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Tracing a Reflection:
Mirrors, Labyrinths and Supervision
by

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part I</th>
<th>Mirror, Mirror (The Digital Gaze)</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part II</td>
<td>Remote Travel</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part III</td>
<td>Circular Logic</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part IV</td>
<td>The Masking of Power</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part V</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part I: Mirror, Mirror (The Digital Gaze)

“I walked down to the ocean
After waking from a nightmare
No moon, no pale reflection
Black Mirror, Black Mirror

Shot by a security camera
You can’t watch your own image
And also look yourself in the eye
Black Mirror, Black Mirror, Black Mirror

I know a time is coming
All words will lose their meaning
Please show me something that isn’t mine
But mine is the only kind I relate to
Le miroir casse
The mirror casts mon reflet partour
Black Mirror, Black Mirror, Black Mirror”

Arcade Fire
Black Mirror, 2007

I remember the first trip I ever took by myself to another city out of state. It was the spring of 2007 and I left my home in Nashville to fly to Chicago to attend a number of art fairs that were part of ArtChicago. I am reminded of this trip because it was the first time that I ever visited Anish Kapoor’s *Cloud Gate* in Millennium Park. It was a pleasant, overcast spring morning and I anxiously walked a number of blocks to see the large reflective stainless steel construction. Being as I was by myself, I at first tuned out all of the other spectators that flocked around me and stood at a distance from the sculpture trying to acclimate my senses to the experience of being with it. My gaze fixated upon the mirrored surface and the way that it reflected the land behind me, as well as the cloud-filled sky, bent my reality. I slowly approached the object for a closer inspection.

Other onlookers around me blurred in my periphery and were muted by my determination to connect with the experience I felt I should be having. I was curious about what I
would see and feel. My eyes were open and my senses were aware. I considered the scale and form of the work in the context of the buildings behind it. Walking under the middle of the sculpture, I noticed how reflections morphed and elongated. The sounds of my surroundings were amplified and distorted. After a while, I backed away from the sculpture and walked around the concrete pavilion.

Satisfied that I had completed my exchange with this monumental work, I became more conscious of the activity happening around me. I noticed a few groups of people standing arms length from the structure on the outsides and beneath the steel cinch in the middle. I eavesdropped on their conversations to hear their reactions to this giant piece of public art. What I saw and heard was people awestruck by seeing themselves and their friends’ altered reflections before them like an expansive funhouse mirror. Arms reached out to meet their reflections on the rounded surface. Tourists pointed armies of SLR and point and shoot cameras toward the sculpture to capture their image amid the gray sky. I remember feeling confused by their behavior because it seemed like their experience of the work was limited to a surface level understanding.

I can’t know how many of the visitors around me that day even cared very much for art at all. For them, I suspect, this experience was about a more direct exchange than the one in which I participated before. Perhaps they experienced the work as entertainment rather than an aesthetic experience. I suspect that they were giddy because they perceived that a phenomenon was occurring, something that we all would eventually know and understand in the

years to come. The world and the way in which we all saw it, the way we all experienced it, was changing.

When I returned to Millennium Park three years later many of the hand held traditional cameras had disappeared from the scene. What I observed instead were hosts of smartphones hoisted toward the surface of the sculpture. My first visit to the park in 2007 occurred only a few months before the release of Apple’s first iPhone. In the three years since, not only did the iPhone undergo three generations of improvements but a rash of competing smartphone companies released competing products that included a built-in camera. While cellphones were abundant for over a decade, smartphones, which distilled a wide variety of tools and devices into one, had only been around for a small handful of years. Where in 2007 only a minority of the park’s attendees clung around the base of Cloud Gate, awed by their strange reflection, in 2010 the vast majority of visitors experienced the work only a step or two away from the surface. They huddled and posed together and snapped photos on their phones that they most likely uploaded to social media accounts in a way that has become almost a rite of passage if one finds his or herself in the midst of such a place. I even took my own self-portrait in the reflection that day. The thing that I didn’t know in the spring of 2010 was that there would arrive in the coming months another twist in the narrative of the introduction of smartphone technology into our daily lives. It was right there before my eyes that day in Chicago but I failed to see it. In the summer of 2010 Apple introduced the iPhone 4 which included, among several noteworthy enhancements, a front-facing camera.

