Turning Inward

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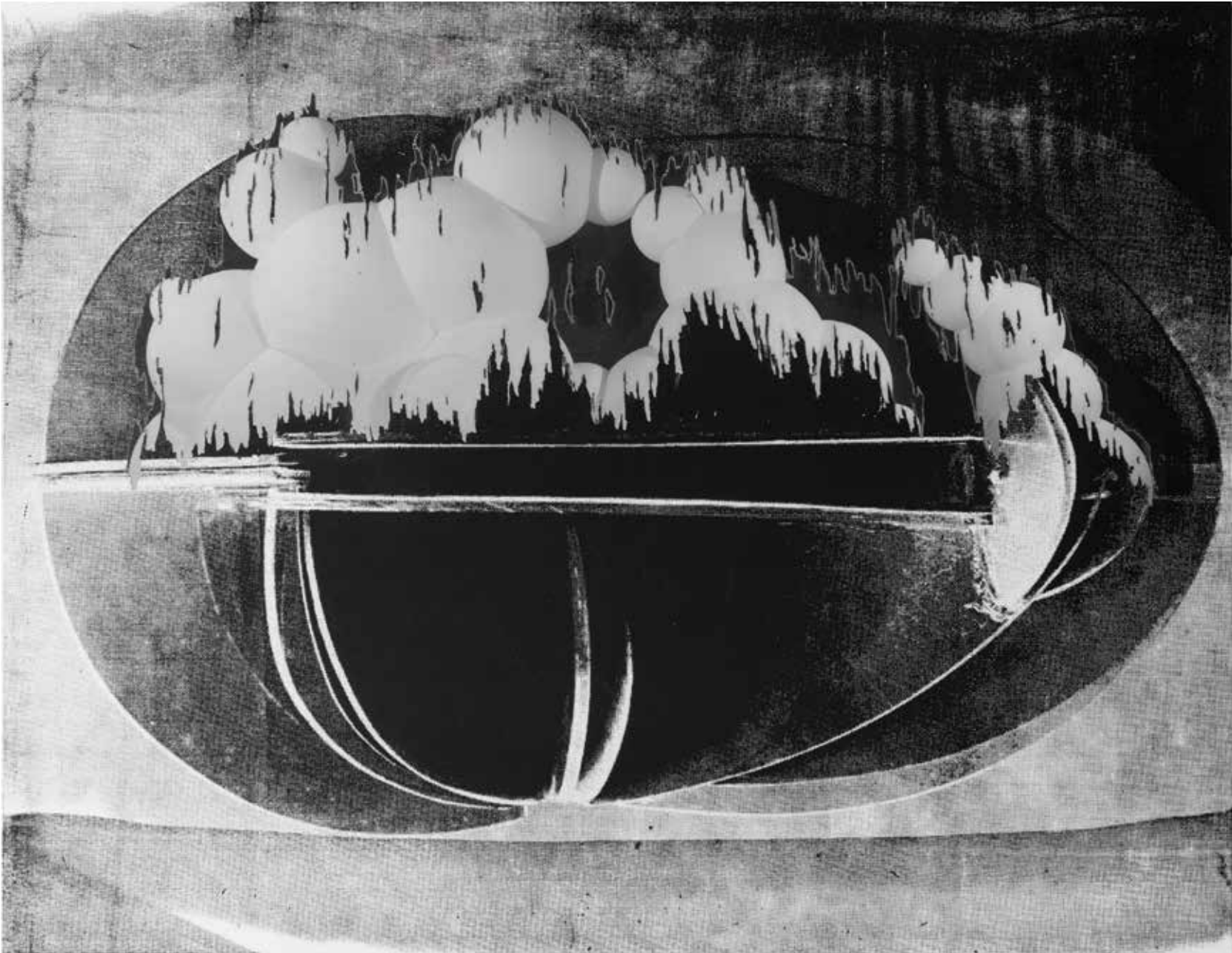


Lou Cantor

Prologue

The Fundamental Limit to Precision

In the 1990 David Lynch movie, *Wild at Heart*, O. O. Spool, played by Jack Nance, presents a puzzling anecdote about "his dog" to Sailor and Lula. As he describes the nature of his relationship with his dog – who is always with him – Spool notes that whatever image of his dog Sailor and Lula might have constructed from the anecdote, their image is most likely wrong since he has not mentioned what kind of a dog he has. Spool's oration recalls Berkeley's critique of abstract ideas contained in his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge.* For Berkeley, such ideas are useless for communication since when they are used in dialogue, they evoke different pictures in the minds of interlocutors and, therefore, paradoxically *prevent* them from sharing in a given experience. Even if we don't go so far as to say that we are fundamentally isolated from other minds, we have to accept that the bounds of communication are very narrow, and, similar to the Big Ear,[1] most of what we hear is merely the echo of what we have said to ourselves before.

