

## **Google photo maps:**

### **Contemporary art and aerial photography visual disturbances**

### **Mapas fotográficos do Google:**

### **Arte contemporânea e as perturbações visuais da mirada aérea**

***Grécia Falcão***

#### **Introduction to the proposal**

In this paper, I propose a look to aerial photographs, more specifically, to photographic images captured from aircrafts and satellites to compose Google's popular geographic mapping system: Google Maps. This proposal consists of a reflection on the advent of the aerial glance in the art sphere, based on hypotheses about a possible “contact zone” between mimesis, abstraction and representation in the face of the visual productions in contemporary art. In order to mobilize these issues, I believe it is necessary to establish a keen eye to today's artistic practices, set in a social reality that suggests the multiplication of the production and circulation flows of images in the current communication technologies. Therefore, I take as reference the work of Mishka Henner: Belgian artist who uses, as a source of research for his works, the photographic records that are available online, so that this reflective path will be developed from the description of two photographic series of this artist.

The visual content that circulates on the Web is the source of inspiration and the empirical material for Mishka Henner's art works: taking as example the photos available on the Internet, in addition to YouTube videos, digital graphic maps of USA geological survey, emails texts and algorithms that are on the Internet public domain. However, a good part of his art works is based on the appropriation of photographic images available in the research and map visualization services

developed by the American company Google. In, at least, eight photographic series<sup>1</sup>, the artist reuses the photographs that were made available on Google Maps for visual registration of the planetary architecture and topography. In brief words, Google Maps is the most widely used online map system in the world, available for free use on the Internet. It is a Geographic Information System (GIS): technical term, which designates types of software that provide cartographic data for the users, including the monitoring of their trajectories through GPS, in addition to other services to aid travel in cities.

Google Earth and Google Street View “photo maps” services are linked to Google's GIS's, providing geographic mapping through aerial photographs, and photographs captured at ground level. Mishka Henner's artistic work is mainly dedicated to the reuse of the photographic images visible in these softwares, whose purpose is to provide an online map that brings the feeling of augmented reality (VR - “Virtual Reality”) to the user. That is, in the Google Earth and Google Street View applications, the user is able to interact with photographic sequences, which are “glued” to each other by geospatial data. The attempt is to simulate a virtual tour through digital photographs, similar to a live tour in places of interest previously chosen on the online map. The updating of these photographs in Google's GIS is done from time to time, either by the service users themselves, who take photos of city streets for uploading in the Google Street View application, or through partnerships between Google and NASA: US space exploration agency that has the newest technologies for capturing photographs by aircraft and satellites. Aerial photos that can be used to compose the Google Moon, Google Mars and Google Earth applications that, respectively, create replicas of the Moon, the planet Mars and the planet Earth surfaces.

Mishka Henner's work deals, to a large extent, with the selection, editing and assembly of these “photo maps” in museums, galleries and other spaces dedicated to the exhibition of contemporary art. The artist navigates through the visual simulation of Google Maps, cutting out photographic frames available in the most popular Geographic Information System on the Internet. His photographic series act, fundamentally, as a way to rethink the fleeting and massive condition of digital photography in the online ambience, which, in many ways, starts to question the use of the

---

<sup>1</sup> These are the photographic series: “Fifty-one US Military Outposts” (2010); “Dutch Landscapes” (2011); “Libyan Oil Fields” (2011); “Eighteen Pumpjacks” (2012); “Fields” (2012-13); “Feedlots” (2012-13); “No Man's Land” (2011-13); and “Turbines” (2017-18), which bring together hundreds of landscape photographs captured from the Google map platform.

photographic device in its brief and instant meanings: when the ways of apprehending the image seem restricted to their narrative as a mimesis: “mirror of the real”.

In the Google Earth interface, for example, the aerial photographs of our planet were precisely “glued”, with the aid of mathematical calculations and the referential parameters of cartographic science (latitude, longitude and height), on a spherical model, which simulates the format of terrestrial geography. In this way, photographs recorded from above from aircraft and satellites, and produced in high resolution, start to function as a map that simulate, by optical and cartographic precision, the total shape of the Earth's surface. Nevertheless, this geolocation software uses the photographic technique to create a visual narrative that values verisimilitude, seeking for the “best imitation of the real” and the “most faithful” representation of the geographical space.

This points to a notion of landscape photography that this article aims to confront. As “naturalized” as the apprehension of these aerial mapping photographs may be, in regard to the viewer’s spontaneous recognition of what is represented in the photos - mountains, forests, streets, people, animals, objects, etc. - what exists, in these photographic images, are technical artifices very well assimilated by humans and even “incorporated”<sup>2</sup> into the subject perceptual system. This is what Anne Cauquelin (2007) demonstrates, in regard to her analysis of the emergence of the landscape concept in Art History: one of the traditional genres of painting, as well as portrait and still life. For the philosopher, the concept of landscape goes back to the various technical formalizations, which, since the Renaissance (14th-16th centuries), tried to “equate” the experience of nature (the world of things) with the space represented in the two-dimensional painting canvas. In order to achieve such verisimilitude between “world” and “image”, classical painters depended on mathematical studies on perspective, and on a certain mastery of the optics laws: knowledge that, from the 19th century onwards, seems to have been transferred to the photographic automatic forms of use with its quick capture and almost instant ways of image printing.

