THE WORLD AS IMAGE AND THE IMAGE OF THE WORLD: PHOTOGRAPHING GOOGLE STREET VIEW

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O MUNDO COMO IMAGEM E A IMAGEM DO MUNDO: FOTOGRAFANDO O GOOGLE STREET VIEW

EL MUNDO COMO IMAGEN Y LA IMAGEN DEL MUNDO: FOTOGRAFIAR EL GOOGLE STREET VIEW

ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on artworks created through the reproduction and appropriation of images available in the interface of Google Street View. As a reflection of the growing proliferation of images produced by automated cameras, independently of human perception and cognition, these artworks provoke a reconsideration of the photographic act, the role of the artist as a commentator on and curator of images, the sublimation of authorship thus entailed, and the ontology of the photographic image. The fact that such artworks are created by extracting images from the Google Street View interface could be perceived as indicative of certain visual redundancies. This article argues, on the contrary, that the photographic works in question are different from each other insofar as they entail specific creative techniques, modes of aesthetic appropriation, and critical approaches.

KEYWORDS 360º photography; google street view; photographic act; history of photography; street photography

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RESUMO

Este ensaio tem como foco obras criadas por meio da reprodução e apropriação de imagens disponíveis na interface do Google Street View. Reflexo da crescente proliferação de imagens produzidas por câmeras automatizadas, independentemente da percepção e cognição humana, estas obras provocam uma reconsideração do ato fotográfico, do papel do artista como comentador e curador de imagens, a sublimação da autoria, e a ontologia da imagem fotográfica. O fato de tais obras de arte serem criadas através da extração de imagens da interface do Google Street View pode ser interpretado como uma implicação de sua redundância visual. Este artigo defende, pelo contrário, que as obras fotográficas em questão implicam técnicas criativas e modos de apropriação estética específicos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Fotografia 360º; Google Street View; Ato fotográfico; História da fotografia, Fotografia de rua

RESUMEN

Este ensayo tiene como foco obras creadas mediante la reproducción y apropiación de imágenes disponibles en la interfaz del Google Street View. Reflejo de la creciente proliferación de imágenes producidas por cámaras automatizadas, independientemente de la percepción y cognición humana, estas obras provocan una reconsideración del acto fotográfico, del papel del artista como comentador y curador de imágenes, la sublimación de la autoría, y la ontología de la imagen fotográfica. El hecho de que tales obras de arte sean creadas a través de la extracción de imágenes de la interfaz del Google Street View puede ser interpretado como una implicación de su redundancia visual. Este artículo defiende, por el contrario, que las obras fotográficas en cuestión implican técnicas creativas y modos de apropiación estética específicos.

PALABRAS CLAVE Fotografía 360º; Google Street View; Acto fotográfico; Historia de la fotografía; Fotografía de calle

INTRODUCTION[1]

Over the past two decades, a significant number of artists have turned to appropriation and reproduction of images from Google Street View (GSV), a resource of the Google Maps platform, images that are produced by automated machines independently of human perception and cognition. In this essay, we set out to comprehend the place of experience in the construction of artworks using these appropriate images. This imagery is exemplary of today's visual culture which is marked by a growing percentage of photographs produced by automatized cameras without human intervention (RITCHIN, 2022; LUND, 2021).

While the artworks discussed here reproduce the GSV interface they also enter into dialogue with the historical aesthetics of the genre of street photography. But, given this history's strong emphasis on the authorial function of the photographer (WESTERBECK and MEYEROWITZ, 2021, p.36), can a frame re-photographed from the GSV interface qualify as street

photography? Street photography is often said to defy simple definition. The works discussed here exemplify the tensions between continuity and disruption that are nonetheless common to the genre. They self-consciously reproduce familiar visual tropes of street photography, but differ essentially with respect to the process of creation entailed and forms of experience evoked.

Popularisation of Google Street View has arguably reinforced the idea of the internet as a duplicate of reality and as supplanting direct perception of the world (FONTCUBERTA, 2022). We argue that the works discussed here actively explore the ambivalence of imagery that, although virtual, reflects a historical photographic aesthetic for which the presence of the photographer on the scene was defining. We analyse the techniques, levels of appropriation that epitomize the production of these photographic works and explore what they might suggest for our understanding of the ontology of the photographic image.

FRAMING THE DIGITAL INTERFACE

The incredible success of GSV since its launch in 2007 lies in its ability to combine maps and photographic imagery.

This innovation was achieved using point cloud techniques which consist of the joining up of points on a map to create a schema for how an image of the site indexed would look volumetrically – a shift from cartography to 360º photography (HOELZL and MARIE, 2014).

