

And down from thennes faste he gan avyse
This litel spot of erthe, that with the sea
Embraced is, and fully gan despise
This wrecched World

- From *Troilus and Criseyde*,
Geoffrey Chaucer (1380s)¹

BECOMING INVISIBLE

When Chaucer’s Troilus looked down from the heavens he saw below him the terrestrial Earth, embraced by the sea, but he also saw a “wrecched World”, which he claimed to despise. In medieval parlance ‘World’ stood for the sphere of activities that lay between man and nature. The World was made up of things, of the institutions and actions of mankind. One could “go out into the World”, could “save” the World, and, equally, could wish for the World’s destruction without laying judgement on creation.² Today, the Earth is circumscribed by a World of surveillance; of espionage in the form of computer viruses and Denial of Service attacks; a World in which the top secret intelligence files of a government can be globally dispersed at the click of a mouse. These events rely on highly distributed and networked arrays of sophisticated technologies that have receded into the background of human awareness. In short, this World is all the more substantial because it is invisible.

As technologies of the invisible have blossomed so too have technologies of vision. Drones, satellites and CCTV cameras capture images covertly, whilst an army of self-surveilling citizens upload videos of riots, robberies, and road rage to YouTube, before watching them replay on the evening news. Like an instance of science fiction cinema, “the omniscient and revelatory”³ camera offers a gaze from which nothing appears to be hidden; the whole Earth is included with only the all-seeing camera existing beyond the frame.

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territories of the database. The catalogue of satellite data that goes into producing Google Earth is itself obtained from a wide variety of sources, gathered for corporate, legislative and reconnaissance purposes on scales that grow daily. In short, if you want to appreciate the economic or political value of a territory, its (in)visibility on Google Earth is a good place to start. Henner’s appropriated works render the digital image as a tangible resource alongside grids of cattle or oil stacks. As image objects – framed, hung, viewed, sold and distributed – the works’ size, beauty and resolution remind us that from the digital economy sprout material shoots.

As well as being an essential method by which *Earth’s* resources are sourced and entertained, the digital image also serves as a metaphor for the human propensity to catalogue, control and extract value from the *World*. Today, the significance of something can be determined by the resolution of the images that depict it. But this resolution is determined by more than the pixel-richness of images. Our new visual subjectivity also bears witness to a great number of poor images: images of bad quality and substandard fidelity, ripped, copied, and endlessly shared on the internet and the web.⁷ In free-fall through our highly technologized World, Henner’s *Feedlots* and *Oil Fields* series call for a new definition of image resolution, one reliant on databases and metadata, of how widely a matter is disseminated, or perhaps most profoundly, of how (in)visible a thing has been made to seem.

IMAGE STACKS

In March 2014 Getty images, the largest stock photography company in the World, announced that they would no longer add watermarks to their archived images.⁸ Instead users would be allowed to use any Getty image just as long as it was displayed using the company’s own embedding script. This change is worth noting for the paradigm shift it signifies in image value.⁹ Rather than attain value from the sole copyright of an image, Getty now collects data about the uses and the users of its intellectual property: each image becomes a pipeline, sucking valuable information

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Methods of invisibility may include the cut and the censor, blur, camouflage and pixilation, zooming out, deleting or not taking an image in the first place. But in a World increasingly defined by the capture and dispersal of images of everything from all conceivable angles, the surest method of rendering something invisible is to increase the scale of the field in which it is embedded. This is an invisibility of higher resolutions, of larger datasets rendered at ever greater densities effective on temporal as well as spatial scales.

THE WORLD PICTURE

Mishka Henner’s work takes place across these scales, in order to affect a collapse between World, Earth and the supposed ground of perspective. The works in the *Black Diamond* exhibition give us a sense of what Troilus might see were he still stationed in the heavenly sphere. But unlike Troilus, and in keeping with the omnipresent gaze of the sci-fi camera, Henner’s works reflect back on the technological and human eyes doing the looking. Troilus’ believed that the World was something that could be envisioned in its entirety, but the World picture remains incomplete just as long as one’s perspective is itself not included in the frame.