Since Classicism to the present day, the socio-technical ground that set the “ways of doing” realistic landscape images seems to have been silenced or, at least, little discussed by the humanities and art fields. In short, Cauquelin shows that the emergence of the landscape concept in the sphere of art is a result of a social phenomenon, having as circumstance the new ways of

---

<sup>2</sup> See the current geographic mapping softwares, such as Google Maps, and its forms of use for geolocation purposes. Today, people walk the city streets while they turn their gaze to the smartphone screens to check their position on the map, using GPS data. An almost “symbiotic” choreography between human body and technical apparatus (smartphone screen) is created, in order to sustain a fast journey through the city until the arrival on a place of interest.

thinking and living the world by the historical-scientific context of the Renaissance (Humanism); and a result of a technical phenomenon, considering the current use of optical lenses and geometric calculations in classical paintings. It is, therefore, a finding that prevents a purist view of the "landscape" term, usually associated with paintings that represent nature, giving a "neutral" and "transparent" way of capturing the lived environment.

In any case, a realistic landscape photograph provokes such a verisimilitude effect that the viewer is led to believe that, "over there", he / she sees the world "for real", even more if this realistic photographic image has a practical function based on the cartographic use of Google company. However, an optical-perceptual shock arises when such photographs, which portray the "real", take the viewer to an abstract view of it. This article deals precisely with some photographic works by Mishka Henner, where the image seems to function as this device of tensions between the communicable pole of the photographs, referring to the immediate visual correspondence for its instrumental use in online maps; and abstraction. Therefore, I am dealing with visual constructions that touch on the traditional notion of landscape, based on the dictates of Art History, but that offer an opening to other ways of recognizing the photographic image and of conceiving the landscape concept. In general, this article is an effort of amplitude of the referred theme - landscape photography - and is dedicated, precisely, to develop this concept from contemporary art and communication technologies fields.

### **The case of the photographic series "Feedlots" and "The Fields"**

I bring into question two photographic series, called "Feedlots" and "The Fields". Both works result from the reuse of aerial photographs made available on the web through Google's map systems. The "Feedlots" project documents the geographies sculpted by the North American meat industry; and the photographic series "The Fields" captures aerial views of the oil fields in the USA. The works are composed of photographic records that document the two biggest engines of the United States economy, beef and oil, sharpening our look at industrial practices and the environmental degradation of the planet.

These photographic productions were created in 2013 and selected for the fifth edition of the Prix Pictet, the global prize in photography and sustainability, which brought together contemporary photographers with works directed to the theme: consumption. The award resulted in a group show,

which took place in 2014 at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England. Over there, along with ten other photographers, who were also nominated for that year's Prix Pictet (Adam Bartos, Motoyuki Daifu, Rineke Dijkstra, Hong Hao, Juan Fernando Herrán, Boris Mikhailov, Abraham Oghobase, Michael Schmidt, Allan Sekula, and Laurie Simmons), Mishka Henner exhibited two photographic prints, side by side, and it is from them that this analysis begins (fig. 1).



**Figure 1** - Coronado Feeders (series: Feedlots) / Kern River (series: The Fields) Mishka Henner, 2013.  
 Beef and Oil exhibition - Victoria and Albert Museum - May to June 2014.

The first photograph refers to the “Feedlots” series in which Henner is dedicated to capturing several aerial shots of beef cattle farms in the interior of the United States. The first photo shows the Coronado Feeders farm, a property located in Dalhart, Texas, which has the capacity to contain up to 60.000 cattle (GEAR, 2016). What stands out in this photo is the “big red blur” that appears in the center of the image. This is the outflow channel, which stores and transports the post-slaughter animal waste. A red pool of blood takes over the farm's several hectares and gathers the wreckage of animals produced for consumption. It is a well that is connected to the confinement bays, which organizes, proportionally, the thousands of cattle that the Coronado Feeders farm supports. In brief words, the viewer faces a “factory landscape” in this photograph, where nature is regulated to intensify the yield of beef production.

Beside this photo, Mishka Henner presents an aerial view that is part of another photographic project. In the series called “The Fields”, Henner cuts out photographic records from Google Maps,

depicting North American oil fields with its extensive fuel production and distribution networks. At the Victoria and Albert Museum, for example, the artist displayed a photograph that depicts the Kern River Oil Field: a 115-year-old oil field located in Kern County, California. The photograph, printed on a large scale, points to the immensity of this landscape, composed of thousands of beam bombs that occupy all corners of Central Valley desert in California (ONISH, 2014)<sup>3</sup>.

Henner searched for these aerial views through Google's geographic mapping software, which makes, publicly available, the photographs of the Earth's surface recorded from aircraft and satellites. Therefore, these photographic series are the result of this online "gold mining", which combines cartographic analysis with data on energy production and agriculture in the USA. Despite being part of different photographic projects ("Feedlots" and "The Fields"), for Henner, the two subjects (meat and oil) are closely linked, and not just visually (HENNER apud DAVIES, 2014). The agricultural industry, for example, starts with the consumption of corn, food supplied to cattle. Large quantities of corn are produced from a large quantity of fertilizers, which, in turn, boost global sales in the oil industry. Well, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the photography of Coronado Feeders and Kern River Oil Field are side by side, pointing to industrial operations that are economically supportive of each other.

The aim, now, is to analyze the sense game accomplished by the "Feedlots" and "The Fields" photographic series, paying attention to the way in which the "distant look" - the aerial point of view - can be configured as a way to destabilize the idea of landscape (pictorial or photographic) as an image that "best" represents space; that is, an image that is symbolically configured as an effective way of describing the environment. The hypothesis is that, from these photographic series, Mishka Henner builds a curious visual narrative that aims to "confuse" the viewer, in order to put in tension the credible character of landscape photography.