The often discussed book *A New American Picture* (2012) by Doug Rickard is based on images from GSV. As described by David Campany in the aforementioned book's preface, schewing the use of the print screen function to capture images from the computer, Rickard takes pictures of the screen using a 35mm digital camera. As suggested by Campany the book's title and visible markers of Rickard's approach allude to canonical works of twentieth-century American photography, such as Walker Evans's *American Photographs* ([1938] 2012) and Robert Frank's *The Americans* ([1958] 2008). Most of the photos depict urban scenes with a particular focus on peripheral areas marked by troubled race and class relations. In the preface Campany alludes a continuity between these historically distant photographies, evoking also the photography of the *Farm Security Administration* in the 1930s and other photographic works related to the *New Topographics* exhibition of the 1970s; a continuity registered in the way Rickard's images evoke the "traces of the rich history of

itinerant photographers who have taken the American streetscape as their inspiration and muse" (CAMPANY, 2012, p.10).

Rickard re-photographed scenes from which he was absent, his interest focused on people accidentally captured by automated cameras driven by Google's workers. Perhaps the GSV engineers and technicians would have preferred empty, unpopulated streets – and it is precisely in the system's residue, in the folds of this mammoth project, that Rickard discovers the possibility of creating this reverse of representation. The 'imperfections,' the noise, the pixels characteristic of low-resolution digital images, the faces deliberately blurred by algorithms and the chromatic distortions all become part of the content of the images too. And yet despite all these elements, an unsuspecting observer might turn pages and pages of a book apparently composed of street photographs before transcending the slight oddness of the images and realizing that they are faced with another kind of visual representation. The difference between Rickard's appropriation and other works based on GSV resides in the strong photographic presence in the images he constructs: beyond creating a new texture by photographing his screen, he delays the perception of the blurred faces or the lack of chromatic gradients by selecting framings that evoke examples from the

American Photography. Looking through the book, therefore, instils a feeling of strangeness, as though something very familiar has become slightly disfigured. Consequently, the work reveals how the images are produced by exposing the specificities of the technological intermediation involved. If we look back at photographic works like *Kodachrome* by Luigi Ghirri ([1978] 2019) or the aforementioned *American Photographs* by Walker Evans ([1938] 2012), we can detect the theme of the presence of images in the world. These names are cited as they were both photographers who, if not pioneers, envisaged photography as a medium for reflecting on the mass use of posters, banners, logos, photos and a myriad other kinds of imagery in urban spaces. When Doug Rickard photographs the computer screen itself, he shifts from representing an image in the world to replicating – via a transposition of use and meaning – the world in an image.

REPRODUCIBILITY AND OPACITY

In the 21st century, has the ubiquity of the photographic image and its social diffusion become one of the most important mediators of our experience with the world? This question resonates

with the arguable belief that photography is a reproduction of reality. Rather than a world's transparent transfer, some of the critical works created through the reproduction and appropriation of images available in the interface of GSV, whereupon they produce an effect of *mise-en-abyme*, a kind of opacity in their photographs: when we see an image within another image, the crystalline, immersive access, like a codeless message typically possessed by photography dissipates as we are reminded that it is an image too. As discussed by Rubinstein (2016), when he asserts the potential of contemporary photographic artworks that tend to obscure and deface the optical surface; in *A New American Pictures*, a similar effect transpires, not because we are looking at images within images but rather because we are looking at an image of another image. While in the work of the aforementioned photographers we saw a map, a drawing, and a poster as a sign of the presence of images in the world, in Doug Rickard's work we no longer have space for anything beyond images.

What unites all these works made through the appropriation of images is that they are not representations taken directly from the world. In the case of the works based on GSV, the world left behind was converted into an image by a driver and his car, by software

with algorithms ready to render the photographs with the aesthetics proposed by the company, erasing or pretending to erase facial identities and car number plates. We are presented, therefore, with the gradual substitution of the paradigm of photography – the relationship between world and image – by the unstable relation between data and more data, from image to image, the latter being the foundation of the paradigm of algorithm-generated imagery (ERNST, 2021; HOELZL and MARIE, 2014).

