Moving within virtual environments and moving things virtually within this environment is today the most valued and financially lucrative activity, whereas moving something bodily in real space is the least valued and least paid activity. Price states that art involves both: digging ditches and managing symbols; physical labour and wielding abstract signs. There is ditch digging, or physically walking through a street, but it also almost simultaneously *means* something virtually, through what Price terms a 'magic disavowal that granted power over our bodies to unseen and immaterial forces.'[3] The material is always already an immaterial image that means something more, and is understood within the environment that is now embodied as numbers and as flesh, a space of information and tangible things - a field of shifting data.

2.
ibid., p51
3.
ibid., p49

We are made of numbers.
We dematerialise with the environment.

To determine direction requires a certain amount of fidgeting, small nervous fingertip movements on the keyboard, moments of feeling about for things upon the desktop. This attentive restlessness is acted out by fingers and retinal activity, moving about to find a direction, not necessarily left or right, forward or back, but a *sense* of direction, even when one goes around in circles of numbers. This sense of direction within the circular, lacking qualities of both space and time, is initiated through idle fidgeting, initiated through the body rooted, the fingers searching. The body (eventually or maybe quickly depending on the loft of one's panic, its trajectory and distance) leads the way to where it must go, blind as such, a worm almost, a finger limited by a series of surfaces. For it is after all a journey of the partially sighted. And sound alone can lead you astray only until you can see no more.

The knowledge of a place is ascertained from small fragments of information felt, found on the surface, small parcels or particles to be discovered through attentiveness to the smooth environment. Touch one surface, nudge it with your elbow, budge it with your shoulder, kick it with your summer shoes and edge round it, impenetrable as it stands it grants a sense of clarity: it provides the outline of the map, the measurability of space, and the certainty of where you are within it.

But remove one surface and you have another. The digital surface proliferates in horizontal networks. It is a discourse written on the white paper of the architect as origamist: folding and unfolding, making new shapes with every turn. It is a small street scene drawn at school, and it is a live sketch imbued with a desire for status and wanting to insert itself into the pages of a book. It is removed from the printer, sent

via email and seen at the other end on a screen. But it always remains a surface, a sheet of paper folded by algorithms and the maths of its surface span. It the highest form of labour - the immaterial shifting of virtual stuff along horizontal lines - derivative trading, while the lowest paid, lowest form of labour is digging, the bodily moving of the real stuff of earth. Art represents both physical labour and wields abstract symbols; a sense of surface work and depth. Depth and work, work that builds and digs holes: digging vertically down into the material to uncover slices of meaning and forms of knowledge that press as awkward objects against the flow of the surface. Walking with my feet while breathing is digging, digging my heals into my own flesh; to be as obstacle unwilling to serve the function of the environment, its economy of easy flow of virtual goods, reduced to the quantity of information required, and instead I put the sound of feet and breath, the voice and song as 'counter-productive' mobility and abundant non-economy in its way. Sound moves unseen but not as numbers. It creates not the JPEG but the stream of its own materiality that cannot be reduced to the necessity of something else, but is inexhaustibly itself. It does not progress along the track of the network but produces vertical lines into a groundless depth. It is like the Hydra, the mythological water monster that rises from the deep of the Lake of Lerna, regenerating continually and building an infinite body of vertical lines. These vertical lines belie the certainty of a shared ground, established through the view from above by Google Maps and digital drone images that have replaced the horizontal perspective and its singular point of view, but which now pretend a plural perspective on a singular ground.

The answer is simple, many of the aerial views, 3-D nose dives, Google Maps, and surveillance panoramas do not actually portray a stable ground. Instead they create the supposition that it exists in the first place. Retroactively, this virtual ground creates a perspective of overview and surveillance for a distanced superior spectator safely floating up in the air.[4]

Hito Steyerl goes on to suggest that just as the linear perspective of analogue, representations established a normative point of view of the environment and a commensurate notion of subjectivity as 'a one-eyed and immobile spectator', promoting the master's eye and legitimating domination of people and territory (ibid., p18), so too the digital view from above establishes a new visual normativity, and with it the subject becomes a subject of surveillance technology, God-like and empowered by distance and the ability to see it all, surface deep. Sound by contrast moves me into a groundless ground. Listening sees no overview and eschews mastery and ownership through the collaboration of the ear. Tapping along together in the dark, we negotiate our blind spots, negotiating and converging towards a place rather than knowing it, establishing it in our uncertain approach. In sound we co-inhabit a dark environment and hear our differences from the contingent negotiations of our private life-worlds. The vertical non-perspective of sound is not a disavowal of social and ethical responsibility, a solipsistic listening into the groundless ground. To the very opposite, a vertical listening provides the audition for what remains in the dark, unseen, invisible and possibly unheard. It does not relate to a personal horizon as a measure of location and ambition, and it does not measure territories and distances with a military aim, instead it listens for the diffuse sonority of its location to hear hidden narratives, the discreet, the fleeting, from which it generates a contingent view, where things can be run in the reverse, networked power structures can be disrupted and unthinkable possibilities radiate beyond the screen.