Professional photographers had long mastered the art of enabling the camera shutter with a timer or handheld trigger so that they could take a photo of themselves while maintaining control of the composition and exposure. While for over a half century there also existed those talented individuals who were known for their ability to capture a picture of themselves with friends and family by arcing their arm out and grasping a camera in the most awkward manner,
for the most part people took self-portraits of themselves by shooting their reflections in the mirror. The idea of taking a photo of one’s self wasn’t anything new at all. What was relevant was that this enhancement coincided with the coalescence of hardware and software evolutions which resulted in a simultaneous burgeoning of social connectivity and self-aggrandizement.

In just a few short years smartphones were incorporated into the masses, enabling users to access the web from any location using cell technology, Facebook went from only being available to those connected to an institution of higher learning to anyone with an email address,¹ and Instagram was invented. This all happened within a period of about four years. In this time span, the inundation of these novelties came at us furiously and they felt new, exciting, and empowering. It has been now almost ten years since my first experience visiting Kapoor’s Cloud Gate. I reference these two events because, for me, they represent a rupture in human awareness. It is my understanding that in prior decades, people found examples of who they strove to be in family role models, figures in popular culture, war heroes, musicians, film actors, athletes, poets and artists. People went to concerts, gallery exhibitions, and watched the network news because they trusted that what they were hearing and seeing was important and coming from a respected practitioner or news anchor. In the present day, I observe that this appreciation and trust is at the very least divided. The experience of the event is mediated by one’s documentation of one’s personal perspective of the experience. In this way, it is not that one sees one’s self reflected in the humanity of society and art, but that society and art exist as evidence of an individual’s curated accomplishments.

My experiences in Chicago were significant because they signal to me a critical adjustment in how many interact with and approach artworks. Greenbergian Modernism cultivated the narrative of mythic artistic figures who, in a way that was beyond the ability of the ordinary person, tapped into the farthest reaches of the subconscious to produce heroic works of art that revealed to the masses a pure art created by a lone genius. Although that narrative shifted away rather quickly toward object-less art making and eventually Postmodernism, patrons still tiptoed through museums to stand before iconic works of art with a kind of spiritual reverence. They stood before these works hoping to absorb whatever magical qualities they emanated, hoping perhaps to glean some kernel of understanding from them that revealed something about who they were. Patrons studied the works to understand the artist's intention or to connect to an inner truth. While for many a portion of this description persists, there is an equal number of public art, gallery, and museum goers that miss an opportunity to connect with art because they are distracted by texts or the impulse to check in on social media. Like the documentary photo that is taken to prove that one survived the climb up the mountain, museum selfies are stealthily taken to show friends that they went to, looked at, and experienced famous works of art.

The power and presence of the artwork becomes subservient to our particular experience of it. If or when we go back to look at the photograph, we then understand the artwork as a notch in the belt of our adventures. It becomes a cluster of pixels that add in with
other such experiences to form the image of who we think we are. This may be a cynical view of the situation. But, as Jean Baudrillard points out,

> There is already sorcery at work in the mirror. But how much more so when this image can be detached from the mirror and be transported, stocked, reproduced at will ... All reproduction implies therefore a kind of black magic, from the fact of being seduced by one's own image in the water, like Narcissus, to being haunted by the double and, who knows, to the mortal turning back of this vast technical apparatus secreted today by man as his own image (the narcissistic mirage of technique, McLuhan) and that returns to him, cancelled and distorted-endless reproduction of himself and his power to the limits of the world.\(^2\)

It could also be that viewers still approach artwork with excitement and admiration and snap the photo of themselves with it to remember the event later. Whatever is true for each individual, the impact of mobile devices in this context is undeniable. Within the hand-held sized contours of our phones, the black screens of glass display our reflection even when the device is off. Powered on or not, they have become tiny mirrors through which we gaze upon ourselves and acknowledge our reflections.

Part II: Remote Travel

“Between the actual site in the Pine Barrens and The Non-Site itself exists a space of metaphoric significance. It could be that “travel” in this space is a vast metaphor. Everything between the two sites could become physical metaphorical material devoid of natural meanings and realistic assumptions. Let us say that one goes on a fictitious trip if one decides to go to the site of the Non-Site. The “trip” becomes invented, devised, artificial, therefore, one might call it a non-trip to a site from a Non-site.”