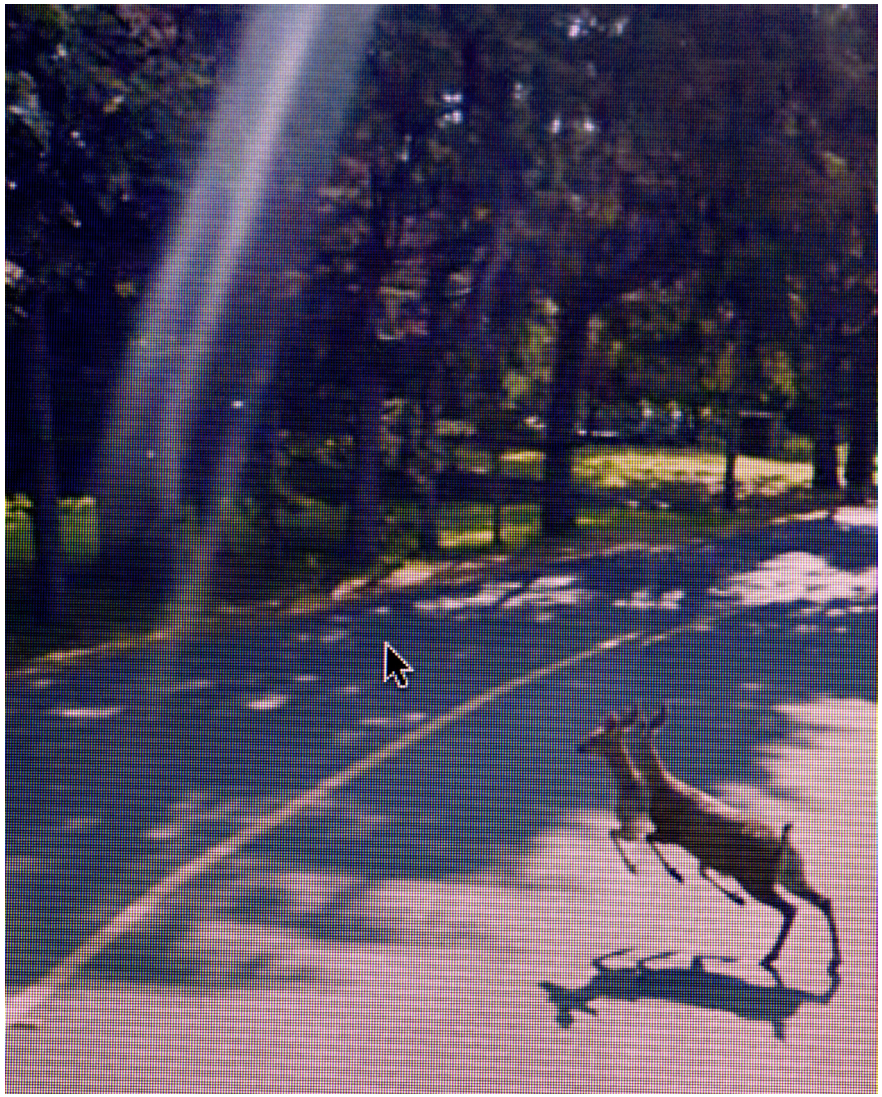
However, the 'imperfections' of the navigable images available via the GSV database enable Rickard to explore the themes of isolation and social alienation. The face blurring automatically applied by Google's program aims to ensure the privacy of the individual. For Rickard, though, the partial anonymity and disfigurement of the people caught by the camera transforms them into symbols of social types, citizens rather than individuals. The artist adds that the GSV images, created by cameras fitted onto a vehicle driving at 30 mph, do not include any human interaction in the image production. The exploration of this distancing is a significant element in the creation and reception of his work (RICKARD, 2012, p.139).

The authorship of works in which images are appropriated is constantly questioned. In some cases, it is precisely this conflict that motivates the artist, as in the famous photographs by Sherrie Levine from the series *After Walker Evans* in which the artist takes photographs of Evans's photographs and exhibits them as her own (which, in itself, is true). Here again, we see works based on already made images – images where it is already difficult to determine who made them beyond the name of a company and its car-camera project. Looking through the work of Rickard, however, we perceive more than the curatorial elan of selecting images – good images. More even than the knowledge of the language and traditions of American photography. The work of photography subsists here: after all, as mentioned earlier, it involves photographing the computer screen, which entails control of the camera position, lens choices, lighting and other details. But there exist points where the photographer made decisions common to photographic work: the treatment of colour, exposure, the contrast in the images, and the selection and sequencing of the images in the book. Wandering for just a few minutes in GSV is sufficient to realise that the program lacks chromatic consistency and while the light metering may have improved over recent years, it remains

inconsistent. Notably, in *A New American Picture*, there is a rigorous elaboration of the primary colour palette, as well as the use of a light-yellow filter to neutralize chromatic inconsistencies.

Another work that reproduces scenes encountered in GSV is *Asoue: A series of unfortunate events* by the photographer Michael Wolf, published as a book in 2010. Here the presence of 'imperfections' is a deliberate act of emphasizing the operational image/screen capture. Some of the images show the lapse of time effect caused by GSV's car-cameras, which capture not just static objects but bodies in motion too. Michael Wolf explores the unexpected result of the partial duplication of moving bodies generated by errors in the software's 'photo stitching' function, although this has improved over time (Figure 1 - 2). Some of his framings induce us to think about the algorithmic process itself. We view mutilated and multiplied bodies. These are flaws, mistakes in the rendering of the enormous number of images taken by the set of cameras on the car and processed by Google's computers. Wolf also exploits many other aesthetic signs from GSV as part of his toolbox: the arrows, the road lines, the transparent rectangles for us to reposition the frame, the street names inscribed digitally on the captured image, the mouse cursor, pixels and moiré patterns,

lens flare caused by shooting against light sources, and so on. From these software glitches, aesthetic appropriations of the tools themselves and the features common to images captured using lenses, we see an authorial work being constructed.