### **Between mimesis and abstraction: visual disturbances of the aerial glance**

In the aerial view of satellites, we are so far from the Earth's surface that landscape photography often becomes a "whole" made up of lines, spots and dots. The "bird's eye view" has

---

<sup>3</sup> "The 115-year-old Kern River oil field unfolds into the horizon, thousands of bobbing pumpjacks seemingly occupying every corner of a desert landscape here in California's Central Valley. A contributor to the state's original oil boom, it is still going strong as the nation's fifth-largest oil field, yielding 70.000 barrels a day" (ONISH, 2014, s/p).

historically been the most used method for discovering and monitoring a territory. But, due to the distance and the varied angles of the photographic record, this form of documentation denotes “evidences of abstraction”, something that Dubois had already noticed in certain photographs by Duchamp, and in Malevitch's painting works and aerial photographs (DUBOIS, 2011). In photographs taken from above from drones, airplanes, or via satellites, which provide photos for the most popular online geomapping software, the face of the Earth shows scenarios close to visual distortion. There are images “without a horizon, without depth, without holes, or protrusions. [...] There are flat, geometrized, ‘abstracted’” (DUBOIS, 2011, p. 268 - own translation), in contrast to the views taken from the ground: the representation of space inherited from the classic monocular view, where the subject stands up (facing the object), creating landscapes images in drawings, paintings, photographs from a single angle. It is a precise (orthogonal) axis, which allows the subject to visualize the horizon line and to create the optical illusion of the rules in perspective.

But humans, more and more, loosen themselves from the ground, floating at different angles through the aerial and anti-aerial point of view. Thus, new ways of modeling colors, lights, shadows and shapes appear when it comes to representing space. In these terms, landscape photography, which values the documentation of the “real”, can invariably tend towards experimental compositions; as in the case of the records of the American photographer William A. Garnett, who captured, from the top of an airplane, the precise alignments of the construction of houses in the state of California, USA (“Finished Housing, Lakewood California”, 1950). The photographer worked with black and white photography and with films of different formats, and it was through the aerial view that, in the 1950s, Garnett built landscape photographs full of straight and curved geometries. His work shows the disturbing repetition of precise contours that are, in this case, the vestiges of the urban architecture and topography of the Earth.

In short, it is quite possible that photographic images become distanced from their representative possibilities, when registering a certain subject from above (DUBOIS, 2011). In other words, it is likely that, due to the effect of rotation and distance, the verisimilitude of the photographic document may “fall apart”, creating an abstract composite of squares, circles, curves and lines that are difficult to decipher, in detail, by the viewer's gaze. However, I would say that, in Mishka Henner's art (“Feedlots” and “The Fields” photo series), the aerial views were captured so far from the Earth that the observer, invariably, is lost by distance. The photos present themselves as a synthetic form composed of colors, lines and geometries, having no way to distinguish the set of objects and beings

that make up the minutia of each scenario.

That is why the photographic enlargement is equally an important facet of these works. If, on the one hand, the aerial documentation creates forms bordering on abstraction, on the other, the viewer is led to build some kind recognition degree, in the face of the high definition and the large size of these photos. For example, in the exhibition “Drone: The Automated Image” that took place, in 2013, at the Darling Foundry gallery in Montreal, Canada, there was a photo from Mishka Henner’s “The Fields” series. This exhibition was part of the “Mois de la Photo à Montréal”, festival featuring several names of contemporary photography art, such as Pascal Dufaux, Mona Hatoum, Suzy Lake, Thomas Ruff, Penelope Umbrico, Jules Spinatsch, and Michael Wesely. At the bottom of the shed at the Darling Foundry gallery, Mishka Henner exhibited just a single image. It was a great photographic projection.

Due to the distance related to the vertical angle, the volumes of the human, nature, architecture and artifacts seem to merge on the photograph surface, causing the indistinction between forms. In this photographic projection, it was only possible to visualize a background made of earth tones and rectilinear traces, apparently, in the foreground. To visualize the extensive area of the oil field, the spectators need to distance themselves from the photo and, by far, they can only distinguish different colored lines that stand out in the photo (fig. 2).