In a series from 2011, *No Man’s Land*, Mishka Henner sourced Google Street View images of prostitutes working on the outskirts of Spanish suburbia. The collection is unsettling, haunted by the algorithmically blurred faces of the sex workers, many of whom have turned towards the camera at the point of capture. Revisiting the collection one is struck by the manifold social and aesthetic questions the images raise, implicitly bound to a sequence of more or less visible human actors. The sex workers are the most readily visible people framed by the work, and we, the viewers, made voyeur in our act of looking at them. Then there is Henner himself, scouring Google Street View like a digital curb crawler, never able to stare his subjects in the eye. But perhaps the most palpable actors in *No Man’s Land* are the invisible men who frequent these lonely junctions and dirt roads, posting their findings, in the form of Street View coordinates, onto online message boards for other men to make use of. Henner makes

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from its point of display. The allusions with oil acquisition are more than apt, since the Getty corporation is owned by Mark Getty, grandson of J. Paul Getty, America’s first oil billionaire. In an interview with The Economist in March 2000 Mark Getty made clear his aspirations: “Intellectual property is the oil of the 21st century.”¹⁰

In bygone eras oil prospectors were often the first people to draw up maps of promising territories. Toda’s rush for territory is mapped at the status of resolution and the extraction of information. It is a rush currently acted out at all levels of contemporary society, from the corporations that control our socio-economic capital, to we, the users, makers, producers and citizens ensconced in the informational World. The resources depicted in Mishka Henner’s work, whether meat, oil, or human are informational before they are visually palpable. It is from this ground that the final work in the *Black Diamond* exhibition can be read as a work that questions the neutrality of information, and the culpability of those who extract it.

BLACK DIAMONDS

In Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* (2011) a CGI planet waltzes with the planet Earth, sweeping in a deadly orbit over the film. Leo, the protagonist’s young nephew, constructs a contraption out of a stick and a loop of wire. By holding the primitive device at arm’s length the loop of wire can be adjusted to match the size of the encroaching planet. Afforded the perspective of Leo we, the viewers, can see for ourselves that the CGI planet has grown in size over the course of a few minutes. The fictional Earth is doomed, and there is nothing anyone can do about it.

Staring along Leo’s outstretched arm the World is anchored at the human scale. It is a scale that the cinema screen cannot encompass, a scale that computer generated imagery and post-production cannot sufficiently render. The word ‘disaster’ comes from the Greek for ‘bad star’: an omen hanging above us, foreshadowing a calamity we cannot predict. Framing out the cinematic apparatus, the camera, the slick appeal of CGI, and even the

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the men and their labour visible by repurposing their ‘crowd-sourced’ database. When Henner carefully selects the composition of a Google Street View shot the raw image *becomes* photograph, encompassing the data-graphic eye as an integral component of the World he depicts. But the scale of Henner’s images extends far beyond the frame of each photograph, or even of the processes that encompass photography. They render visible the networked World in cross-section, comprised neither of simple photograph nor of techno-social infrastructure but of the highly charged tension between the two.

FIELDS, LOTS AND FIDELITY

In an essay exploring the history of linear perspective, from Renaissance painting through to printed and mass-produced images, Hito Steyerl argues that the current preponderance of aerial views, 3D cinema and Google’s ‘virtual’ Earth has established a new visual subjectivity “safely enfolded into surveillance technology and screen-based distraction.”⁴ With echoes of Walter Benjamin’s claims for cinema, as a vast apparatus engaged in the training of our apperceptions,⁵ Steyerl argues that views of Earth procured for military and entertainment purposes train us in a ‘stacked’, three dimensional perspective of territory, sovereignty and occupation. If linear perspective centred the World on the Earthly beholder – rendering the artist, viewer or owner of a painting as master of all they purveyed – then its replacement, a tumbling or “dynamic viewing space,”⁶ imposes a kind of vertigo on the subject, causing us to misjudge the social and political ground of our perceptions. Henner’s *51 US Military Outposts* places viewers in the position of Gods above a toy-like World, the fidelity of which is wholly reliant on the resolution of the sourced images. In line with his *Feedlots* and *Oil Fields* series, the resolution of the images – appropriated from Google Earth, and painstakingly stitched together – gives us a clue as to where their socio-political ground is located. Just as a pixel attains significance only within the context of the image grid, so the relatively plain surface of Earth is politically meaningless, is without form and void, until its geometries and textures, its biological traces and material densities, are caught and defined in the vast, inconceivable,