Figures 1 and 2.
Michael Wolf, from the photo-series *Asoue: A series of unfortunate events*. Screenshot/Crop of a GSV interface (Wolf 2011). © Michael Wolf Real State

The spectator's perception is agitated by the diverse images of accidents, burning cars, bodies on the ground, and obscene gestures, combined with the radical way in which the technological artefacts of the digital medium are made evident. Like Rickard and unlike other works, Michael Wolf uses his camera to photograph the monitor. The encounter between the sensor pixels and the screen pixels, along with the use of a large zoom lens, creates a mist of moiré patterns and grids. Also added to these elements are the presence of the mouse cursor and the incorporation of graphic elements and interface icons, creating doubt as to whether we can interact with his work, itself already an index of interactivity (Figure 3). If the traditional form of photography seeks to potentialize representation of the world, the insertion of these artefacts highlights the aesthetic materiality of visual perception, a metalanguage.

In the book *A New American Picture*, Doug Rickard utilizes a tripod placed in front of the monitor. Evidently, the reproduction of GSV images differs from traditional street photography, dependent on quick reflexes to capture events as they unfold. Looking at the GSV scenes, the artist has a certain amount of time in front of the monitor. But is it always possible

to return to the same locality and encounter the same event? This at least is what we would like to think, when in fact GSV itself continually updates its images and offers no guarantee that we will encounter the same data – the same scene – next time we connect. Once again this reveals the fragility and instability of these images.

Figure 3.
Michael Wolf, from the photo-series *Asoue: A series of unfortunate events*, Screenshot/Crop of a GSV interface (Wolf 2011). © Michael Wolf Real State

THE EXPERIENCE OF OPERATIVE IMAGES

As Harun Farocki (2004) observes, the operative image is an image that no longer represents the object: first and foremost, it is part of an operation. In *Phantom Images* (2004), the author describes the use of cameras installed in the front section of missiles deployed in the 1991 Gulf War. The sequence of images produced by this 'new device,' a suicide camera, shows the free fall of the projectile until its explosion collides with the target (Figure 4). For Farocki, these images present a new perspective and a new image type. They differ from conventional images of war propaganda or from any other earlier visual genre. Eventually, considering its functionality, the Google Street View imagery enters the realm of operative images (HOELZL and MARIE, 2014). Just like the camera mounted on the tip of the missile, GSV produces images that seek to realize an operation, a process, rather than a representation following an observation, thus fundamentally changing the ontology of the image. When artists like Michael Wolf introduce these images to the art world, they are reversing the original objective of their production. Further still, Michael Wolf, by revealing the opacity of the digital medium, problematizes and potentializes the questioning of the images generated by automated cameras and made available on the GSV interface as operative images (Figure 5).

Figure 4,
Footage recorded by a camera installed in a missile deployed in the 1991 Gulf War, Harun Farocki (dir), *War at a Distance/ Erkennen und Verfolgen*, 2003. Germany. © Harun Farocki GbR