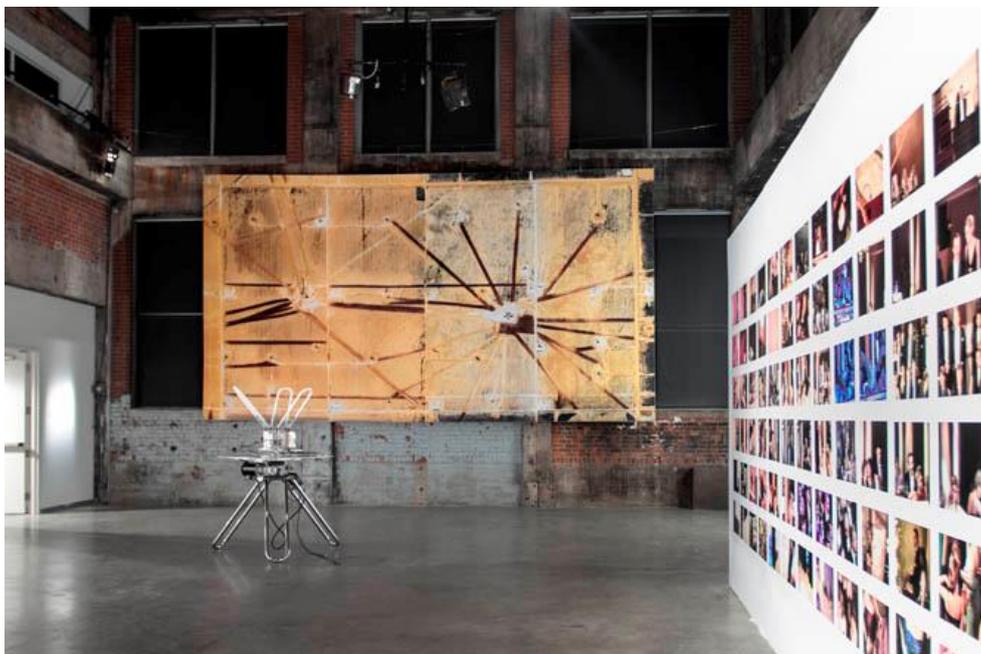


Figure 2 - Levelland Oil Field # 1, Hockley County, Texas (2013) Dimensions variable.  
Photo series: “Feedlots” - Mishka Henner, 2013. Exhibition: Drone: The Automated Image - Darling Foundry Gallery, Montreal, 2013.

However, if the viewers get closer to this aerial photograph, they can verify some details of the industrial oil operation of Levelland Oil Field, USA. It is possible to recognize, for example, the appearance of electricity poles and some beam pumps: machines used to mechanically lift oil out of the ground (fig. 3).



Figure 3 - Levelland Oil Field, Hockley County, Texas (detail). Photo series: "Feedlots" - Mishka Henner, 2013.  
Exhibition: Drone: The Automated Image - Darling Foundry Gallery, Montreal, 2013.

These is the "small" photographic fragments, as shown in figure 3, that Henner captures from Google's online photo-mapping software. In Google Earth app, the aerial shot, which depicts the immensity of this oil field, is not so sharp and clear. It was necessary to perform "zooms" within the "photo maps" interface and select photographic clippings, which were gathered (one by one) to compose high definition images. In his studio in Manchester, United Kingdom, the Belgian artist composes photographs with sufficient resolution to equalize colors, contrasts, maintaining the sharpness to print the photographs in large dimensions. In "The Fields" series, Henner made, at least, four large panels with extensions that exceed the mark of two meters in height and four meters in length.

At first glance, in this big photograph projection on the wall of the Darling Foundry gallery, an abstract whole is visualized (fig. 2). However, if the viewers get closer to the image, they will be able to verify what is "in fact" represented in this large landscape photo (fig. 3). Briefly, there lies the strength of Henner's art works. The photo series "Feedlots" and "The Fields" propose visual

experiences executed in the tension/disturbance between the distant (the aerial and geometric vision of the whole image) and the proximity (the detailed identification of the landscape photography mimetic property). Thus, the photographic document meaning is reworked as the viewers approach and move away from what they see.

I would say that the expressiveness of such works is, precisely, in this disharmonious break between mimesis and abstraction. Using the same language - photographic - Henner mixes two opposed logics. On the one hand, in the commercial galleries and museum's environments, the good definition and the wide dimensions of "Feedlots" and "The Fields" photo series give account of the documentary clarity of these landscape photographs. Invariably, viewers get closer to the images, searching for traces of verisimilitude: something implicit in such photographs produced as documentary evidences for geo-mapping purpose. On the other hand, if the viewers look from a distance, the same images present a complete visual distortion of what is seen. Through the aerial view, squares, rectangles, lines and spots appear in the landscape photographs.

A meaning dynamic is created valuing discontinuity, which, in Rancière's terms, would be a good example of "image pensiveness" (RANCIÈRE, 2012 - own translation). For the philosopher, when the image suspends any information transmission activities, or any meaning of an eminently conclusive character, it becomes an object of thought that creates a new regulation of the "fiction" and "document" boundaries in images. The "pensive images" are those that propose a "opening" of meaning, as opposed to the immediate-looking image that supports the classic chain of projected ends of causes and effects.

According to Rancière, such a phenomenon occurs when artistic strategies create "the latent presence of one regime of expression in another" (RANCIÈRE, 2012, p. 118 - own translation). As the author says: "images are, exemplarily, pensive images due to the way they combine two modes of representation" <sup>4</sup> (RANCIÈRE, 2012, p. 118 - own translation). In the case of Henner's photographic series analyzed in this paper, it is possible to consider that the meaning of these landscape photographs is "suspended" by a disturbance established between antagonistic forms of expression - mimesis and abstraction. The spectators try to decipher what they see in an

---

<sup>4</sup> "The pensiveness of photography could then be defined as that node between several indeterminations. It could be characterized as an effect of the circulation between the subjective/motif, the photographer and us, the intentional and the unintentional, the known and the unknown, the expressed and the non-expressed, the present and the past" (RANCIÈRE, 2012, p. 110 - own translation). "The pensiveness of the image is then the latent presence of one regime of expression in another" (RANCIÈRE, 2012, p. 118 - own translation).

experimentation process at different distances, in which the viewers walk through the museums and art galleries, placing themselves in relation to the photographic panel.

### **The oblique view and the experimental attitude in art**

But, of course, since this photographic representation is similar to a map, having an operative function, there would be no way to get lost adrift in contact with Henner's landscape images. What is sought in these photographic records, based on the inherent credibility of photographs produced for geographic mapping, is a trace of the "real". The photo series encourage the viewer to decipher, up close or from a distance, what are these animal confinement spaces in agriculture ("Feedlots", 2013) and these oil exploration fields ("The Fields", 2013) in the USA, both registered by Henner's search in Google's photo maps. What I realize, however, is that the relative geometrization provided by the aerial photo view does not take on meaning due to the associative logic of verisimilitude. On the contrary, the visual abstraction appears as disturbing effects in what refers to the properly representational content of the landscape scene.

