

PANOSCOPIA

The Panoramic Photography of Luc Courchesne

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The popular success of the painted panorama in the nineteenth-century hinged, according to social historian Stephan Oettermann, on its popularization of the controlling gaze[1]. By climbing to a vantage point such as a hill, tower or rooftop, an artist could command a sweeping 360-degree view of a city or landscape. The aim was to deliver that commanding view to the paying public. Great pains were taken to reproduce the scene as accurately as possible on an immense, circular canvas. A specialized architecture developed to house the bird's-eye images, brought to ground. The open-air vantage point was replaced by an indoor observation deck, separated from the wraparound wall upon which the canvas was stretched by an intervening space. The gap recreated a sense of distance vision in the closed exhibition space to which the open sweep of society and nature was now profitably confined.

The sense of distance was reinforced in the image by the horizon line, extending laterally in both directions from any point and joining in a circle behind. In traditional landscape painting, the horizon had been a destabilizing element. It exerted a lateral pressure, inviting the eye to wander beyond the left and right limits of the frame, seduced by the suggestion of an open vista. The opening of a lateral vista was a threat to conventional perspective organized around the central vanishing point. The vanishing point created a privileged axis in the dimension of depth, running from the eyes of the viewer to a point where the representational space receded to an infinite distance. The infinite regress was an extension of order. It connoted that the principles of linearity and symmetry governing the foreground composition extended indefinitely to all of space, making the scene shown a selected segment of a universal order. On the opposite end of the same axis, in the viewing space before the canvas, lay a corresponding vanishing point where the objective order projected into the mind's eye of the observer, receding into the infinite proximity of subjectivity. The reciprocity of the two poles assured the participation of the subject and the object of sight in the same order, that of representation, across their difference in nature and in spite of their essential exteriority to one another. The pull of the horizon was an ever-present threat of distortion of this balanced order. The horizon is the paradox of a line that encircles, wrapping distance dizzyingly around into an immersion. The eye of the observer, enveloped in a deformation of its objective correlate, is no longer an ideal point projected out of space in a way that guarantees its order. It is more a black hole bunching the fabric of space, dead centre. Safely distanced, outside perspective is compromised. To parry this threat, such mechanisms as double-framing were used. The lateral pressure of the horizon could be contained, for example, by placing the vanishing point in a view out a window frame, or by doubling the sides of the actual frame with vertical architectural or natural features in the painted scene to

cut the horizontal drift and channel the wandering eye back to the depth-axis that centres perspective.

The painted panorama liberated the horizon line. Representation was now allowed latitude. But the horizontal extension was accomplished using techniques that actually intensified the traditional order. Formally, the scene was a composite of a number of segments, each ordered according to the conventions of perspective, with its own vanishing point. Mathematical formulae were used to correct the distortion created by bending the flat perspectival surfaces so that the segments could be connected to form a circle. The vanishing points of the joined segments stood out as privileged viewpoints, structuring the composition. The panoramic image did not in fact break with traditional perspective, but multiplied it. The viewer on the observation deck would turn in a controlled circle to follow the scene from one central perspective to the next. Order now radiated laterally in all directions for the untravelling visual tourist, treated to an awe-inspiring view of a most particular place at the same time as a representational performance of universalized knowledge. The horizon was tamed. It was now not a threat to the infinite extension of knowledge, but a popularized performance of it. The first panoramas were in fact scientific study aids for the accurate description of inaccessible mountain topographies: the peaks of knowledge pared down to size for public viewing pleasure.

Contrast with that the present-day panoramic photography of Luc Courchesne. The images are captured automatically rather than constructed using rule-bound procedures that give them an air of representational authority. They are lifted out of the flow of the artist's everyday life, more like chance samplings than logical segments. Each bears a date, tethering them to a singular moment. The moments link together as an itinerary through lands foreign and familiar. Since the images do not on the whole present recognizable landmarks or follow a publicly available rule of progression, whether of a tourist trip or a cultural documentary, their spatial order comes across to the viewer as ephemeral as their dating. Even the foreign images are singularly everyday, presenting generic activities, associated with transport, dining, socializing and business, with a tinge of strangeness. The viewer is not positioned, as in the painted panorama, to enjoy the spectacle of the particular, awe-inspiringly integrated into universal order. The images overshoot the particular toward the singularly familiar, and fall short of the universal in the generically strange. These two dimensions occur together, ephemerally, in the image, in a gentle unresolved tension, as between magnetic poles, compassing a seemingly chance itinerary, a life-drift. The viewer is not masterfully positioned. He or she is disposed to feel a vague, attractive tension, polarized tug to enter the drift.

