

# TIME

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## LightBox

### Street View and Beyond: Google's Influence on Photography

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Postcards from Google Earth, by Clement Valla, Untitled

"I started focusing on these typologies — this peculiar condition that tends to occur around specific types of structures like, bridges, overpasses and bodies of water. Basically what happens is that Google gets a 3D model of the earth's surface and then they take the aerial photography and just project it straight down onto the 3D model. Essentially these aerial photographs are being bent and stretched and distorted to fit the 3D surface of the earth. What I'm concerned about most with all of my work is the interplay between human elements and computer elements and how these impersonal systems or impersonal processes are producing this type of crazy new imagery."

When Google Street View started as an experiment in 2007, the company sent SUVs equipped with cameras, GPS and lasers to collect its first pictures. The idea of capturing images of the entire world from the perspective of the street was revolutionary, if not a little insane. Now, five years later, Google has recorded 360-degree photographs of streets in more than 3,000 cities in 43 countries around the world. Google Street View cars—along with snowmobiles, giant tricycles and Trekkers—have covered more than five million unique miles of road since the project began, making tens of millions of still images in even the most far off places on the map, such as Antarctica.

The massive and growing archive has spawned a virtual world of images like we've never seen before in the history of photography—and its accessibility has inspired a new generation of photographers who are using the tool to document the world while simultaneously redefining the boundaries, quite literally, of contemporary art photography.

While critics bemoan the trend of artists using Google imagery in their works, the artistic appropriation of photos is as old as photography itself, employed by everyone from the Surrealists to the post-modern Pictures Generation of the late 1970s. Google's Street View images aren't a commentary on the world, but are surveillance photos taken for the practical purposes of just showing us places we may not be able to visit. The machines and cameras used to collect them have no discretion, much less artistic influence. Through meticulous research, framing, grabbing and reformatting, photographers themselves are assigning photos artistic value, in much the same way they do when shooting, toning or retouching a raw file or an analogue negative. "In its raw form, satellite imagery can be quite dull," says Mishka Henner, an artist who often works with Google's images. "Cropping, adjusting, and forming a body of work out of them completely transforms these images into something that can be beautiful, terrifying and also insightful. If the internet remains free and open, I'm confident that in ten years photographic work like this will be as prevalent as imagery produced by hand-held cameras."

At this point, all the Street View images are created by a human-operated Google cars with a spherical camera affixed to the top. The device looks like an all-seeing eye that has nine directional cameras for 360° views at a height of about 2.5 meters. The new high-resolution replica of the world that Google provides is every voyeur's dream—one can virtually visit an endless variety of places from the comforts of one's own home.

In the catalogue to the show *Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance, and the Camera since 1870*, editor and curator Sandra Phillips compared the biblical story about elders spying on Susannah to present day, saying: "Today, however they would use cell phones to grab a picture of a young woman in a compromised position and send it to friends, having located her garden through Google Earth. Human hunger for seeing the forbidden has not changed. The technologies to facilitate it have."

And she's right—this technology has been adapted quickly by artists and devoured by the art world. Doug Rickard used Google Street View to see the back roads of the nation in a series called *A New American Picture*, which was featured at New York City's MoMA last year and is currently on view at Yossi Milo Gallery. Geoff Dyer wrote extensively in the *Guardian* about Rickard, saying: "Any doubts as to the artistic – rather than ethical or conceptual – merits of this new way of working were definitively settled by Rickard's pictures. It was William Eggleston who coined the phrase "photographing democratically" but Rickard has used Google's indiscriminate omniscience to radically extend this enterprise – technologically, politically and aesthetically."

Rickard says he probably made 10,000 images of this work before narrowing the selection down to just under 80 images. "The only difference [between this work and traditional street photography] is that the world's frozen, so you're limited to that surrounding," he says. "You've got a fixed lens and your distance is determined by the width of the street, not where you walk. But there's a lot in kinship with traditional photography that was really partly responsible for me being able to embed 1,000 hours into this in four years."

Jon Rafman's project *9-Eyes* captures uncanny images of reality and provides a case study on the unrelentingly objective aesthetic that comes from Google Street View. "The potential sentimentality of these photographs is counteracted by the manner in which they were captured," he says. "There is a tension between the indifferent robotic camera, and the human gaze that sees meaning and interprets narratives in these images. That tension is the essence of the project. People often say that technology is changing our perception of the world, changing our perception of reality, but I think that the inverse is also occurring—a technology becomes successful because it taps into something fundamental about contemporary consciousness, it expresses how we are already experiencing the world."

Some artists, however, are looking at another aspect unique to the use of Google imagery. Clement Valla, through his project *Postcards from Google Earth*, is finding the glitches and bugs unintentionally captured by Google Earth's lens and documenting them to comment on the mistakes resulting from technology's limitations. "Because Google Earth is continuously updating, there's kind of no archive of these particular moments or situations," he says. "So I thought it would be interesting to take them and print them as postcards."

The prevalence of Google's imagery and technology is already permeating the aesthetic of more traditional photography and even artists working in myriad disciplines from sculpture to street art. Manuel Vazquez still begins his process with taking his own pictures but later intergrates the aesthetic of surveillance imagery and Google Street View, as seen in his project *Lonely Crowd*, which incorporated the pixelated nature of digital works to convey the physical and emotional distances between strangers in a crowd. "The web has changed the way we access and read the city, through technologies that have shortened and broken the boundaries of space and time," he says. "It is like a walk with no specific destination, affecting time, space and perspective with every click. There is not a linearity of past-present-future. It feels like a continuous flow of information that is updated."

Interdisciplinary artist Aram Bartholl, meanwhile, has used Google imagery as the inspiration for some of his work but hardly produces only photography. Bartholl creates sculptural objects that represent virtual objects such as the red map marker icon found on Google Maps. "Services like Google Maps change the way we perceive the city," he says. "I remember once I had a parcel service on the phone claiming my address didn't exist because it couldn't be found on Google Maps." His works, which have been shown at *Rencontres d'Arles*, among other festivals, aim to explore how technology imitates reality and vice versa. "The map marker icon is just a 20 pixel interface on the screen, but when you switch to satellite mode and then zoom in more, it looks like it becomes part of the actual picture, casting a shadow on the city," he says. Despite the growing number of photographers who use Google in their works, it remains unclear how this technology will influence our perspective in photography—and perceptions of spatial reality—outside the virtual world.