It is not by chance that Phillipe Dubois understands that aerial photography - going back to the balloon trips made by Félix Nadar (19th century) - served as a strong influence for modern pictorial movements. Regarding the avant-garde arts, which sought to distance themselves from the classicism that imposed rigor on the pictorial representation of the landscape. That is, in order to circumvent the visual systematization of the rules in perspective, where the painter faced the object head-on to fabricate the optical illusion of mimetic representation, artists of Russian suprematism, such as Lissitzky and Malévitch, already in 1914, were inspired by the visual distortion of aerial view in order to experience a new plasticity in their paintings. Dubois, through the writings of art historian Rosalind Krauss, will be able to elucidate this thought:

What is striking is that, unlike other photographs, the aerial view raises the question of interpretation, of reading. It is not simply a matter of the fact that, seen from above, objects are difficult to recognize - they are effectively - but, more especially, the fact that the sculptural dimensions of reality are made very ambiguous: the difference between hollows and bumps, convex and concave, goes out. Aerial photography places us in front of a reality transformed into something that needs decoding ... If all photography promotes and deepens our ghost of a direct relationship with reality, aerial photography tends - by the very means of photography - to perforate the film of that dream (KRAUSS apud DUBOIS, 2011, p. 262-265 - own translation).

The photograph from above would also influence the constructivism of the Bahaus school, where Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) and Rodchenko (1891-1956) manufactured compositions in their

drawings, paintings, photomontages, sculptures, using inclined angles. In photographic art, both become known for the use of plongée and counterplongée plans. The positioning of the camera "from the bottom up" and "from the top down" was what gave new textures, depths and contrasts to the photographs, characterizing the experimental attitude of their works.

The fact is that the "oblique look" adds distorted perspectives to the vision, providing instruments "to the inaugural attitudes of abstraction in art" (DUBOIS, 2011, p. 265 - own translation). In line with the arguments of Rosalind Krauss, Dubois notes that the "aerial inspiration" extends to the Abstract Expressionism of the USA, like the example of the "action painting" by Jackson Pollock. Pollock, instead of facing the painting head-on, placed his large canvases on the floor. He created a casual stroll over the panels, while flinging paint drips towards the ground. The random fluctuation of the "glance from above", with its multidirectional movements, was the device created by the artist to manufacture paintings with forms and figures that could not be deciphered.

But the resonances between aerial (or anti-aerial) photography and abstractionism in modern art do not end there. Any scenario, when photographed from a distance creates simple geometrical visual structures, which would reach the minimalist aspects of art: a certain art investigation that, in the 50s/60s, after Pollock's peak in the United States, seeks to play with the artistic methods of production, acting within the limits of visual forms and scales, optically calling for the minimal expression of representation, or a non-representation state of the visual art. The geometric character of minimalism, with a strong constructivist influence<sup>5</sup>, radicalizes the anti-figurative work of the Abstract Schools of Europe - Futurism, Cubism, Bauhaus - and rejects, for once, the illusionist and metaphorical attributes of a work of art.

To strip his artistic productions of decorative and interpretive effects, minimalism sought the simple conception of materials. In painting, it was about the encounter with elementary shapes and contours, increasingly flat and monochromatic, to show that there are no meanings prior to the two-dimensionality of the canvas. Sculptural minimalism, on the other hand, started to develop objects with the help of industrial, prefabricated materials, creating structures that operate conceptual

---

<sup>5</sup> Heir to Italian futurism and French cubism, constructivist art emerged in the early 20th century and is present in much of the Russian avant-garde works. This movement follows the ideal of modern European art abstraction, and seeks to break with the figurative classical art that values the representation of the "real" and the allusion to the forms of nature. Generally speaking, its language is characterized by the constant use of geometric elements, using primary colors and photomontage. Among names like Aleksandr Rodchenko and Kazimir Malevich - one of the inventors and theorists of non-figurative art - constructivism creates objects with an emphasis on emptiness, working with forms in front of the environment where they are inserted. Therefore, the presence of matter on the canvas is emphasized, together with the valorization of the industrial object as a way of desecrating the symbolic structures of art.

transits between the field of painting and sculpture. The geometrical creation of Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd and Robert Morris, for example, starts to question these traditional genres of art, breaking with the stylistic judgment that separates the forms of three-dimensional creation (referring to sculptural volumes) from two-dimensional (referring to photography and the painting).

In general, when it reduces representation to the purity of geometric shapes, Minimal Art prevents the viewer from wanting to perceive painting as something more than the materiality of the canvas itself. At the same time, the use of sculpture will add volume to the visual aspects of flat geometries (cubes, boxes, spheres, rectangles), highlighting meanings that must be experienced empirically. In both cases, an art that is metaphorical, interpretive, carrying previous ideas or emotions is denied. Instead, the minimal forms (sculptural, photographic and pictorial) will cherish the corporeal/material encounter between spectator-work. That is: through the experience of art related to the observer's body-subjective presence in the exhibition environment, where the formality of the minimum object is found (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2010)<sup>6</sup>.