November 2, 2000: Two blue railings bracket the centre-point like metallic lids. The centre-point is composed of two differently shaded concentric circles, a grey iris and a black pupil. The pupil is not part of the image per se. It is its constitutive blind spot. It is blank because it is the spot occupied by the camera mounted with a panoramic lens with which the scene was shot. It is the black hole of representation parried by traditional panoramic practice. Here it unabashedly appears, standing in the image for

its mechanical origin, as well as standing in for the artist's body, eclipsed by the lens to which he owes the image. The double origin of the image, mechanical and human, is twice removed, in a single spot. It is into that removal that the viewer is drawn. Since the black hole takes the place of the traditional vanishing point, it attracts the eye, exerting a centripetal force drawing the observer into the image at a paradoxical point where its emergence coincides with its eclipse, and where the body of the artist, the imaging apparatus and the eye of the observer collapse together. Rather than projecting a universal order, the image implodes into a singularity, this time in a sense close to the meaning of the word in physics, where a black hole is termed a "singularity" where normally separate moments in time and points in space bunch into a pure immanence from which nothing, not even light, escapes, and which therefore cannot be observed from the outside.

In this case, the image unfolds as it implodes. The eye is no sooner drawn in than a countervailing centrifugal force pulls it back out. The horizon pulls from the centre-point to the periphery, where it describes a third concentric circle. This encircling is less a line than a fringe. It has a blurred thickness, across which the image fades infinitely into the distance in all directions. The photograph is not so much framed as it is fringed with its own fading out. Unlike the painted panorama, the distortions produced by projecting a curved surface onto a flat surface, in this case, glass plates, are not corrected for. The distortion increases toward the fringe. The persistent distortion forbids the fade into the distance from coming across simply as an objective representation of an external view. It marks it as belonging to the image and its process of production. The image has unfolded from the immanence at its heart only to envelop its own distance.

If we try to imagine the flat surface of the photographic image projected back into three-dimensionality, it makes as much sense, in the image's own distorted terms, to see the fade-out of the fringe folding back around to rejoin the central eclipse, yielding a torus or donut shape, as it is to construe it as a spherical band as in the traditional panorama. The panoramic photographic plate suggests its own alternate visual geometry. By folding its outer limit back into itself, the image asserts itself as a form of interiority. It is not so much a represented segment of an outside objective sight as it is a *monadic sampling* of vision. The monad, says Leibniz, has no windows. It is a pure interiority, yet it connects with the outside: by enveloping it in itself. The point at which the outside enters, the crease, the in-folding, appears as an interior emptiness: the hole in the donut of vision. The black hole of representation at the heart of the image is the trace in it of the process of its production and of the principle of its form. It is where the image most wholly shows *itself*.

The in-creased tension between the centre and the fringe sets a visual rhythm in motion. The eye of the observer tends to swing back and forth between them across the photographic scene that the image, in itself, contains. When the eye pauses on the content unfolding from the central singularity, the rhythm of the eye's movement continues in place. The bipolar attraction to the fringe and to the centre transforms into an immobile movement, a pulsing. This is a pulsing of vision to which no actual

element of sight corresponds: a virtual visual movement induced by the paradoxical form of the image as a monadic whole; a kind of formal giddiness animating every point in the image with a pull in two directions at once; a pan from centre to periphery and back again without any actual displacement. The effect of this *immobile pan* is slightly dizzying.

It is at this point that the image moves out of itself, but not toward a possible extension of a representational order in an outside world. It moves out of itself further into its blind spot: in other words, toward non-visual sensings. The slight dizziness of the image activates the viewer's sense of balance by gently throwing it off. Recent studies have shown that the sense of balance always works by gently throwing itself off. The body generates continual kinesthetic noise, quasi-chaotic micromovements. Its sense of balance is its constant nonconscious correction of this sway. Standing in place in balance is not actually a stasis. What we experience as stasis is a minimal degree of nonconscious kinesthetic activity in place, ready to unfold into actual movement at any moment: activity on the verge of emerging. This quasi-chaotic nature of this nonconscious experience of emergent activity only enters awareness when a troubling of the body's active capacities short-circuits the actual emerging into action. This short-circuiting of action in its incipience enters awareness as vertigo.

The dizziness in the panoramic image triggers a conscious experience of the body's base state of emergent activity. In so doing, it gives a kinesthetic content to the virtual visual movement. The pulsing of vision in the image is doubled by this inter-sense switch to the kinesthetic sway of active incipience. The content of the image is now doubly irreducible to what is actually seen. The sight seen is inhabited by a virtual movement of vision, seconded by proto-activity in a non-visual sense register that is felt short of actually emerging: a two-fold virtual dynamic. The image is thus internally dynamized, in and out of vision, without actual activity or interaction. This inter-sense pulse-switch-sway is a kind of itinerancy *of* the image. This itinerancy in place intensively recalls the life-drift sampled extensively in the stringing together of singular-generic moments across the photographic series. The virtual dynamic recapitulates, interior to each image, the life-drift between images extending across the series.

This has an important consequence for the nature of the photographic series. If the images in the series had the kind of naturalistic, representational framing of perspective painting, painstakingly multiplied in the traditional panorama, then they would potentially connect at their peripheries. A spatial order would radiate from each image, suggesting a possible connection between images that could be effectively mapped, given enough information. The connection between images would be guaranteed, even in its actual absence from representation, by an easily prolonged, fixed spatial order. There would be no obstacle in principle to filling in the gaps in representation. In Courchesne's photographic series, on the other hand, the gapping is constitutive. The periphery does not extend outward in orderly geometric fashion, but folds distortedly back in. Because of this, its content is not reducible to a

visual scene, and thus cannot be fully rendered as a spatial form. The image contains a virtual dynamic, more temporal (pulse-switch-sway) than spatial in nature. All of this adds up to an experience. The content of Courchesne's images is experiential. Experiences do not connect geometrically in three-dimension. They connect processually, in many dimensions, including dimensions of felt intensity that inhabit the sight seen, but do not show.