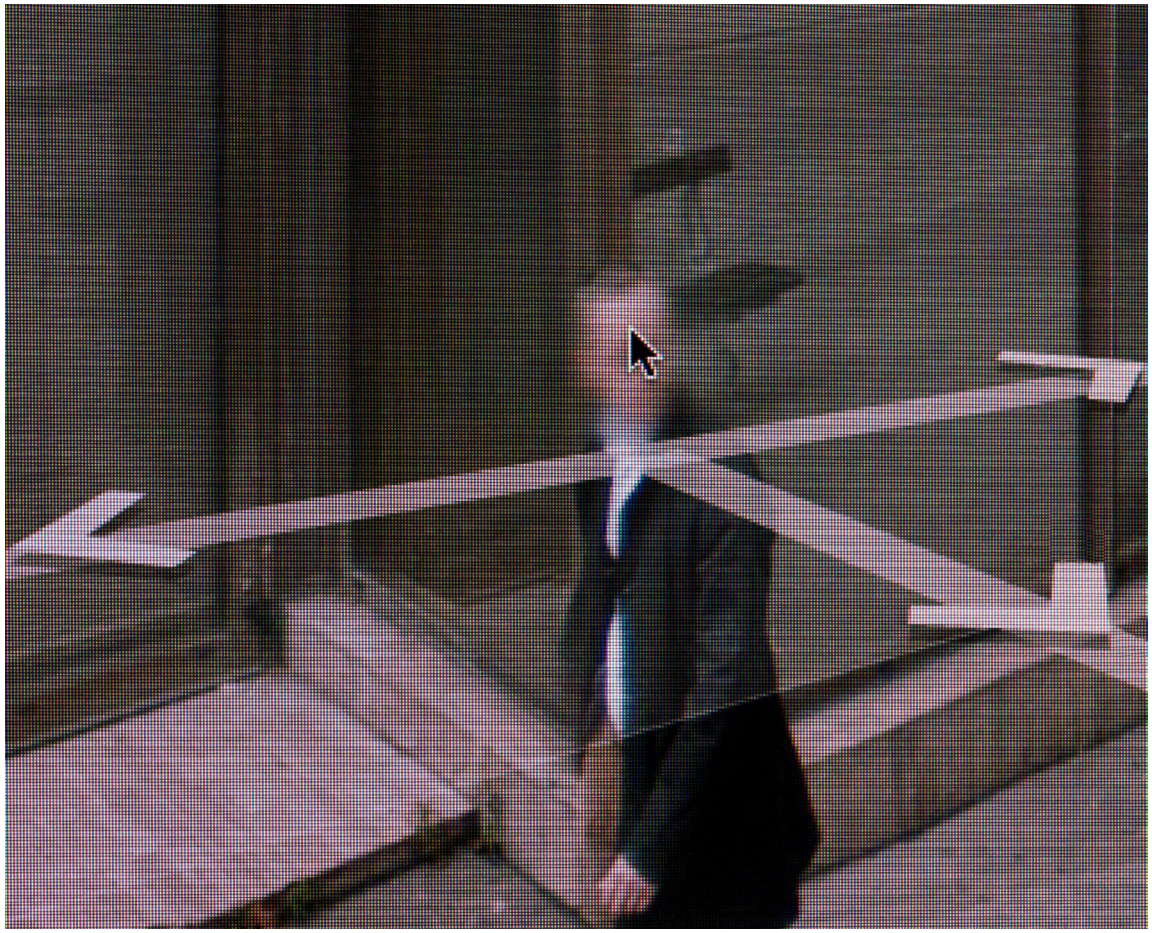


Figure 5.
Michael Wolf, from the photo-series *Interface*, Screenshot/Crop of a GSV interface (Wolf 2011). © Michael Wolf Real State

A kinship seems to exist between walking on foot through a city and wandering through the GSV interface. You can quicken your pace, just as you can click the arrow to move around more rapidly. In both activities, we are able to look around from all sides, globally. But GSV continues to have a blind spot: when looking down, the image usually falters: this is because the solid

tripod and the car itself should appear but GSV seeks to erase their presence. We encounter good framings, city street corners, people passing by and forming an attractive composition, an elegant geometric figure, without realizing the fact, reminiscent perhaps of the urban photographs of Joel Meyerowitz (2018). But stepping slightly backwards or forward is impossible, while the point of view is kept constant: we are almost three metres high, usually moving about on the asphalted road. It is a privileged position, the nearest equivalent being photos taken on a bus trip or from the tall tripods used by some photographers like Massimo Vitali (2019). It is the position of tennis umpires or courtroom judges, lifeguards, the sentry posts at army bases or those recently installed in Republic Square in São Paulo. The optimal speed for the car is set at 30 mph, which is not always possible, but the images will be presented at an average interval of 15 metres. A good shot appears, but a truck is blocking our view of a group of young friends crossing the road. We can wait eternally but we will never again see those boys who, in the frame available a few metres ahead, are no longer there. In these new documents, it is no longer a matter of retaining the flow of time that elapses in real life events, but a question of containing the unpredictability of the torrential flows of data in the system.

THE ALL-SEEING AND THE POINT-BLANK RANGE SHOT

In 2009, the artist Jon Rafman published the essay *IMG MGMT: The Nine Eyes of Google Street View*. Explaining his interest in capturing GSV images, the artist says that he found in them a world that seemed truer and more transparent due to the neutrality of the machine's perception, the impartiality of the image capture process and the sheer scale of the Google corporation's project with its mission to organise information on the world and make it universally accessible and useful (RAFMAN, 2009). Rafman recognizes that in reproducing GSV images, he is attributing cultural meanings – as occurs in the production of images in other media – but he emphasizes a key difference: by re-photographing them, the artist is also a curator who simultaneously constructs and deciphers codes and significations (RAFMAN, 2009).

Jon Rafman creates a visual essay based on the selection of events encountered in the navigable images of the GSV database. At first sight, the work resembles a photojournalistic essay, while its images recall the potential of journalistic eyewitness accounts insofar as the automated cameras – albeit unintentionally – capture police operations. On the outskirts of a city in São Paulo state, police force officers have stopped a group of youths (Figure 6).