In these terms, the aerial perspective and the spatial logic of verticality will be the decisive factor for a process of changes in art. It is a disorder in relation to the rigor and verisimilar character of classical painting that, since the Renaissance, is based on mimesis to build image representations of the "real". Before the rules of perspective, the painter should create pictorial images using the orthogonal angle, where objects are positioned precisely at the eye level of the painter/observer. This technical procedure works by the horizontal angle, so the painter could manufacture landscapes images, strongly believing that his paintings were the perfect "double" of nature.

But, in order to achieve such perfection when creating images, man depended on a very well calculated distance from the object to be represented. It is a visual recognition that removes all the instability of the environment (sounds, smells, textures, vibrations from the environment), creating paintings by completely excluding the effects of "disturbance" of the body. In short, in classicism, the human eye was not synonymous with an organ that, therefore, is part of an unstable corporeality

---

<sup>6</sup> "It is fascinating to see to what extent the dimension of the human body could be implicated - and more and more subtly - in the production of the American artists of this movement, despite being explicitly "geometric". [...] Sol LeWitt will not cease to imply the human dimension, between one meter and sixty-two meters, in a very considerable number of his most "mathematical" or modular works. [...] Ad Reinhardt projected the frame of his dreams - black, evidently - as "a square (neutral, without form) of canvas, five feet wide five feet tall, tall as a man, wide as the open arms of a man (neither big nor small, without size). It is understood, in fact, that the "without size" works there as a duplicate operator of "specific", geometric formality, and of subjective, corporal implication. It allows the stature of the object to come before us with the visual force of a dimension that looks at us - it concerns us and, indirectly, it resembles us - even though the object gives nothing to do besides itself, besides its shape, its color, its own materiality "(DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2010, p. 124-125 - own translation).

(CRARY, 2012). On the contrary, in the epistemological boundaries of the time (17th and 18th centuries), vision was interpreted as a scientific principle of calculation (refraction and reflection of light). And the eye was a mechanism of pure rationality, capable of effecting a true reading of the world around it.

However, little by little, the modern strands of the arts create new experiences for painting, giving way to the artist's sensory perception, uncertainty and dispersion (19th century). Blurry paintings, with quick brushstrokes and abrupt cuts in the scene portrayed, will shake the fundamental balance of mimetic representation. It arrives until the moment when the verticality of the aerial and anti-aerial angles enters, more and more, the sphere of art to emphasize games of concealment in pictorial and photographic images. The oblique angle acts as a true “theoretical device” (DUBOIS, 2011 - own translation), so that the visual representation reaches an abstract surface.

All this theoretical crossing is to realize that, in the aerial view, there is a real tension between the mappable and geolocalizable pole of landscape photography, and the abstract pole. Today aerial photography, associated with GIS's and the uses of GPS, shows its instrumental capacity to map the world. Nowadays, softwares such as Google Maps (with its maps and photo maps) is used indiscriminately. Cartographic codes, graphic drawings, and photographic representations (vertical and horizontal ones) are interpreted, in order to create an accurate and an effective path across the globe. However, the intense use of these tools of urban geolocation - where aerial photography is only an instrument for watching and for repositioning the human in cities - does not allow us to visualize the contingent and coded character of the apprehension of the world by images.

Nevertheless, in the photo series “Feedlots” and “The Fields”, the aerial photography shows itself as a place of questioning about what is given to see. These landscape photographs are configured as a device: as a catalyst of historical, social, political and aesthetic forces. In these works, the photos, taken from above, feature a “double expressive condition”, being a stronghold of documentary sharpness/clarity and, on the other hand, of opacity. Its uniqueness is not an attribute - relative to the visual representation of space by verisimilitude - but an effect of image meaning produced in the coming and going of the viewer look (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2010)<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> “In other words, a kind of critical formation that, on the one hand, disturbs the normal course of the river (this is its aspect of catastrophe, in the morphological sense of the term) and, on the other hand, resurfaces bodies forgotten by the river or the glacier further up, bodies that she “restores” make appear, make visible suddenly, but momentarily: this is her aspect of shock and formation, her power of morphogenesis and “novelty” always unfinished, always open, as Walter Benjamin says so well. And in this set of images

In other words, by taking their bodies close to these great photographs, the spectators experience a possible place of recognition in front of the photo aerial views. Up close, they see the subtle figuration of animals, fences that divide lots of livestock confinement, trucks, telegraph poles, and oil pumps. However, the informative “whole” of these landscape photographs can only be seen from a distance, that is, when the viewers move away from the large photo images. From there, the documentary photography becomes an opaque reality. The image documentary aspect can (even) “appear” and “disappear”, several times, as the viewers walk through the exhibition space, relating themselves to the photographic panel.

This happens because, by far, the viewers cannot look for likelihood and identify what composes Henner’s landscape photography. They may only see colors, stains, as well as a geometric visual surface with straight and curved lines. Thereby, it seems to arise a kind of photograph of “minimal gestures”, which could allude to the minimalist currents of contemporary art. Since the 1950s, Minimal Art has acted as a procedure, which places the viewer's physical experience at the center of the artistic issue. Other recent art movements, such as Kinetic Art, Performance Art, Body Art, Side Specific, Land Art and the interactive art installations try to understand the corporeity of the observer, and the materiality of the exhibition environment, as fundamental elements for aesthetic apprehension<sup>8</sup>.