4.
Hito Steyerl, The Wretched of the Screen, Sternberg Press: Berlin, 2012, p24

The way I walked the cars went backwards.
That is written and writes its own environment
that is highly elastic but always relative to power.

A sonic environment holds the surface promised on screen and digs into its slices, disrupts its view to show me the possibility of its invisible expanse and mobile overlaps. One surface removed while another appears, looking for the master's chair, looking for the lost feather of the first lizard. This vertical hole is the environment of the spoken text, its environment of discourse without surface: its own small parcels and particles and past particles and participles, printed, lazered, back lit, sintered: walkable, nudgable, pushable, budgable, kickable. It gently prods the hard surface of the body's limits and awakens its increasing rage against the manipulation of its view.

Through the artistic practice of simultaneously working the surface and digging the ground, walking the environment and slicing its surface, the work is not just time and space, it is not just a walk and its not just an environment. It is not just, as Boris Groys put it in relation to an infinite historical perspective, pure 'unproductive, wasted time' flowing past, in danger of simply being lost,[5] or what Giorgio Agamben termed bare life:[6] the constant stream of unstoppable and unarchived time. Instead the work halts the flow and takes a piece of timespace out of its stream. This congealed piece is materialised in its workness and its subsequent placement and coding. It is given materiality through the magic disavowal of discourse. In this way the environment that is stretched along surfaces of numerical lines by the artists'

searching fingers and their restless activity on screen; and that is dug into by the artists' rhythmic breath and the sound of their feet, is transformed into an artwork, which, through its imminent intelligibility within the space of its showing becomes yet another environment: the environment of discourse, within in which the particularity of the enterprise is defined and understood. This environment is, according to Stanley Fish, 'not to be apprehended by itemizing features of the internal landscape, but by grasping a coherent set of purposes that confer value and significance and even shape on those features.'[7] Grasping this set of values by walking its terrain, we can gain a knowledge of the environment as work. This knowledge does not come from the work itself, rather, as Fish suggests, if it comes from anywhere at all, then it comes from the fact that we are embedded within in it, embodied almost, 'in a field of practice that marks its members with signs that are immediately perspicuous to one another.'[8] This embeddedness, almost embodiedness, takes place within among other places the environment of the gallery, which the work circles, walking around its material and its measure, with plastic bags around our shoes, noisy and self-aware, within the internal space of the exhibition which guarantees 'a contact with the soul (of the environment) itself'[9].

This environment of art discourse and the gallery space follows a set of rules that are embodied yet ever changing within the practitioner's choices and actions. Its territory is

5.
Boris Groys *Comrades of Time*, e-flux Journal #11 - December 2009,
↪ www.e-flux.com/journal/11/61345/comrades-of-time/
6.
Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 1st ed.
Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1998

7.
Stanley Fish, *Professional Correctness*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1995, p21
8.
ibid., p16
9.
This is a loosely paraphrased and adapted interpretation of imminent intelligibility as articulated in *Self Knowledge in Thomas Aquinas*, by Richard T Lambert, Authorhouse: Bloomington, Indiana, 2007, p107

highly elastic and constantly shifting, with border negotiations going on continually. The prize of these negotiations, are areas of power quarantined off and separated from the partisan battles that established them.

> It's a very simple matter. All the landscapes which one faces in one's daily life, even those such as the beautiful sites shown on a postcard, are essentially related to the figure of a ruling power.[10]

Japanese filmmaker Masao Adachi's landscape theory, fukei-ron, (which he devised along with Mamoru Sasaki and Masao Matsuda at the end of the 1960s) considers the landscape, and in particular the filmic representation of an environment, its spectacle, in relation to political power and a ruling subjectivity. His theory creates a link between representation and rule beyond the image, the JPEG and its numerical code, in the dirty, messy earth itself: how it was dug, measured and bordered, how the environment expresses power and control, and how therefor it impresses its values and worth onto its inhabitants and steers their movements and creates their sense of reality.

In the environment of art the border controls are more lenient than most, allowing the import, according to Marcel Duchamp, of 'anything', as long as the timing is right and the power struggles are won. But this too is an environment of power, and those with interest guard those interests from the constant partisan skirmishes that seek to redefine the territory, stretching ever further the reach of the gallery and never escaping the status of art. However, the digital expands the reality of this power into the mathematical lines of the environment as symbolic surface, and determines how we move and dig through the pervasiveness of its code.