In this police operation, the suspects are forced against the iron railings of a residential garage and – with their hands behind their heads or holding onto the bars – are subjected to a police search in full daylight at the precise moment that the Google car is passing through the city's streets. In numerous locations, similar police operations are recorded and, although individuals cannot be identified, it is possible to figure out the difference in the police uniforms (Figure 7).

Figure 6.
Jon Rafman, from the photo-series *IMG MGMT: The Nine Eyes of Google Street View*. Screenshot/Crop of a GSV interface (Rafman 2018). © Jon Rafman

Figure 7.
Jon Rafman, from the photo-series *IMG MGMT: The Nine Eyes of Google Street View*. Screenshot/Crop of a GSV interface (Rafman 2018). © Jon Rafman

The current generation of operative image devices has a different potential to the tools available to photographers in the past. Not even the images of Arthur Fellig – better known as Weegee, who in the 1930s and 40s tracked police incidents in New York, listening to police radio frequencies so he could be the first to arrive on the scene (HILL, 2019) – could compete with the thousands of cameras providing a continuous visual record.

With the raw and high-contrast light of his flash and the iconic phrase commonly attributed to him, 'f8 and be there', emphasizing the need for the photographer's physical presence in going about the profession, Weegee was a master of point-blank range shots. The traditional practice of photojournalism demonstrates the skill of being in the right place at the right time. But Rafman's work shows that no photographer can be readier than operative image devices. Surveillance cameras seem to have become omnipresent, functioning non-stop to record incidents and events. Unlike the aesthetic cohesion that Rickard encountered through the dialogue with a specific American photography and attention to colouration, or the desire to preserve the operative aspects of software found in Wolf's work, Rafman evokes the practice of photojournalism by seldom intervening in the images – making small adjustments for contrast and exposure – and seeking the most effective angle for transmitting what he wishes to share.

EMBODYING THE INTANGIBLE SPACE

While Google Maps aims to create a global spatial inventory, mobilising enormous technological and human resources for

this purpose and achieving an unprecedented capacity for dating and spatial representation, we cannot forget that ever since its invention, photography has contributed to the visual mapping of near and distant lands. This 'heroism of vision,' as Sontag (2009) called it, impelled a new model of activity that led photographers to embark on socio-cultural safaris in search of images (SONTAG, 2009, p. 69). Today, though, the user-photographer can travel through streets, cities and countries far from their social, cultural and geographic context from the comfort of their homes or studios, without exposing themselves to danger or fatigue.

The Google car-camera exploits the privilege given to automobiles over the course of the twentieth century – they are in the middle of the street while pedestrians are squeezed to the sides – in order to photograph undisturbed. Not by chance Rafman talks about the neutrality of the images and this alleged transparency, with most people unaware that they are being photographed (RAFMAN, 2009). As mentioned earlier, this image taken from above, which points in all directions, spherical, also converges with the desire for space-time totality common to Google's ideology. In opting to erase the presence of its car from the images, the company is following the same aesthetic procedure made by

GSV when shifting from 2D maps to immersive 3D photography: aiming to exist in every pocket and mind, becoming part of our visual memories (GSV), information memories (Google browser), work memories (Google Docs) and confidential notes (Google Note) but without ever calling attention to its own existence.

An exception to this supposed limitless freedom of the GSV car-camera can be found in an artistic work using photography's sibling medium: cinema. In the short video *Nunca é noite no mapa* (2016), 'It's never night on the map', the filmmaker Ernesto de Carvalho makes use of GSV to show the changes occurring over recent years in the metropolitan regions of Recife and Rio de Janeiro. Using the 'Historical Imagery' tool – a program function that can be activated to visualize other images already taken by Google in the same place over the years – the filmmaker uncovers documentation of the construction works implemented to host the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the Rio 2016 Olympics. Various land clearances are evident, along with the disfigurement of streets and entire neighbourhoods in the name of major global sporting events. Discursively the film follows an interesting curve, showing that the evictions and urban gentrification projects, as well the omnipresence of GSV, form part of the same societal project where

the free-market economy is no longer one form of life, it simply 'is' life, like a bodiless camera that hovers in and over the cities. The climax of the film comes when the Google car-camera tries to enter a small and narrow dead-end street in the city of Olinda: it is suddenly blocked by a resident who emerges from one of the houses, places his body in front of the car and, in a gesture of pure confrontation, takes out a camera and photographs the car-camera (Figure 8 - 9). This person is the filmmaker himself. In such a way, he succeeds in using GSV to show the troubles faced by Brazilian cities, creating a global comprehension of a problem that involves public policies and Google, while also opposing his own body to the disembodied image.

Figure 8.
Frame reproduced from the GSV interface depicting the author's confrontation with Google's car, Ernesto de Carvalho (dir), *Nunca é noite no mapa*, 2016. Brazil. © Ernesto de Carvalho.

