Re-presentation: A Tactical Approach to 21st Century Visibility

Dr Meg Rahaim
Anglia Ruskin University

Nearing the end of the 20th century, Michel de Certeau described the discursive relationship between government and the governed as a strategic projection of visible power and control within which individuals were able to work tactically in resistance to, in spite of, or peripherally to that projection. Manipulating circumstances in ways the program of authority neither anticipated nor even took notice of, individuals’ production was invisible to that authority. In this circumstance, an individual’s agency was clearly dependent on the limits of her own visibility.¹

In the networked condition of the 21st century, everyday life takes on a radical visibility, differentiating itself from what came before, putting serious limitations on old forms of tactical creativity, and perhaps necessitating a new understanding of tactics, themselves. To consider the question of human agency today, instead of searching for examples of ‘Cultural techniques that camouflage economic reproduction’², we might look to forms of cultural production that are profoundly visible, including the work of art.

This work I will discuss today is part of a larger project of aligning aspects of de Certeau’s strategies and tactics with Vilém Flusser’s functionalism and ‘playing against the camera’³, in order to identify criteria for tactics in examples of creative production that still manage to operate in the heavily surveilled present. In this presentation, I will describe re-presentation as one such method, using examples from my own studio practice and others’. I argue that an engagement with digital imaging involving its re-presentation can constitute a tactical approach to image use and production not merely in spite of, but also enabled by, 21st century visibility.

Strategies and tactics in relation to visibility

Michel de Certeau describes the condition wherein the proper places of the city come into being through the strategic designation of authorities, e.g. streets, squares, parks. He contrasts place in this sense with space, what he describes as the production of the citizen’s tactical navigation of the city—and everyday life—outside the expectations of authority, e.g. the walk to work that instead of staying to the paved pathways, transgresses a manicured green space, or cuts through a private retail space. In order for citizens to express agency within the system in a sustained way, their expression must retain a level of invisibility. Once a path starts to wear noticeably into the green, the authority might respond by placing a barrier to foot traffic, or alternatively, introduce a paved path in its place. Tactical production does not attempt the destruction of authority or its designations. Tactics are folded into strategies, as they take the latter’s designations as a framework for production or performance. Likewise, strategic designations often arise from the appropriation of noticeable public behaviours.

Vilém Flusser’s account of the functionalist relationship between co-dependent human and photographic apparatus describes the condition of the individual in thrall to technology. The human and the camera constitute a circular trap wherein the work and desire of the human informs and effects the improvement and promotion of the apparatus in its evermore-dominant necessity in human communications. In this case, the strategic authority into which the individual is folded is not a governmental one, but a program of images.

Since photographs are publishable records of its user’s actions, this functionalism poses a challenge to the invisibility of tactical creativity described by de Certeau. The move to digital technology, in its infinite and instantaneous reproducibility, accelerates this functionalism, compromising human freedom in a more encompassing way. The current program of images effects a greater proliferation of images than its predecessors because it designates and maintains the innumerable conduits for copy and dissemination possible in the digital network. This program is successful, also, because it cannot be pinned down to a single individual or small body of participants. The program itself is as ubiquitous as culture, invisible in the growing crowd of end-users.

As can be seen in the examples of copious unread ‘I agree’ statements, public surveillance cameras, and online social networking, the ease, economy, and even enjoyment of digital image-production ensure people are visible in all aspects of their daily lives. Having no recourse to invisibility, individuals not only actively enfold themselves in the program, but offer themselves for its consumption.

Depresentation

I am interested in what motivates and perpetuates the trust that everyday interactions with image technology are benign and transparent, that what you see is what you get. Perhaps it is a willingness to accept that a thing is beyond my comprehension that allows me to overlook the

¹ Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life (London: University of California Press, 1984), 93: ‘The ordinary practitioners of the city live… below the thresholds at which visibility begins… They are walkers… whose bodies follow the thick and thins of an urban text they write without being able to read it’.
² Ibid, 29.
³ Vilém Flusser, Toward a Philosophy of Photography (London: Reaktion Books, 1983), ‘Playing against the camera’ is a methodology he presents for resisting this condition.
material processes that compose aspects of everyday life, including the role of human labour in digital production. There are certainly aspects of the digital tools I use that obscure their own materiality and origins. Marianne van den Boomen presents an example of this in the elements of interface design such as the ‘desktop’ and ‘buttons’, showing that material processes are ‘ontologized and represented to us as readable signs, that is as material metaphors’, but that our understanding can only go so far as what is represented and metaphorized for us onscreen.\(^4\) Van den Boomen gives the deliberate act of selective representation the name ‘depresentation’. The computer interface design presents to its users ‘an ontologized stable state, while representing the procedural complexity’.\(^5\)

Depresentation is an important and unavoidable aspect of digital materiality. It is enacted in a number of ways, some spectacular, others more culturally engrained or ideological. It is because of deliberate depresentation that image technology, both plain to the senses and requiring physical interaction, comes to be treated as immaterial, disposable, ephemeral, inconsequential, and without strategic origin.