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distraction of the film’s characters, the stick and wire loop device grounds our view of the bad star as a problem of linear perspective. The dynamic range of views is made relative; the image of catastrophe is for each one of us alone.

Mishka Henner’s *Scam Baiters* project has a similar collapsing effect on its viewers, asking us to question our own culpability in the kinds of networks its exposes. The project takes its inspiration from online communities centred around the practice of ‘scam baiting’: message board ‘baiters’ weaving increasingly complicated schemes to trick email ‘scammers’ into compromising and often humorous situations. The result is a perverse kind of Turing Test, in which baiters, usually located in the West, convince scammers, usually located in Africa, to prove their authenticity and commitment. Henner sources the signs and symbols produced in these exchanges, displaying them like precious artefacts from some forgotten language. The results are inspiring in their flare and imagination, dissolving the cultural, linguistic and geographic distance between those involved. Once again it is we, the viewers, that are implicated in the work. The apparent wealth of Western culture is what attracts the scammers, who sit at their computers, day after day, attempting to extract what little value they can from us. Most of their emails are marked out by spam filters, and slip away into the dark superstructure that lies beneath the global telecommunications network. But enough make it through the filters, emerging on our screens with appeals to send money, to have faith, to believe everything one sees. The stories they construct may not be real, but the hope they proclaim is. *Scam Baiters* renders that hope visible, with a humour no less troubling than the lengths scammers go to con people out of their life savings. Don’t we all spend our lives extracting what little value we can out of the screens that surround us? At computer terminals across the World digital labourers tap into an invisible pool of information, convincing faceless clients, cold-called dupes, or anyone with a bank account to sign over their value, to trust and hope: to believe everything they are told.

At the status of the screen, email, images, keyboard and mouse, we are all distinct nodes in a vast number crunching network in which information is exchanged with apparent neutrality, whatever it represents. Mishka

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BLACK DIAMOND

Mishka Henner

Essay by Daniel Rourke

Henner’s work emphasizes the creative potential locked up in the resource of cold, dark information, conceiving the World at the scale of the image. From this perspective, our feet rooted in fresh ground, the bad star may still loom over us, but the World it threatens feels clearer, more precise. It is our wrecched World after all.

NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Robert S. Kinsman, *The Darker Vision of the Renaissance: Beyond the Fields of Reason* (University of California Press, 1974), 47.
- 2 Ibid., 48.
- 3 Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Duke University Press, 2003), 124.
- 4 Hito Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective,” in *The Wretched of the Screen*, e-flux Journal (Sternberg Press, 2012), 12–29.
- 5 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 19–55.
- 6 Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective.”
- 7 Hito Steyerl, “In Defence of the Poor Image,” in *The Wretched of the Screen*, e-flux Journal (Sternberg Press, 2012), 31–44.
- 8 Getty Images, “NEW: Embed Lets You Share Tens of Millions of Images,” *Getty Images*, March 2014, <http://infocus.gettyimages.com/post/new-embed-lets-you-share-tens-of-millions-of-images>.
- 9 Jennifer Allen, “True Blue Or The Work Of Images In The Age Of Digital Reproduction,” *Mousse Magazine*, March 2014, <http://mousemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=1111>.
- 10 “Blood and Oil,” *The Economist*, March 2, 2000, <http://www.economist.com/node/288515>.

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