Lou Cantor,
Scratch-Off IV, 2012
Courtesy of the artist

The urge to seek and describe common experience and the status of the projected self in the examination and relay of such experiences shapes the mode of collaboration I adopted working with Paweł Althamer on *Clouds*. The aim of the work was not only to mimic the quality of the sensation of identifying different characteristics or "objects" in the shapes of clouds, a common experience which

1. The Ohio State University Radio Observatory was a Kraus-type radio telescope located at the Perkins Observatory at Ohio Wesleyan University from 1963 to 1998. Known as "Big Ear," the observatory was part of The Ohio State University's Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project.

Paweł Althamer
and Lou Cantor,
Clouds, 2012
Le Léman, Geneva
Courtesy of the artists

presents a scope for interpretation as broad and diverse as the minds of the people viewing the clouds, but also to segment the working process in such a way that the ensuing sculpture gathers extra layers of interpretation – or even misinterpretation – throughout the production process.

A key point of interest in works like *Clouds* is that of how a symbol, allegory or reference can be intersubjective and to what extent sharing an experience is essential to common understanding. At the same time, works like *Clouds* investigate what exactly it means to share an idea.

Axis Mundi or How We Share Native Ideas

No matter which way we look there is always a horizon. At these limits, objects blur in distance, time, resolution or recognition. The periphery of our perception is shady, orotund and rich in the potential for illusion

and allusion. It is a space where we may situate our fears but also our hopes and desires. As the center of our consciousness is ultimately individual (or at least we like to see it this way), such cognitive borderlands largely overlap with the apprehension of others. This happens to a greater extent if the Other shares our background, experience or cultural reference points, and less so if he/she is culturally distant to us. Such a spatialized model of perception extends to communities, and it is often projected onto other phenomena.

Lou Cantor,
Scratch-Off III, 2012
Courtesy of the artist

Throughout history, almost all cultures described their own motherland as the center of the universe. For example, the most common name for the territory known as "China" in the West is "Zhongguo," where first the character zhōng (中) means "central" and second guó (國/国) means "state." Such a construction expresses the ancient belief that the country was located in the center of the world. Many known cultures would frequently choose a special spot, usually a mountain or other elevated location, to be seen as the center of the center – the axis mundi. In Japan, this is Fuji San. It is Mount Kun-Lun in China, and the Black Hills for the Sioux. The world's axial point could also be represented by a plant, most often a tree the Bodhi under which Gautama Siddhartha sat on the night he attained enlightenment, Yggdrasil in Norse mythology, or Thor's Oak in pre-Christian German myth, and perhaps most importantly, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in Genesis. Less frequently, different plants, usually those containing psychoactive substances like Fly Agaric mushroom in some parts of Russia, would be regarded as the universal axis. New universal centers are created all the time, often without any direct influence of already existing mythologies. Curiously, elevated landmarks like the Palace of Culture in Warsaw or the Empire State Building in New York would receive letters addressed to fictional characters like faeries or Santa Claus. The emergence of such a spatial modeling in conceptualizing reality may suggest an a priori condition of our thinking that makes different people in different situations think along similar lines, a kind of cognitive axis mundi. Such parallel mythologies can, on the one hand, be interpreted as

illusions – patterns we tend to project onto whatever phenomenon is available – and, therefore, we may discount them as mistaken or products of a tendency to reshape the world along anthropic lines. Or we could consider them, however wrongly conceived, as tantalizing insights into the foundations of common ideas, what eighteenth-century philosophers like Berkeley and earlier writers like Locke described as Common Notions – the bases of human cognition. If we decide to do this, we will perhaps learn very little about the subject of our observation, but considerably more about why and how we share particular points of vision.

Spatial interdependence is the dependence of outcomes in some units of a structure on those in other areas of a structure or network. This is a central concept throughout the literature of comparative political and social science. "Everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things."[2] Moreover, "space is more than geography,"[3] the sense of proximity in Tobler's Law, and so the pathways along which interdependence between systems may operate, extend well beyond simple physical distance and bordering. Applications of spatial modeling have expanded recently, due to global changes that have enhanced the perception of interconnectivity as well as developments in technology for obtaining and working with spatial data in innovative ways. I am interested in how the use of such modeling, despite being rarely applied to the field of culture, could be helpful in illustrating phenomena. Such an approach reveals our present era as being something like The Decade of Pictures.

If contemporary art's strength lies in its ability to generate heterogeneous formats and its dynamic mechanisms for aggregating content, through the absorption of the products of other disciplines like philosophy, science, pop culture, or advertising, then in order to fully understand the path the art piece in an age of digital reproduction has undergone, we can actually apply policy distribution models originally developed for statistical analysis.

2. The "first law of geography," according to the American-Swiss geographer and cartographer Waldo Tobler (University of California).