Resistence

Both de Certeau and Flusser acknowledged opportunities to employ methods of non-oppositional resistance, centring on invention, subversion, and the production of the unexpected. De Certeau’s tactics work within a system in ways it could not have anticipated, and which constitute a significature beyond the analysis of authorities. In Toward a Philosophy of Photography, Flusser suggests that though most users of cameras are uninterested in the implications of camera use for human freedom, some users, specifically experimental photographers, seek to resist the functionalist relationship, ‘consciously attempting to produce unpredictable information, i.e. to release themselves from the camera, and to place within the image something that is not in its program’.\(^6\) Flusser equates this ‘playing against the camera’ with the possibility for human freedom, offering a brief and generalized list of methods: ‘outwit the camera’s rigidity’, ‘smuggle human intentions into its program’, ‘force the camera to produce the unpredictable, the improbable, the informative’, and ‘show contempt for the camera and its creations and turn one’s interest away from the thing’.\(^7\)

In my own daily image-use, I recognize places within images that afford me brief recognition that some sort of depresentation is at work, the jerky malfunction of an animated gif, the slow, cartographic scan of a large uploading image, the disappearance/reappearance of overlaid graphic indicators in a mapping application. These are moments when I do not necessarily see more, but am made aware that there are things at work that I cannot see, the visibility of an invisibility.

Those moments when material interaction evokes instances of visibility, open spaces for tactical intervention in the digital image through reframing or re-presenting an image-object or particular technology. I look to examples of artists whose work with digital imaging apparatuses interrogates the technology’s hidden social function or means of production. These practices, as well as those I adopt in my own studio practice, employ a methodology of ‘playing against’, revealing them to be tactical despite their inherent visibility.\(^8\)

Re-presentation

‘Re-presentation’ is a term I use for methods by which the re-contextualisation of strategically produced image technology reveals some hidden, ignored or depresented aspect of its origin. In each of the works I will discuss, there is some depresented aspect of the technology that is re-presented through the production of an artwork. It can be by the use of found or appropriated imagery, but it can also be through the sustained performance of a particular technology that some deliberately depresented aspect is revealed.

As a form of tactics, re-presentation is a gesture of non-oppositional resistance, seeking to produce knowledge in image form rather than to destroy the strategically produced original. In my practice, I work with mapping and GPS technologies to consider the balance between the passing away of lived experience and the creative production of an account or narrative that can be shared and interpreted. The works I discuss here are also to do with locative imaging technologies, more specifically, Google Earth and Google Street View. Mapping technologies, and Google’s in particular because of its ubiquity, allows artists to address not only the specific issues to do with those platforms, but more engrained cultural myths to do with truth, representation, and objectivity.

In searching the digital everyday for the material signature of depresentation, one phenomenon in particular seemed to me to reflect its purpose for and effect upon its human users. At any designated location in Google Street View, many images taken simultaneously

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5. Ibid, 256.

6. Flusser, Toward a Philosophy, 81.

7. Ibid, 80.

8. In Michel de Certeau’s The Practice of Everyday Life, the tactical performance of the individual in the city is opposed to the strategic designation of city infrastructure and rule of law. The individual is able to employ tactics creatively and invisibly because she does so in ways that are unexpected by, and so invisible to, the authority. I call for a tactics of visibility because the pervasive surveillance in network society has made it impossible to act invisibly. This entails the continuation of putting strategically designated items to use in unexpected ways, but it is not expected to achieve invisibility and could even be seen as doing so in spite of its visibility.
by vehicle-mounted cameras are algorithmically stitched together into a hemispherical dome in order to create the eventual onscreen illusion of continuous 720 degrees of space. At ‘eye level’, the transition from one source image to the next is often undetectable, but by clicking and dragging that image downward, a look at the sky in GSV reveals a small something else. Reminiscent of the meeting of the paper strips that compose the surface of a globe, the source images at the apex of the sky come together noticeably (Fig. 1). They stretch, squeeze and compress the material of the discreet digital images, making a spectacular, little pattern.

In a series of prints entitled God’s Eyes, I use images of sky as seen through the filter of this algorithmically generated composite in order to examine the relationship between the particulate nature of a subject matter (clouds in sky) and a pixelated distortion which disrupts the illusionistic space within the image (Figs. 2, 3, and 4). In making them into prints, I am interested in the way a heavily mediated envisioning might unintentionally interact with the world outside Google. Torn from context, their striations evoke a constricted iris and a closed aperture, a disembodied eye that cannot see.