Robert Smithson
A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites, 1968³

When one encounters an artwork, for instance a painting, one experiences it either as an object or as a window into another space. One can interpret the latter as a form of travel. If the painting depicts a specific place, we intuitively understand that it is a representation of that place and not the actual place itself. We can, however, as Smithson said, take a fictitious trip to this place by entering into the work and allowing ourselves to explore and sense what it is like even though the artwork is only a collection of material assembled, adorned, and displayed in an interior space.

When I began making the painting Airfield_Black Mirror I was thinking about the way Smithson talked about this sort of travel. If one uses any of these software programs, like Google Maps, to explore unfamiliar territories or places to which one has never traveled, one experiences a visual depiction, or simulation, of what these places might be like at a particular time. I wanted to make a painting that portrays the process of moving through a place in Google Maps using a method that combines multiple aspects and moments of this process into a single pictorial space. By doing this, I not only reference a technological experience that is familiar to

and reflects my current milieu, I am also making a two-dimensional metaphor of a time-based medium that conveys the experience of a three-dimensional place.

The challenge of exploring this idea in a painting, as opposed to photography or film, appealed to me because I am intrigued by the possibilities of portraying distance, depth, time, and motion within a static image. Unlike the moving pictures of film or video, the stasis inherent in painting allows the viewer to interact with the work on many different levels over time. A painting may imply motion or a frozen moment in time but can also pack other conceptual signifiers and experiences on top of those implications. The imaginative nature of the depicted location and the feeling of accessing the place through a digital software program lends itself to expression in a hybrid form of abstraction and representation.

Although I am deeply invested in exploring provocative ideas, I am by nature a maker. I enjoy constructing objects and paintings with my hands. Attention to detail, surface quality, and the presence of the painting’s stretcher as an object are all contributing factors that support and accompany the painted image. I am confident in and excited by painting’s ability to depict spaces and experiences, real or imagined. Gerhard Richter’s varied artistic practice has had a critical impact on the way I think about making my own work. Richter has used both

Patrick Brien, *Airfield Black Mirror*, 2015, oil, acrylic, and spray paint on linen, 60 x 94 1/4 inches
representational and abstract paint languages in different series throughout his extensive career. His multi-faceted practice includes traditional paintings on canvas, paintings applied directly to photographs, as well as glass sculpture. Although I also feel comfortable working in a variety of media, the process of painting is where I feel most natural. The dexterous nature of paint application allows me to operate in an abstract paint language while infusing a gesture with real meaning.

For Airfield_Black Mirror, I alluded to the experience of navigating an unfamiliar place where everything is foreign and new. The emotion I wished to convey was the disorienting feeling of being lost. It is in this space of unfamiliarity where one experiences emotions ranging from pure bliss and invigorating stimulation to mounting fear and utter panic. Because smartphones are now ubiquitous and GPS directions are accessible to one’s fingertips, I’m unsure how often people experience these feelings anymore. To aid in the creation of this sense of disorientation, I wanted to let many impressions of this location fuse together in the same picture plane. The manner in which these programs allow one to toggle between different perspectives and varying informational constructs afforded me the opportunity to use multiple perspectives to achieve the ambiguity I desired.

The space described in this painting is complicated because of its reluctance to portray a single destination, orientation or viewpoint. An initial strip of lush grass that ushers you into the painting in the foreground and the directional button on the right side clearly signifies that the set of images depicted are digitally mediated environments. The space defies either a projection outward toward the viewer or the development of depth that invites the viewer into the painting.
Like images stacked on top of various open windows on one’s desktop, any illusory sense of space is knowingly false. On the surface, a flat computer screen may tell the user that one window is on top of another or that a word processing document is really behind a window that displays the image of a landscape. By layering and breaking the continuity of imagery I desired to communicate an interruption and superimposition of information that describes a specific place in a painting. Like memories of a place, the elements in the work are patched and stitched together.

The moments in the painting where the color palette breaks away from the local color of the landscape, such as the area where the fluorescent pink meets the black voids, should elicit in the viewer the momentary glitch in the computer’s display.

Drawing a distinction from modernist painting and the deductive formalism of practitioners who followed, David Joselit posits in his catalog essay entitled *Surface Vision* that:

> For artists steeped in an electronic image world…the “beyond” is articulated as a “beside.” Instead of projection inward in depth or outward in space, there is an implosion of space within the surface itself, where information flows are internally segmented and regulated.\(^4\)

Although the natural inclination is to read the imagery in the painting as a horizontal landscape, the illusion is broken by flat applications of paint that suggest areas of a street map. Portions of missing imagery eradicate any hope for a whole, clear picture and carve out voids on the picture plane that raise the viewer’s awareness of the presence of a suggested digital overlay.