3. Nathaniel Beck, "Space Is More than Geography: Using Spatial Econometrics in the Study of Political Economy," New York University (March 2006), http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/politics/faculty/beck/isq_reprint.pdf.

The velocity of transformations of cultural agents, such as images, experiences a geometric progression as interconnectiveness is constantly increasing at rates previously inconceivable. Using the statistical model known as the Poisson Distribution as a point of reference, we may expect similar outcomes simultaneously occurring in different fields, and I think this is the reality of contemporary cultural production. What makes the application of such models particularly useful is their capacity to encompass a diversity of phenomena that can be considered as an integrated system, no matter how heterogeneous such phenomena are, as a byproduct of the interconnectiveness of the elements composing the phenomena.

"Thatcher illusion,"[4] cars getting angry and being watched

Our perception is also undergoing a fundamental change that reaches perhaps beyond the McLuhan-esque paradigm of technological determinism.[5] Past decades showed how we have transformed from simple Homo Sapiens to Turing Man; our imagination now resembles the interfaces of the devices we use, and even the questions we ask ourselves seem to be Google-search friendly. Extensive amounts of knowledge processing and memory are exported to electronic devices, and rapidly progressing miniaturization presents the prospect that these "smart" devices will no longer be external to our bodies. Yet some things can't be processed with computers: absurdity, misreadings, mistakes – in such a context, human error might very well be our most valuable asset.

Naturally our brains are programmed to see some phenomena as groups of individual objects and others as systems, a human face would be a good example of the latter processing schema. This is counter to the perceptual schema applied to a tree with its trunk, branches, and leaves, or even parts of the body like legs, arms, and fingers – which we see as sets of elements. The face is seen as a system constructed of features, distances between them, and the ratio of those distances in relation to each other. Because of this, it

4. The effect is named after the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979–91) on whose photograph the effect was first and most famously demonstrated. Psychology Professor Peter Thompson originally coined the term in 1980. See: Thompson, "Margaret Thatcher: A New Illusion," *Perception* 9 (1980), 483–484.

5. Bolter, J. David, *Turing's Man: Western Culture in the Computer Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

becomes more unlikely to detect local feature changes in an upside-down image of a face, despite identical changes being obvious in an upright representation. Another consequence of such a perception mode is face pareidolia, a psychological phenomenon entailing the recognition of a vague stimulus as significant. It provides the basis for us recognizing familiar shapes, most often faces, in unrelated representations or abstract patterns or, for example, clouds. Research by Takahashi and Watanabe suggests that pareidolia faces do more than give the impression of the presence of faces, they trigger an additional face-specific attentional process. Pareidolia faces give people a strong impression that a face is present in an object, and this impression is accompanied by face-related brain activity. The feelings generated by this process is common enough to allow so-called Virgin Mary toast, i.e. toast with burn patterns resembling representations of the Virgin Mary from art, to reach the top of "Most Viewed" news story lists and to have a casino paying nearly $30,000 for exhibiting the sandwich.

Again, because we perceive faces as systems they may remain functional even with the actual features replaced, for this reason we are able to read "emotions" of specially designed robots or masks. Interestingly the features of such robots or masks do not have to resemble the natural appearance of a person. Moreover, the synthetic face might be easier to relate to because it avoids triggering the Uncanny Valley experience.[6] From this perspective one could reconsider the mask and its alleged *Verfremdungseffekt* to suggest that the defamiliarization happens not by dissonance between the actor and mask, but by the direct application of the mask onto the audience.

This same notion of direct eye contact has also been, literally, built into car design in recent years. Research shows that most clients relate to the car's "face" and the choice they will make while buying their next vehicle will depend more on how much they can emotionally identify with the car's appearance than how well they appreciate the car's

6. The so-called Uncanny Valley describes a phenomenon observed by Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori. Following the hypothesis that the more humanlike a robot looks, the more familiar it appears to humans, Mori observed that this causal relation only goes up to a specific point, at which subtle flaws in a robot's appearance begin to make it seem uncanny (e.g. through a cold prosthetic hand that is associated with a dead body). In Mori's familiarity vs. human likeness graph, this sudden drop of familiarity appears as a "valley."

technical capacities. "The headlights seem to make eye contact the same way people do on the street," says the Dodge and Chrysler designer Ralph Gilles, adding, perhaps troublingly, "a mean face is what we're going for." In recent years, cars have become "angry," not as a matter of the traditional expressions of automotive aggression, increased horsepower, or size, but through the design of the car's "eyes," its headlights. The new millennium has seen a transition in automotive design from daisy-adorned Volkswagen Beetles to much harder-visaged vehicles. In 1995, the Dodge Neon featured in an ad campaign displaying the car's friendly face and the slogan "Hi." Last spring, however, Dodge released the Neon's replacement, the Caliber, with the campaign slogan: "It's Anything But Cute."