According to Alexander Kluge the tension between verticality and surface is the environment as the inescapable platform we work on. It is a desert, made of too many microchips, our movements, actions, walks, inevitably follow Silicon Valley-imposed algorithms, the rules of which are now embedded in our neurosystems directed by connecting interfaces. To resist this networked existence he suggests we turn inwards. 'Introspection is the only authority from which you can obtain advice. You can't ask the internet what you love. You can either notice this yourself or not.'[11] This is an acknowledgment of one's autonomy through which in Kluge's eyes we counter-poeticise and counteract, in alliance with other platforms and with other environments, the seemingly inevitable flow and rule of the digital sphere. This act of resistance and collaboration is articulated as an oasis, 'a garden of cooperation in an information jungle… sometimes a jungle, sometimes a desert'[12], rooted within a confined and defined space. His counter-poeticizing, is a development that further emphasises the collaborative of his and Oscar Negt's original term 'counter production.' Their idea of using, rather than abandoning, the environment we work in - the flow of the digital landscape - in order to counter what we are every day subjected to: the unquestioning subjugation and farming of ourselves and our movements for economic and state purposes by algorithms and digital pathways of that very environment, and to instead work a different field. Creating associations based on the flow of Silicon Valley, but turning different directions and arresting their flow through on the one hand a reassertion of

10.
Masao Adachi in an interview with Jasper Sharp, published 2007, ↳ www.midnighteye.com/interviews/masao-adachi/, accessed on 18.07.2017

11.
Alexander Kluge in Kluge and Obrist, *What can art do*, e-flux journal 81, 2017, ↳ www.e-flux.com/journal/81/126634/what-art-can-do/
12.
ibid.

autonomy, through 'the authority of introspection', and on the other by the creating new alliances, making new movements and walking with different shoes.

Kluge's desire to emphasise the power of an inward looking autonomy, and the need for collaboration as resistance articulates an 'auratic anchor': the anchoring of the digital flow in Walther Benjamin's aura of the work, not to resurrect its universal authority, its quarantine status, but to give us an individual purchase and foothold within the flow of the digital environment.

> They portray an almost dust-free other nature. And so you imagine the "impure" of reality. An entirely new, self-sufficient form of aura, which isn't based on autonomy but, on the contrary, on absorption into the other nature. From whose parallel reality we see reality[13.]

Using the strengths of the anchor but removing its quarantined status by forming alliances with other platforms – publications, academies, conferences - connects the environment of the exhibition back to the movement and potency of the work's initial making: the fidgety fingers, the digging feet, singing, voicing and sounding; giving the work back its movement through the discursive channels that anchored it in the first place. Here its exhibition becomes just one component in a strategically planned discursive programme. Such counter-poeticising allows for the taking up of the autonomous work not as an impotent end in itself, but as part of a multi-platform act of resistance and a knowledge production based on digging and walking.

The identification of the exhibition and art discourse as an environment of resistance to the flow of numerical lines promotes collaboration between the populated surface and the vertical depth, in which one takes aspects of the environment of the external surface and negotiates it through a material practice. This produces the work's environment, its own limited placing and imminent intelligibility, the unavoidable aspect of its own auratic anchor as art, in relation to the environment walked, sang and voiced. Thus we are converging towards the environment's reality as the possibility of its performance overlapping with the political power of its terrain.

And when this engagement with the real, the attempt to define the environment or even what environment we are talking about, is itself surveyed, both by those 'dark forces' that own track and farm our data produced by the navigation of our environment, combined with the environment of discourse that defines itself and unfolds in each step through a constantly interpreted and recorded walk, then it becomes yet again one environment overlapping another, one surveyor surveying another, from the outside in. The circular becomes the spiral and eats its own tail in a bid to survey its environment(s) that have become symbiotic and impossible to distinguish. It gets no closer to defining its environment but does 'bring a form to accommodate the mess'[14], which makes some things visible and leaves others in the dark. The castle is shrouded in an impenetrable fog, and we are simply left with the audible voices of those who take care of the particular things that are in a sense waiting to be removed. For as we know from Jean-François Lyotard's complaint, the trouble with exhibitions is that they are always taken down.[15]

14.
'To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.' Samuel Becket in Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett, a Biography*, ch. 21, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: California, US, 1978 (Conversation with John Driver, 1961).
15.
Lyotard cited in Alexander Kluge in Kluge and Obrist, What can art do, e-flux journal 81, 2017, ↳ www.e-flux.com/journal/81/126634/what-art-can-do/

13.
ibid.

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