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Taking a cue from the “New Vision” movement of the 1920’s “which foregrounded the new mobility of the photo and film camera, and made unconventional points of view a key part of its poetics,” I sought to reimagine what Dziga Vertov accomplished through the use of film editing and montage to create multiple levels of meaning from superimposed images and defamiliarizing camera angles. For instance, if zooming in over a particular neighborhood or intersection in Barcelona, the software offers the option of flowing back and forth between map and satellite views. If you are in Google Earth, you also have the ability to transition down from an aerial perspective to a landscape perspective that allows you to navigate through the city’s streets.

Playing off of these references, I incorporated as many allusions and signifiers to this language as I could. For example, when one wishes to advance forward in Google Maps street view, an interesting phenomenon often occurs when you click on the guiding disc with directional arrow. As the software moves one forward along the route, it first sputters before smoothly and swiftly sending the individual along the route. As the propulsion sputters, the parametric armature of the panoramic imaging software becomes visible, causing skewed squares to blur the edge of the path that was once undisturbed. Although it almost immediately corrects itself, this glitch is an identifying characteristic of the transparency of the structure. Another characteristic function that

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intrigued me in Google Maps’ street view was the ability to pan straight up in the air or directly
down onto the asphalt and see a series of thin black lines that indicate the poles in the software.
Isolated moments when the armature of the software is exposed are the truly intriguing
discoveries made when
interacting with the technology.
These discoveries remind the
user of the mediated nature of
their exploration, temporarily
breaking the viewer’s
suspension of disbelief.

In the screen shot to the left,
you can also see the shadow of
the camera mounted on top of
the vehicle cast on the
sidewalk. This idea drove the
creation of Street View (Null
Point). The painting mimics the
pan down action achievable in
Google Maps and gives prominence to a
viewpoint that is rarely considered worthwhile. I began thinking about a painting that depicts an
urban environment only through its reflection in a water puddle on the street. The conflation of
space opened up by a reflection, despite the short distance between eye level and the asphalt is
very attractive.

Screen Shot from Google Maps Street View

Patrick Brien, Street View (Null Point), 2015, oil
acrylic, and spray paint, 23 1/2 x 43 1/2 inches.
“Beneath English trees I meditated on that lost maze: I imagined it inviolate and perfect at the secret crest of a mountain; I imagined it erased by rice fields or beneath the water; I imagined it infinite, no longer composed of octagonal kiosks and returning paths, but of rivers and provinces and kingdoms… I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, of one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and in some way involve the stars.”

Jorge Luis Borges
The Garden of Forking Paths, 1941

The medium of painting, unlike film, allows for imaginative invention and narrative storytelling through the layering of events and time within a single static image. I enjoy the idea that a painting can slowly reveal itself to a viewer over a long period of time. The many possibilities that I may explore in a painting, like references to visual languages that do not originate in painting, intrigue me. A motivating objective of my process is to stretch the vocabulary of painting by investigating how I might communicate an idea visually by using new informational sources.

In my belief, one of an artist’s chief functions is to document and reflect his or her milieu. With this in mind, I was compelled to find a way to speak about the incorporation of digital nomenclatures onto objects and surfaces where they have never been before. They pop up in areas of our daily life that were once free of graphics and interfaces. Take for instance the “Heads Up” GPS windshield display on new lines of BMW’s or a drinking cup called “Vessyl” that manages your hydration and can determine what you are drinking, as well as its health

These are designed visual languages which are slowly being added to our fields of sight to mesh with our surroundings in real time.

The uneasiness that I feel with the infringement of this sort of digital mediation upon my field of view speaks to the wariness of a future complicated by new technology. This is a major concept explored by the BBC television series *Black Mirror*. In this immensely inventive “dystopian drama,” each episode focuses on a specific theme. The episodes explore situations where an advancement in technology, created for good and convenience, produced unexpected side effects. It is an enthralling series that balances the conveniences and benefits of a future supported by new technologies with creatively written scenarios where these advancements backfire. More than one episode features moments where screen-based images exist in places unexpected. Also, in many of the episodes, the subject of time and its manipulation by technological constructs is investigated.