In minimalism, an art that aims to “inform nothing” appears. It is not necessary to interpret “nothing more” than the very minimal expression of the geometric shapes. These art works would emphasize a bodily relationship between the viewer and the painting canvas, and the three-dimensionality of the sculpture. An association between vision and body experience, expressed since modernity in the 19th century, when the subject's perception - due to the increasing sensory-motor stimulus of bodies in cities - seemed to be increasingly susceptible to the modeling of a

---

“about to be born”, Benjamin still sees nothing but rhythms and conflicts: that is, a true dialectic in work” (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2010, p. 171 - own translation).

<sup>8</sup> This recognition of vision as something modulated by the phenomena of the body (embodied perception, so to speak) has been on the rise since the 19th century. If, on the one hand, realism and positivism were present in the currents of nineteenth-century scientific and popular culture, ratifying a “rationalized” look at things in the world - see the emergence of ceramic museums (Grévin Museum) and the curious “Salles d’Expositions” from the Paris morgue - on the other hand, certain optical toys, including the three-dimensional paintings and the Panorama, began to associate vision with the observer's bodily instability. It is the “moment when the visible is opened in another device, within the physiology and temporal instability of the human body” (CRARY, 2012, p. 74 - own translation). The Panoramas, developed at the end of the 18th century, are configured as the first attempt to simulate a reality: that is, “making look real something that is not”. This device consisted of a circular painting, in addition to a structure specially designed to allow the creation of a simulated environment. However, in Panoramas, the “real effect” depends on the individual's complete bodily insertion into the mechanism. Thus, unlike the optical-classical regime, where the subject passively received a “true” image of the world (a landscape represented on the pictorial canvas), the Panorama admitted that the human body was capable of modulating, and even intensifying, the illusory effect created by circular painting panels.

physiological body, immerse in a sociocultural conjuncture that challenged the human perception (CRARY, 2012; BENJAMIN, 1994)<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, when viewed from afar, the landscape photographs from “Feedlots” and “The Fields” series show their geometric formality. These art works explore the reductionism of forms, putting in tension the properly traditional field of painting and photography. I mean the dominant cult of mimetic representation, where the image - by the “real effect” of the rules of perspective - seems to stabilize, very well, the figurative reception of the landscape image. In classicism, the documentation of the “real” aims to fully identify all objects and beings that compose the painting canvas. Instead, minimalism advocates a radical break with mimetic/figurative art. The visual reduction of pictorial and sculptural forms seeks to establish a conflictual relationship between subject and art: given by the spectator’s corporeal ordering regarding the visual-material “simplicity” of the art work.

## Final considerations

In short, Henner’s photographic works studied in this article seem to put the viewer in the middle of an interpretive conflict: in the midst of a relationship between “two distances” (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2010 - own translation)<sup>10</sup>. On the one hand, the possibility of a credible encounter with the landscape photography, on the other, the sensorial experience (optical and tactile) of geometric visual forms. In the photographic series discussed above, these two expressive poles seem to “make use” of each other. Thus, the artist finds a particular way to expand the traditional field of painting and art photography.

The “Feedlots” and “The Fields” art series, despite maintaining the documentary content of the photographic aerial view, have strong interference from the visual models already established

---

<sup>9</sup> Faced with the growth and industrialization of modern cities, the subject’s participation became essential as part of the perceptual process. Whether crossing busy streets or using mechanized transport, it was no longer possible to look at the world while ignoring the manifestations around it, which directly influence the body, the senses, the brain. “The observer had to operate more and more in fragmented and unknown urban spaces, in the perceptual and temporal displacements of train travel, telegraph, industrial production and the flow of typographic and visual information” (CRARY, 2012, p. 20 - own translation). That is, in times of circulation, speed, crowd and shock (BENJAMIN, 1994), perceiving the modern reality was literally “embodying” the vision.

<sup>10</sup> “To speak of dialectical images is, at the very least, to build a bridge between sensory, optical and optical distances, in case) and with the senses (the semiotic senses, with their mistakes, their separate spaces). Now, this bridge, or link, is neither an image that is logically derived, nor ontologically secondary, nor chronologically posterior: it is original, quite simply - it too. [...] And a relation of these two distances already unfolded, a relation of these two obscurities is possible to obtain an image - which is neither pure sensoriality nor pure memory - exactly what should cause an aura. We will want to say, therefore, that double distance here originates and that image is shown as dialectical, critical. But it is necessary to avoid all trivial exceptions regarding this “origin”: just as the name is because it is already unfolded, justly, or *différente*. Only such a name because it intervenes in Walter Benjamin a title of its own dialectical and critical concept” (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2010, p. 169-170 - own translation).

in the avant-garde arts. In this analysis, I sought to “match” the referred photographic series with the stylistic norms of classical painting, including the “abstract” strands of modern/contemporary art. In this context, the article sought to draw attention to an artistic production that dialogues with the massive uses of photography in the online ambience, creating a “movement” in the hierarchies of art, as Mishka Henner’s landscape photos seem to play, simultaneously, with various systems of signs, in order to break with tight categories and rigid parameters, which may stabilize the meanings of contemporary photography.

**Grécia Falcão**

*Professor at Universidade Lusíada de Lisboa*

*Doctor in Communication / UERJ*

*ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7547-0870>*

*E-mail: [falcaogrecia@gmail.com](mailto:falcaogrecia@gmail.com)*

Received: April 8, 2020.

Approved: May 28, 2020.

## References

BENJAMIN, Walter. **Obras escolhidas; vol.1. Magia, técnica, arte e política: ensaios sobre literatura e história da cultura**, Brasiliense, São Paulo, 1994.

CAUQUELIN, Anne. **A invenção da paisagem**. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2007.