To remain *images of experience* - as opposed to images of what is given to experience - the photographs in Courchesne's series cannot possibly connect at their fringes. They must connect virtually in their blind spots. The blind spot is not only the trace in the image of the unfolding of its process, its mechanical coming to be at the hands of the artist. It is also the point of entry of the viewer's multi-sensory re-experiencing of the image's interior unfolding. The drawing of the viewer into the black hole of the image is its immanent re-beginning. The viewing is not just the delivery of a represented segment of the artist's life. It is a bringing integrally back to life of the interior unfolding of the image, as a new experience. This *reanimation* of the image, beginning again from its own eclipse, is the processual connection between the images in the series. It is that blind-spotted reliving that moves across the series with the viewer's gaze. The photographs are strung together on it as on an invisible connecting thread of reascent experience.

The form of the images is a monadic dynamic that draws the viewer in for an experience: a truly, effectively *immersive perspective*. This is not a perspective in the traditional sense of an outside view onto a naturalistic scene. It is an interior perspective on life, as technologically image-assisted. Although Courchesne's panoramic photographs are actually still, the virtual dynamic they contain qualify them as interactive. Not just snapshots: *still interactions*.

And then there is the hand. It cups the black hole-iris in its palm, as if to steady the image and deliver it from its own giddiness. Another non-visual sensing is added to the process. The seer is invited to become a toucher. His or her hand can extend toward the artist's hand in the image, and give the glass plate on which it is mounted a spin, countering his apparent steadying. The image is put back in motion, but it is a derivative movement that is applied to the image from the outside rather than arising in the interiority of the image. The vision-kinesthesia switch relays again into tactility. At this juncture, the image folds out of itself without folding back in. If the viewer is aware of his or her kinesthetic sensing, it is now of the hand motion: the determinate activity issuing from its emergent base state. The viewer is seeing actively in front of the image, at a safe distance from which it can be manipulated. This issuing into action stills the virtual dynamic interior to the image. The tactile interaction has transformed the live interactive still into an objectively spinning still life. Not until the spinning stops will the image regain its animate sway. The invitation to touch and spin the glass plate unfolds the image in an actual interaction. This constitutes a *translation* of it into another dynamic, in which the image features as an object, approachable from the outside. It is re-given to an outside perspective where sight at an objective distance can relay into a touch.

The interaction inside the 360-degree screen apparatus Courchesne calls the "panoscope" is another actualizing translation of the immersive perspective. The projection of the image in 360-degree surround places the viewer in a situation more similar to that of the traditional panorama observer. The body is free to actively swivel to take in the view. The whole-body swivel repeats the spin of the plate, translated from a movement of the seen object into an objective movement of vision. The transformation into a traditional panorama does not, however, go all the way. The image is still automatically captured, so that it is still more a life sampling than a logical perspective segment. The small scale of the surround screen also sets up a tension between close and distance vision. What had been a distorted fringe becomes an effective horizon where the image recedes into a represented distance. But the fact that the represented distance is seen close at hand, without the traditional panoramic device of the gap between the observation platform and the canvas, gives an odd feeling of being swaddled in visual distance, as if the touch of the hand to the photographic plate had changed direction and returned optically to the body. This sets up a pulsing between near and far and between the visual and the tactile, not unlike the virtual movement of the fringe folding into the immanent centre of the photographs or the pulse switch to sway. The effect is heightened by the fact that the viewer enters the apparatus through what in the photographic disk was the black hole, tracing all at once in an over-full void its human authoring, mechanical process and monadic principle. The panoscope, as a result, remains more intensely immersive than the traditional panorama, even as it plays on its conventions.

The different aspects of Courchesne's artistic practice stage variations on immersive perspective, its actual unfolding and its enfolding in vision of different sensings. As images of experience, his installations cannot be reduced to their narrowly visual form or itinerant content. They must be approached as on-site performances, even in the absence of actual interaction. The photographic stills are fully a part of Courchesne's interactive art practice. Their status should not be confused with the printed, disk-shaped orientation plans often provided to visitors to traditional panoramas. The traditional orientation plans were representations of the representation. Courchesne's spinning disks are stagings of a dynamic. There is a reciprocity between aspects of the work that requires each of its elements to be understood in translational terms in relation to the others. They repeat the same immersive dynamic, but differently in each case, depending on the apparatus and the installation. This means that the installations for which Courchesne is best known, in which the panoscope is fitted with a voice-command video interface that is interactive in the usual digital sense of the term, are best understood if they are not seen in isolation but in relation to the interactive-still pieces of the kind included in this exhibit.

1. Stephen Oettermann, *The Panorama : History of Mass Medium*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (New York: Zone Books, 1997).