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7 “Vessyl,” last accessed April 17, 2015, https://www.myvessyl.com/?utm_source=AdWords&utm_medium=CPC&gclid=CIPXm_OW_sQCFdgcgQodHZEAFQ.

The issue of time and its inclusion in the story of a painting came to dominate my thought process during the past year. As I researched specific sites to include in my painting, I concluded that it was imperative to depict a location and built environment that clearly communicated a passage of time. When I began work on *Remoteness As the Failure of Distance Traveled*, I came to the realization that the lost city of Machu Picchu in Peru would be a dynamic representation of this idea due to its ability to immediately signify a long span of time by its appearance as a ruin. I was also drawn to this site because of its physical resemblance to a labyrinth.

The act of web browsing has been compared to a labyrinth by early net artists, exemplified by the work of visual artists who were experimenting with technology and making artwork specifically on and for the internet in the 1990’s. The convoluted, structural complexity of jodi.org sends the viewer on an undirected internet surfing experience that presents him or her with a different visual construction with every new page load. Additionally, with the lack of any discernible navigation menu, the viewer is left to find his or her way through the labyrinth by clicking around the image to try to find a way to advance to the next page. With so many hyperlinks and portals of information and references, a session of internet surfing can expand and accrete to the point where one loses track of where they started. Each click compares to a left or right turn in the labyrinth. The structure of a labyrinth is composed of a series of dividing walls that create

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Patrick Brien, *Remoteness As the Failure of Distance Traveled*, 2015, oil, acrylic, and spray paint on canvas, 95 x 133 inches.

corridors. These corridors prevent the inhabitant from seeing over in order to devise a way to navigate through the maze. For me, the labyrinth also represents a series of interlocking matrices and systems of control that offer multiple layers of meaning.

The depicted image in *Remoteness As the Failure of Distance Traveled* is divided in several ways. The painting is a two panel diptych, so most obvious is that the painting is physically divided vertically. However, I also built in false divisions in the image on the horizontal axis that skew and distort the clarity of the main subject. The action in the painting appears to trail off of the right side only to reappear on the left side under the dividing line in a manner that
alludes to a loop\textsuperscript{11}. The painting was constructed so that there are as many allusions to the loop as could be presented. I was inspired by Lev Manovich’s question:

Can the loop be a new narrative form appropriate for the computer age? It is relevant to recall that the loop gave birth not only to cinema but also to computer programming. Programming involves altering the linear flow of data through control structures, such as “if/then” and “repeat/while”; the loop is the most elementary of these control structures...As the practice of computer programming illustrates, the loop and the sequential progression do not have to be considered mutually exclusive. A computer program progresses from start to end by executing a series of loops.\textsuperscript{12}

The inclusion of computer terminology and logic in my work is an intentional acknowledgment of the impact that computers and mobile devices have on the way we experience the world. For the past year I have investigated the way in which the language of technological interfaces have come to mediate and possibly alter our experience of daily life. Acting as a veil or overlay upon our objective way of seeing the world, the visual language of these apps, software programs, and digital graphics have become so nearly seamlessly integrated into our public and domestic spaces that we acknowledge their presence as ordinary. The multi-colored meandering path that extends diagonally from left to right references the GPS tracking map of the Nike Run app. This function appears when the user permits the app to use his or her location during exercise. The colors correspond to the speed with which the person ran in a specific area and help the runner understand, through visual information, the exact locations where they excelled or struggled.

\textsuperscript{11} “Loop Definition,” accessed April, 17, 2015, \url{http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/loop}.

\textsuperscript{12} Manovich, The Language of New Media, 17.
The use of color in my painting is usually the result of an intermingling of concept and intuition. Often, the color palette is driven by reference images that are assembled, collaged, and edited from my research. The palette often reflects screen colors that refer to the photographic screen shots, as well as the visual nomenclature of the software applications from which the pictures came. These mechanisms are counterbalanced by an intuitive sense of color application and disbursement that are meant build and sustain interest, attention, and desire. It is not coincidence then that I chose the vibrant gesture drawn by the GPS track from the Nike app instead of another, less visually arresting reference. In searching for and selecting thematic representations for my inclusion in my paintings, I balance the appropriateness of the element to the concept of the work with the visual impact that it might have upon the viewer.