CRARY, Jonathan. **Técnicas do observador – Visão e modernidade no século XIX**. Rio de Janeiro: Contraponto, 2012.

\_\_\_\_\_. **Suspensões da Percepção: Atenção, Espetáculo e Cultura Moderna**. Editora: Cosac Naify, 2013.

DAVIES, Lucy. (2014) *Mishka Henner: a Duchamp for our times*. In: The Telegraph. Disponível online: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/photography/10813540/Mishka-Henner-a-Duchamp-for-our-times.html>  
Acesso em: 15/09/2017.

DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges. **O que vemos, o que nos olha**. Ed. 34, São Paulo, 2010.

\_\_\_\_\_. **Sobrevivência dos Vagalumes**. UFMG, Belo Horizonte, 2011.

\_\_\_\_\_. **Imagens apesar de tudo**. Trad. Vanessa Brito e João Pedro Cachopo. Lisboa: KYM, 2012.

\_\_\_\_\_. **Diante do tempo**. Belo Horizonte: Ed. UFMG, 2015.

DUBOIS, Philippe. **O ato fotográfico e outros ensaios**. São Paulo: Papyrus, 1994.

GEAR, Elizabeth Sulis. (2016) *Horrific Satellite Images of Texas Feedlots*. In: Feature Shoot. Disponível online: <https://www.featureshoot.com/2016/08/horrific-satellite-images-of-texas-feedlots/> Acesso em: 10/10/2017.

RANCIÈRE, Jacques. **A partilha do sensível. Estética e política**. São Paulo: Ed. 34, 2005.

\_\_\_\_\_. **O espectador emancipado**. São Paulo. Martins Fontes, 2012.

ONISH, Norimitsu. (2014) A California Oil Field Yields Another Prized Commodity. In: **New York Times**. Disponível online: [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/08/us/california-drought-chevron-oil-field-water-irrigation.html?ref=collection%2Fbyline%2Fnorimitsuonishi&action=click&contentCollection=undefined&region=stream&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=148&pgty](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/08/us/california-drought-chevron-oil-field-water-irrigation.html?ref=collection%2Fbyline%2Fnorimitsuonishi&action=click&contentCollection=undefined&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=148&pgty) Acesso em: 01/02/2018.

## Abstract

Google's geographic mapping systems (Google Maps) and other service-coupled software (Google Earth and Google Street View) use photographic registration as the primary documentation and mapping tool for terrestrial geography. For cartographic science, aerial photography is an important tool for the analysis and management of geographic information, and is the ideal technique for creating a visual narrative that values likelihood, that is, for the “best” and “most faithful” representation possible from space. On the other hand, in this paper, I would like to discuss the communicational meaning of the photographic records provided by Google maps from the analysis of two photographic series created by Mishka Henner: a Belgian artist known for using photographic archives as a research source for his works. Available online. Apparently, the strategies of appropriation, production and exhibition montage operationalized by the artist are able to multiply the forms of communication of photographic images, and to “vary” the meaning of this set of “map photographs” generated by the company Google.

**Keywords:** Google Maps. Communication Technologies. Landscape photography. Contemporary Art.

## Resumo

Os sistemas de mapeamento geográfico do Google (Google Maps) e demais softwares acoplados ao serviço (Google Earth e Google Street View) utilizam o registro fotográfico como principal ferramenta de documentação e de mapeamento da geografia terrestre. Para a ciência cartográfica, a fotografia aérea é uma importante ferramenta de análise e de gerenciamento de informações geográficas, sendo a técnica ideal para a criação de uma narrativa visual, que preza pela verossimilhança, ou seja: pela “melhor” e “mais fiel” representação possível do espaço. Por outro lado, neste paper, gostaria de problematizar o sentido comunicacional dos registros fotográficos fornecidos pelos mapas Google a partir da análise de duas séries fotográficas criadas por Mishka Henner: artista belga conhecido por utilizar, como fonte de pesquisa para suas obras, arquivos fotográficos disponíveis online. Ao que parece, as estratégias de apropriação, produção e montagem expositiva operacionalizadas pelo artista são capazes de multiplicar as formas de comunicação das imagens fotográficas, e de “fazer variar” o sentido deste conjunto de “fotografias-mapa” geradas pela empresa Google.

**Palavras-chave:** Google Maps. Tecnologias da Comunicação. Fotografia de Paisagem. Arte Contemporânea.

## Resumen

Los sistemas de mapeo geográfico de Google (Google Maps) y otro software acoplado a servicios (Google Earth y Google Street View) usan el registro fotográfico como la principal herramienta de documentación y mapeo para la geografía terrestre. Para la ciencia cartográfica, la fotografía aérea es una herramienta importante para el análisis y la gestión de la información geográfica, y es la técnica ideal para crear una narrativa visual que valore la probabilidad, es decir, para la representación "mejor" y "más fiel". posible desde el espacio. Por otro lado, en este artículo, me gustaría discutir el significado comunicativo de los registros fotográficos proporcionados por los mapas de Google a partir del análisis de dos series fotográficas creadas por Mishka Henner: un artista belga conocido por usar archivos fotográficos como fuente de investigación para sus obras. Disponible en línea. Aparentemente, las estrategias de apropiación, producción y montaje de exhibición operacionalizadas por el artista pueden multiplicar las formas de comunicación de las imágenes fotográficas y "variar" el significado de este conjunto de "fotografías de mapas" generadas por la empresa Google.

**Palabras clave:** Google Maps. Tecnologías de Comunicación;. Fotografía de paisaje. Arte Contemporaneo.