Figure 9.
Frame reproduced from the GSV interface depicting the author's confrontation with Google's car, Ernesto de Carvalho (dir), *Nunca é noite no mapa*, 2016. Brazil. © Ernesto de Carvalho.

The city where I live, seen from above, in this aerial map, interpolated, solicited. I am in one of these streets, in one of these houses, I am inside the map. The map does not care whether I am inside it or not, but I am inside the map. The map is indifferent, free, the map needs neither legs nor wings, the map does not walk, or fly, or run. It feels no discomfort, it has no opinion. It never rains inside the map and there is never any wind. Inside the map, there is no one-way road, no speed. For the map, there are

> no traffic jams, no directions. The map is an eye unencumbered by a body. And I am inside the map, in some place. Even if I try to hide, the map finds me and contains me. I am inside the map. Here I am, inside the map. I am inside the map, this is me, inside the map. (CARVALHO, 2016)

In 2016, Jacqui Kenny began the project *The Agoraphobic Traveller* in which the artist takes GSV screenshots while travelling virtually through 'remote' destinations of the world. According to the author's website, the work emerged as a way of overcoming her personal struggles with anxiety and agoraphobia, subsequently obtaining significant recognition following its exhibition in numerous museums and galleries, while she acquired more than 135,000 followers on her Instagram profile. Since then, the artist has also undertaken projects supported by Google, as well as having a film about her work shown globally on Google's home page on World Mental Health Day (KENNY, 2017).

In her artwork, we are drawn in by the organization of the space of the landscape, the composition, the precise framings and the visual citations that reveal her abundant knowledge of street photography's history. The images from *The Agoraphobic Traveller* present a palette of sophisticated colours with subtle, pastel tones, an allusion to Kodak's Portra negative film or Fuji's

Pro line (160NS and 400H). A significant portion of the images features architectural photography, the pictures of the façades of vernacular buildings like those taken by Walker Evans. Another theme of Kenny's work is the vast landscapes, broad spaces, remote places, deserts and deserted spots. In her description of the images, Jacqui Kenny names the cities and countries from which the images have been taken. In addition to the United States – including Silicon Valley where the Google headquarters is located – we are shown numerous agoraphobic journeys through countries of Latin America like Mexico, Peru and Chile. We also encounter images from the Arab Emirates that revive the theme of the desert, and even a series of images of trees and their shadows, connecting distant countries like Mongolia and Senegal.

Contrary to the work of artists like Michael Wolf – who aim to expose the algorithmic language at work by highlighting noise and digital artefacts – Jacqui Kenny's screenshots create ambiguous images that can be easily mistaken for photos taken in the real world. In this sense, her images deceive since they do not reveal the means of capture: the monitor screen. Perhaps this is more pronounced because the format of her screenshots matches the frame size of 120 mm medium format cameras, deliberately diverging from the proportion of the screens visualised by GSV users.

BETWEEN THE BLIND SPOT AND THE SEAMLESS IMAGE OF THE WORLD

Comparing the works made using GSV with the photographers whose names are oft-repeated in regular photographic discourses, the present text does not intend to diminish the quality of more recent works. Our wish is, precisely, to show that artists and photographers have known how to use the tools available to them, frequently entering into dialogue with other kinds of artistic creation. Speaking of photography, Vilém Flusser (2009) stresses that the creative potential of a medium resides in surpassing, circumventing and deviating from what was programmed by the manufacturer. By appropriating the images available to everyone with a computer or smartphone and internet access, these artists knew how to find a way of going beyond the mere selection of places on the map. Following the critical thought of Flusser (2009), perhaps the support given by Google to Jacqui Kenny, followed by the film made and shown globally on Google's homepage on World Mental Health Day, raises the question of whether, despite the considerable skill demonstrated in selecting and creating a sophisticated chromatic palette, we are not still operating within the logic of limits programmed by the manufacturer – in this case, the digital company?

If we pursue the idea that GSV, by erasing the car-camera that takes the images, shows a desire for disembodied omnipresence, nothing would be more natural than the interest in appropriating this material as though it were the thing itself, rather than a representation of it. We are no longer talking about places represented by the company's equipment and available for viewing online, but images that, from their creation, are made to be used, manipulated, *operated*, and designed to meet interests not always found at the same superficial level as the given image. This echoes the concept of operative image formulated by Farocki (2004) whilst the author exemplified the images produced by the cameras mounted on missile warheads, declaring that 'these images are aimed at us'; and now repositioned in the context of GSV, which uses its localization system to track its users unaware, identifying the commercial preferences of a consumer public.

The company's global strategy is to leave the system open to appropriations that potentialize transparency, while also permeating society, offering supposedly free services and resituating the very idea of the product. Framing the company's interests in these terms, could it be said that these artists, despite their authorial aesthetic proposals – including their transcreation using photographic

references – are, in the same sequence of events, reinforcing Google's primordial wishes?