The juxtaposition of this graphic next to the image of a lost mountain city whose civilization was mysteriously abandoned intrigued me. While the exact circumstances concerning Machu Picchu’s abandonment are still debated, the fact that the city was engineered and built with such care and skill tells us that it was meant to endure.\textsuperscript{13} The Incan empire only lasted 100 years and is widely believed to have been destroyed and conquered by the Spanish.\textsuperscript{14} I am reminded of George Santayana’s quote “Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it.”\textsuperscript{15} This idea implies a narrative loop of errors that will reoccur in human civilization if humanity ignores its past failures and declines to implement a correction that will prevent the events of history from happening again.

The final element in the painting that alludes to a circular structure is the way that I present the ruins of Machu Picchu from multiple viewpoints, landscape and aerial perspectives, \textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{13} Owen Palmquist and Ricardo Preve, \textit{Ghosts of Machu Picchu}, documentary, edited by Mickey Green. (2009: A Production of NOVA and National Geographic Television, air date: September 3, 2014) DVD.

\textsuperscript{14} Lucy C. Salazar, “Mystery Solved!,” \textit{Faces}, July/August 2008, p.18

\textsuperscript{15} “George Santayana,” The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed March 7, 2015, \texttt{http://www.iep.utm.edu/santayan/}
on the same picture plane. This idea was influenced by a scene in Christopher Nolan’s film *Inception*, in which the city of Paris is folded in upon itself. Nolan’s concept for this scene was a provocative model for the way that I wanted to portray time and space in my painting. By inserting clues that I was portraying two views of the same space, I wanted the viewer to be aware of the site in a spherical, almost three-dimensional sense. The graphic of the GPS track also conveys a record of time elapsed. This, in combination with the image of the ruins, serves to depict the passage of time despite the use of still images. Icons and graphic notifications continue to arise in unexpected places. I am curious about what impact the adoption of these new media surfaces as an added layer of visual information onto an already saturated field will have on the way we study and look at artworks.

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16 *Inception*, directed by Christopher Nolan, (2010; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010), DVD.
Part IV: The Masking of Power

“The computer, with its emphasis on information and its reduction of the individual to the password, epitomizes control societies. Digital language makes control systems invisible: we no longer experience the visible yet unverifiable gaze but a network of nonvisualizable digital control.”

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun
*Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia In the Age of Fiber Optics*, 2006

The internet has long been viewed as it was in its infancy: a free platform for the exchange of information. Invisible systems of flagging and tracking were, in the pre-9/11 era, mostly reserved for those perpetrating suspicious or illegal activity. While the climate we live in now is very different, paranoia over surveillance and tracking of American citizens persists because of the ambiguity of information shared by agencies of power. As Chun’s quote above indicates, in the pre-digital era it was much easier to for civilians to identify control systems and structures. The Patriot Act signed by President Bush and initiated in October of 2001 opened the door for agencies of power to legally monitor any individuals they desired in order to guard against threat to the security of the United States. In June of 2013, scandal broke out concerning domestic spying allegations as a result of leaked information by Edward Snowden, who was a government contractor working with surveillance data for the United States. These days, the level to which ordinary, non-threatening online activities of US citizens are monitored are unclear. What is clear is that the data is still being collected and stored. What agencies of

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power like the NSA do with this information should give pause to users of the internet and mobile applications.

We live in a mobile society. In our attempt to make life easier and more socially connected, new hardware devices and software applications were built to address our desire to have more access to information as we live our lives on the go. Mobile apps provide a service or function to users while simultaneously collecting data and information regarding the user’s private locations, activities, and personal information. Many users are either unaware of or simply underestimate the impact of this trade off. As Jean Baudrillard noted in *Simulacra and Simulation*,

> The eye of TV is no longer the source of an absolute gaze, and the ideal of control is no longer that of transparency. This still presupposes an objective space (that of the Renaissance) and the omnipotence of the despotic gaze. It is still, if not a system of confinement, at least a system of mapping. More subtly, but always externally, playing on the opposition of seeing and being seen, even if the panoptic focal point may be blind.\(^{19}\)

It is true that this user could deny the app permission to access his or her sensitive information, but the risk/reward is unclear. If we deny the app access, more than likely we will be unable to use the app, making our life less connected to friends and family and less convenient. Yet, users should be aware that the gaze operates both ways. Our browsing habits are being monitored, if not by government agencies then by advertisers, and our whereabouts may be tracked.