Lou Cantor,
Damage Control, 2014
Courtesy of the artist

Like holy mountains and spiritual mushrooms, we establish emotional relationships with commercial emissaries as well. These relationships can have social implications, eye contact with cars, cartoon figures on cornflake boxes and being watched by a pair of printed eyes changes our behavior in ways which are traditionally associated with human interaction, or at least interaction with animate beings.[7] What exactly does this dynamic tell us about our perception and the field of intersubjectivity? Particularly interesting are the ways in which we share certain modes of thinking, for example, how an image of a mask, regardless of how culturally distant it may be from our native culture, remains understandable on perhaps an intuitive level. I'm interested in how such non-knowledge or "pre-knowledge" can be addressed in developing communication strategies. A number of questions follow from the proposition: What kind of intellectual properties guide the change in global tastes from a preference for "nice" to "angry" cars? To what extent are these changes interconnected with technological advances, social unrest and political economy? How is the emotional relationship with an inanimate object established? How does an object transform from being a commodity to a symbol? To what extent can a creation of such communicative value be engineered? Such questions can begin to be addressed by examining how objects with preexisting

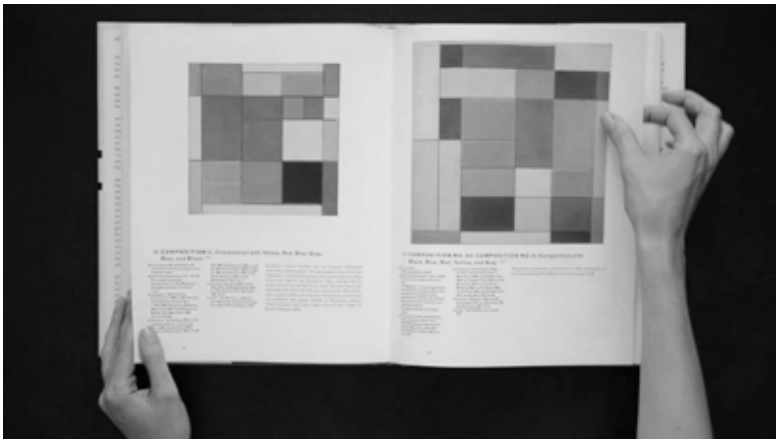
7. Researchers at Newcastle University found out that bicycle thefts decreased by 62% at locations where watching eyes posters were installed.

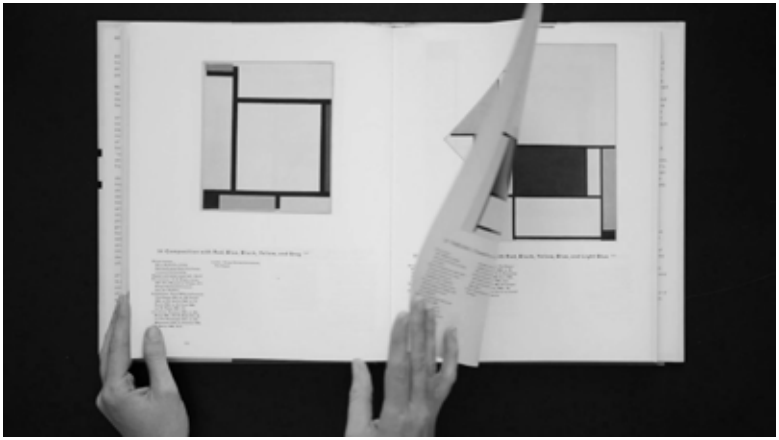
interpretations and cultural meanings can be “re-engineered” to take on different roles in different contexts. Such moments of transition provide opportunities wherein one narrative can be read or misread, as the object shifts its status and assumes a place in another field of signification and meaning. When I use, for example, crash test barriers I build the narrative on a reading that was not intended by EuroNCAP[8] engineers and is directed at different ends. Such recontextualizations need not be hermetic, in fact, they cannot be, I am eager to examine how my own reading could be shared, and, indeed, how it cannot be shared. How meaning and exchange “crash” just like cars.

8. *European New Car Assessment Programme*

As Nietzsche once observed, “each [drive] has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm.”[9] Therefore, such sites and contexts of meaning exchange require a high level of awareness of social and cultural positioning which is itself inscribed in the cognitive principles it explores. In such a model there must be the subjective center and the more intersubjective periphery. Yet, communication can only happen on a shared field, and what we share can only be described as a system where images, objects and language are presented to minds composed of common cognitive faculties. The price of ideas being able to understand each other is the isolation that makes mutual understanding such an uncertain business.

9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Random House, 1968), 267n.481.





Lou Cantor,
Known Unknowns, 2014
Video
Courtesy of the artist