As Ernesto de Carvalho says in *Nunca é noite no mapa* (2016), the eye unencumbered by a body enables access to places without, like the map, having our bodies there. This is the idea invoked by Rafman (2009) when he asserts the neutrality of the GSV imagery. The idea of neutrality is constantly discussed and perhaps, what calls the most attention is the massive presence of photographs in peripheral countries, places difficult to reach, sometimes dangerous, made by people sitting in developed countries. Browsing through the images made by the photographers discussed here, it is common to find incredible framings. It is also not difficult to encounter situations in which the framing demonstrates the absence of alterity in GSV's act of photographing people: sometimes they are in their homes, sometimes homes in ruins, but always with the same kind of framing used: top-down. This prompts a reflection on whether the appropriation of these images – that is, the duplication of the image, removed from the context of its first appearance – entails some reverse effect. Or, as the proverb goes, whether the enemy of my enemy is my friend. These questions end up highlighting the potency of the forms of using the platform

encountered in some of the works. Among the cited artists, perhaps Ernesto de Carvalho (2016) and Michael Wolf, with the work *Fuck you* (2011), clash more directly with the company's interests.

This way of exploring the world ends up repeating the stereotype of the adventurer photographer heading to the unknown world, an imaginary consolidated over the past two centuries and today reformulated in a context involving a growing proliferation of images produced by autonomous machines, independent of human perception, in a world subject to mass global mapping and surveillance state (RITCHIN, 2022). Although in different contexts, in terms of our relation to the prevalent historiography of Western photography, we find ourselves in a similar era to the mid-nineteenth-century travellers, who took the first photographic cameras to faraway lands to return with an entirely new realistic image and 'neutral' representation. Albeit unconsciously, perhaps, these artists were also producing images of places that would soon vanish with the acceleration of global development. This idea is presented in *Nunca é noite no mapa* (2016) by using GSV as a source for documenting the changes made to Brazilian cities in the years leading up to major global sporting events.

Nevertheless, there is something that fundamentally differentiates these works, even if we seek to recognize them through the traditional aesthetic elements of photography. Certainly, photographing the 'real world' affords an experience distinct from photographing an algorithmic image encountered on the digital interface. By reproducing a scene on the computer monitor, these artists establish a practice that highlights the act of encountering the world as an image and, even so, recreating images of the world. But what world is this? GSV alludes to looking at a three-dimensional image that assembles multiple shots into an apparently seamless visual composition, creating an illusion of unlimited space. Users – like the artists cited here – often navigate in a scene that can be extended according to their interest in continuing to move through the interface. However, movement through the scene is always limited by the available data and by the user-photographer's access to the internet, which are factors of political, legal, technological and economic order (CINNAMON and GAFFNEY, 2022). The GSV navigator conceives the world as a database. Other 360º navigators are available in addition to Google, including Microsoft's rival Bing Maps Street covering North American and some European cities, Tencent and Baidu

in Chinese cities, and Yandex in Russian cities and other Eastern European localities (CINNAMON and GAFFNEY, 2022). However, somewhat contradictorily, these alternatives emphasize even further the corporate limitations, symptomatic of the complex and suffocating geopolitical and economic context in which we live.

CONCLUSION

The production of 360º images appears to point definitively to major changes in the history of the modes of representation and urban imagery, at the same time as it highlights the debate on authorship in a context of increasingly automatic and operative image production (ERNST, 2021). As Uricchio (2011) has suggested, the production of 360º photographs challenges the mode of representation marked by the world-image binary insofar as the stability of a geometrically fixed perspective and viewpoint is shaken by the multiple points of view, by the intervention of the algorithms and, who knows, by the sublimation of authorship. If these new modes of making and seeing images indeed represent a rupture, what is the place of traditional photography and the photographic act?

If the process of creating GSV imagery can be denominated a photographic act, it seems that the aesthetic adopted is an obsolete practice: the manner in which the car-camera moves and photographs without asking, top-down, invasive and feigning alterity and discretion is similar to how the mid-nineteenth-century western photographers explored the outer world over the course of the colonial period. An attitude that persisted in the twentieth century in the development of what we call as Modern Photography, ever fast and stealthy. They do not ask and, if possible, they prefer to pass by unnoticed, furtive, blurring the faces, taking away an image without any connection to people or places and even so speaking of a faithful representation by exploiting the paradigm of the reality of the photographic image. As per this argument, it becomes essential to perceive how the practice and reflection on the photographic act is reciprocally interconnected today and in the subsequent histories of photography. This act is another name for experience. And the experience of photographing the present alters the past and future of its history. For many photographers, the camera is the pretext for experience, not the contrary.

NOTES

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