Compelled by this idea, I made an assemblage of works that investigate these questions of power versus convenience. I wanted to unpack the dual nature of the gaze. My response was to create an artwork that spoke to this ambiguous and uneasy power relationship of surveillance by borrowing the visual presentation language of the most visible authority in the art world: the museum. *Elsewhere Is an Inverse Mirror II* harnesses a museum aesthetic of the clean,

hermetically sealed presentation of objects in plexiglass vitrines and displayed on low-lying plinths. The pedestals themselves echo the language of my paintings in that the printed images are mounted on the face of panels that I constructed in the same manner that I would for my paintings. The plinths are not simply supporting surfaces but are conveyors of imagery. Each panel reiterates strategies that I use in my painting process. Whether it is combining aerial and landscape perspectives or recalling the low resolution of surveillance cameras by producing hazy, blurred images, the plinths make a physical connection between two-dimensional imagery and three-dimensional objects that rest upon them.

The content of the sculptural assemblage references a seminal artistic text, Robert Smithson’s *Monuments of Passaic*. The text is an account of his travel to “monuments” which were in reality places, structures, and ordinary objects of infrastructure. They described and documented the change that the artist’s hometown had undergone in the years since his absence as it transitioned away from an industrial producer. As the reader follows the text, he or she can “track” Smithson’s movements from location to location. As a parallel to the autobiographical nature of Smithson’s writing, I inserted references to my own life and hometown of Nashville, Tennessee, including a photo obtained from Google Earth of the house in which I grew up. The picture covers the backside of

*Patrick Brien, Elsewhere Is An Inverse Mirror II*, mixed media, 34 1/4 x 88 x 60 1/2 inches
a constructed, partially folded painting support that sits upon a sculpture base of stacked images that recall a computer’s desktop. I wished to point out how easy it was to gather personal information about someone online, including former home addresses, but also wanted to do this in a way that was voluntary. The offering of this bit of personal information is also referenced by the images that appear on two hand-made phone sculptures on which I displayed screen shots of my Instagram page, as well as my Nike run app.

On the largest plinth, two levels of photographic prints coated in resin show both a satellite and map view of Passaic, New Jersey. They provide a desktop-like foundation for the other elements contained by a plexiglass container. On one end, a painting on panel lies horizontally with a 3-D printed circular labyrinth resting on top. Rising from the side of the painting is a painted tower that stretches vertically toward the top of the plexi box to support one of three active surveillance cameras. The opposite end features the aforementioned folded panel bearing the image of my former home and whose inside is faced with mirrors. The security camera points toward the mirrors and records the reflections captured within the vitrine. Protruding from ellipses cut out of the plexi container are two “selfie sticks,” one of which displays a mobile device that plays a slideshow of surveillance imagery and selfies of random people taken from the internet. The other stick holds a handmade replica of a smartphone that displays images taken from my Instagram account.

The other two supporting platforms that lie next to the main display unit help to reiterate the linguistic tie between surveillance tracking, remote travel, self-reflection and documentation. For instance, the left most platform supports another selfie stick or monopod that contains another handmade smartphone. Lying next to this is a walking stick that one might use on a hike and which emulates the length and size of the selfie stick. On the far corner is the painting Elsewhere Is An Inverse Mirror I, which is a small, mostly black work that I created last year in response to reading a great deal of Robert Smithson’s writing. The title refers to a quote from
Smithson, but it also describes the transportive possibilities of a device’s screen: a black mirrored glass portal that can create and fuse two different realities into a single place or instance. The device confounds the boundary of here and there and allow us to extend our physical presence globally through an online presence through social media.

The center platform features a video still image taken from a video that I made last year. The video concerned the ever-present eyes of surveillance cameras in public, and some private, spaces. For instance, if one walks down any given street at any given time or location, one can expect to be captured on the security cameras of businesses and ATMs in addition to any amateur smartphone photography or video. The image, once again presented horizontally as the face of the pedestal, also has a glossy resin covering. Two broken concrete stepping stones rest upon the platform as a visual metaphor for the stepping stones along a trail. The pavers emphasize the connection between the notion of remote travel via the computer and the digital trail of evidence that is left behind by someone who uses the software applications which are monitoring and collecting information about their activities. On top of the pavers, the second security camera rests upon electrical parts extracted from a computer monitor. The camera not only records the pavers on the platform but also captures a worm’s eye view of activity within the gallery.