These heavily pixelated images give away their mode of construction not by a simple scaling up, but by the disruption of illusion. Upon first noticing them, I stopped thinking about ‘where I was’ in GSV and became more aware of the entire application’s status as illusion. When looking at an image of the ever-changing sky, what is pictured is not likely still to be.

The title God’s Eyes refers to a Native American tradition of winding brightly coloured yarn around crossed wooden sticks to make the concentric pattern that is a symbol of godly omniscience, a practice once widely adopted as a children’s handicraft in the US, and of which I made many as a child myself (Fig. 5). The notion of human hands forming the all-seeing eyes of God resonates with the allegedly benign—however depresented—corporate surveillance committed through the digital god’s eyes, Google Street View and its sister, Google Earth.

Clement Valla’s Postcards from Google Earth, a project of digital image collection, operates tactically to reveal the seams within this same ubiquitous program of images that Valla calls ‘a database disguised as a photographic representation’. His collection re-presents that ‘depresented’ database by alerting the viewer to the disguise. By pointing out the gaps in algorithmic vision through images portraying the surreal breakdown of infrastructure, the work points to the role of human labour in the designed aspect of the application itself. Bridges over bodies of water are often the most visually striking examples of the phenomenon he charts—images suggesting disaster that land somewhere between the natural and human-made.

Jon Rafman’s Nine Eyes of Google Street View project also concerns itself with moments of discontinuity—the glitch that produces the unexpectedly poetic. It is not only the limitations of the platform that is re-presented, however. It is the intention of Google Street View made clear by the recognition of moments of unanticipated human drama, or the just, plain puzzling, before the eyes of the GSV car. The title of the work refers to the nine camera lenses used to create these images, and the importance of GSV as a context for these images in further emphasized by Rafman’s retention of the navigational icons and copyright text from the original screenshot.

The work of photographer Doug Rickard also uses Google Street View to picture places at a distance to the photographer. Instead of collapsing this distance, however, those images in Rickard’s New American Picture, a series depicting contemporary American poverty, accentuate the distance between bourgeois artist-voyeur and unknowing, marginalized subject precisely because of its digital, networked, and remotely captured source.

Unlike Rafman, Rickard removes the copyright, metadata, and navigation tools from his images, perhaps in an effort to have them read more like traditional documentary photography. Replete with pixelation, blurred faces, glitching image-stitching, and the familiar perspective of the GSV car, however, the source remains recognizable. In this way, what they likewise re-present is separation and ultimately the photographer’s absence from the pictured scene. Their poor image quality coupled with the felt presence of the screen rejects any promise of knowledge in close inspection before the desirous curiosity can effect a grasp.

I feel empty rather than empathetic when I look at these images of human deprivation, their material origins the automatic product of an inhuman eye. A focused exploration of photographic distance, poverty, and voyeurism, these works reveal the way in which such technologies enable certain social behaviours and misunderstandings. Google is not an objective equalizer, but only reinforces privileges and divisions that already exist.

Conclusion

There is a great challenge in working with the reproducible images today to acknowledge the novel ways in which the technologies we utilize complicate the meaning of those images. Each of these artists, not printmakers necessarily, do seem to take what I see as a particular disciplinary concern of printmaking in their work. This
concern is the way the process by which an image comes to be, the process of its mediation and material context, informs its interpretation. The ways in which these works are presented reflects this. In the case of Valla, the works were given away at exhibition as actual postcards, playing on the infinite availability of the digital multiple. Rafman’s work began as a tumblr, the studio wall or shoebox of precious clippings updated for sharing in the digital age. He eventually came to accept other people’s GSV finds on it, and later published many of the photos in print and book form. Rickard’s works are presented as photographic prints and also available as a book, again playing on notions of the photographer’s absence/presence, authorship, and the reconciliation of human gaze to the non-human eye.

I admit I do not fully understand the everyday digital technologies I use. Instead, I acknowledge my misunderstanding in a practice that reflects on and seeks to clarify it through the practice of re-presentation. I can embrace the black box as a fundamental and informative aspect of my practice without ignoring the ‘depresentation’ it enables. I can be wary of my own dependence on provided cultural forms of image and communication by using them to interrogate the cultural mythologies they perpetuate.

Works Cited


Figure 1 (above) A view of the sky in Google Street View
Figure 2 (below) Gods Eye IV, 2013, digital inkjet print, 80x80cm
Figure 3 (above) 
*Gods Eye II*, 2013, digital inkjet print

Figure 4 (below) 
*Gods Eye II*, detail
Figure 5 An example of a “Gods Eye” handicraft object

For images of relevant works by Clement Valla, Jon Rafman, and Doug Rickard, please use the following links:

http://www.postcards-from-google-earth.com

http://9-eyes.com

http://www.dougrickard.com/a-new-american-picture/