The final element of the work is a third surveillance camera that I mounted in a different gallery on the other side of the exhibition space. The footage from all three cameras appears on a monitor that rests face up in front of the set of mirrors under the plexiglass container. The footage can both be seen on the monitor, as well as in the reflection in the mirror, which the first camera is recording and feeding in a continual loop. It is this perpetual, persistent presence of the panoptic eye that captures our comings and goings to which I would like to call attention.
Part V: Conclusion

“Supervision is control through vision. It establishes dominion over people and things by recording and archiving surfaces, linking itself to superficiality by more than a shared prefix.”

David Joselit
Surface Vision

The issues addressed in my research are certainly not rosy but I don’t believe them to be dark and foreboding either. The connection I hoped to make was one between eyesight and enhanced vision through technological devices. I wanted to underline the awareness that we see and can be seen. Issues of presence and absence come into play when we lose sight of the demarcation between our physical and online presences.

In closing I wish to situate my work among the projects of practitioners working in related realms of vision and presence: Harun Farocki and the duo of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller. Joselit refers to Farocki’s series *Eye Machine* in his essay *Surface Vision*. Farocki’s work from this series “examines [intelligent] image processing techniques such as electronic surveillance, mapping and object recognition, in order to take a closer look at the relationship between man, machine, and modern warfare.” The images in this work are purposefully arranged and multiplied on the projected video in order to make reference to their original sources. As Joselit points out,

The “eye machines” present in Farocki’s appropriated footage are not passive recording devices, but restless agents endowed with a purposeful motion once considered unique to human beings. And yet this roving vision leads not to a revelation of depth but to the proliferation of surfaces, as exemplified in Farocki’s


I can’t help but recall the high-tech satellite images projected on wall-sized screens in numerous popular television shows about the CIA. In these shows, high-ranking officials direct missions from situation rooms of government headquarters in America using satellite video in real time. The action being carried out is often across the globe in the middle east where the narrative of the story often deals with the lingering military struggles from the war on terror. While television shows prominently feature the maneuvers directed by the decisions of government figures, Farocki’s work foregrounds the action of the technology itself.

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s work that was exhibited at Documenta in 2012, *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*, explores the use of a mobile device as a transmitter for storytelling in real time. A description from the artists’ website informs us that

> An alternate world opens up where reality and fiction meld in a disturbing and uncanny way that has been referred to as "physical cinema". The participants watch things unfold on the small screen but feel the presence of those events deeply because of being situated in the exact location where the footage was shot. As they follow the moving images (and try to frame them as if they were the camera operator) a strange confusion of realities occurs.

Cardiff and Miller’s piece interests me because the visual fields from two separate points in time are melded together into one experience. People walk by and action happens on screen in the recording that don’t appear in person at the moment the viewer experiences it. The technology becomes the conduit of a narrative experience. Lost in the action of the video, the viewer may lose awareness of the iPod entirely. Interestingly, the video clip that demonstrates and


documents how the piece functioned makes the viewer more conscious of the device than he or she would have been in the actual experience of interacting with the work in the Kassel train station. In the video clip, there is a person who represents the viewer, us in this case. However, we do not control the action of the mobile device. We watch the action as it occurs both on our computer screen and on the mobile device. Because we do not control the iPod, our attention is drawn to the action that happens on the inside and outside of the device’s borders. Cardiff and Miller’s work is poignant because it presupposes that the viewer is already at least somewhat familiar with the process of navigating actual space while paying attention to the action that occurs on screen.

I reference the work of these artists in relation to my own project because I believe they point to many of the same issues with which I am concerned. The increasing sophistication and intelligence of cutting edge imaging software, along with high definition satellite capabilities are slowly being introduced through many different delivery systems, such as television, film, and works of art. As these technologies filter down to the consumer level and are integrated into usable functions and apps on mobile devices, I believe our sensibilities and aesthetic sensitivities are changing.

When a viewer encounters a work of art today, he or she is equipped with a much more advanced level of visual acuity than was possible decades ago. I am curious how artists will adjust to communicating with an audience who are exponentially more visually savvy than viewers in the past. Lastly, I firmly believe that we should be able to freely interact with and benefit from the computer software applications on desktop and mobile devices without having our locations, private information, and web histories monitored, tracked and surveilled. The pace
with which these encroachments upon our freedoms are being accepted as part of the trade off of using these technologies concern me greatly. These issues inspired me to create a body of research and resulting artworks in an attempt to dissect and understand the changes that are occurring in the way that we see and are seen by agencies of power.
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