Distributed Aesthetics and the *Tele*-image

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Introduction

History has it that Samuel Morse successfully transmitted his first electric-telegraph message on the 6th of January 1838. Having become increasingly obsessed with the possibility of transmitting 'intelligence' at a distance by electricity, the artist and part-time inventor built a telegraph machine using a variety of materials that he found readily at hand, scattered throughout his workshop. Using bits of wire, cotton thread, sundry art materials and old clockwork mechanisms, he succeeded in sending a message – coded in the graphic language he devised especially for such a purpose – a distance amounting to some ten miles. Legend has it that this experiment was realised entirely within the four walls of his New Jersey studio, achieved by coiling the total length of copper wire used to conduct the sequencing of electrical pulses – a message written literally with light – around the interior of his studio.

By recognising the close, coincidental relationship in the mid-19th century between the invention of photography (which was in the process of being formulated concurrently across the Atlantic by the likes of William Henry Fox Talbot and Louis Daguerre, following upon the pioneering experimentation of Joseph Nicephore Niepce) and Morse's first electric-telegraph message, this article will develop some thoughts that focus on contemporary aesthetics associated with the *tele*-image[1]: digital images that are realised principally through transmission and relayed using the Internet.

This research is drawn from my current research investigation of virtuality and the art of exhibition. This will entail three distinct, but inter-related strands of interdisciplinary investigation and subsequent analysis involving practice-based and research-led methodologies as well as critical theorisation. In particular, research-led practice will directly reference my curatorial design project, *Remote* (recently exhibited at Plimsoll Gallery in Hobart, Tasmania during June 2005).[2] This will be complimented by practice-based research addressing the networked artworks of two artists represented in the exhibition whose respective practices involve the production of artworks that negotiate the un-fixed, refreshing nature of Webcam imagery: Susan Collins (UK) and Nancy Mauro-Flude (Tas/Neth). Finally, some preliminary thoughts that briefly

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[1] '*tele*– (Before a vowel properly tel-, but more often in the full form), afar, far off; used in numerous (chiefly recent) scientific and technical terms, mostly denoting or connected with special appliances or methods for operating over long distances; also in several terms connected with psychical research, denoting actions or impressions produced at a distance from the exciting cause, independently of the normal means of communication.' Definition from the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). http://www.oed.com

[2] *Remote*, exhibition Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania, Hobart, 3-23 June 2006 (Artists: Susan Collins; Pete Gomes; Derek Hart; Nancy Mauro-Flude; Martin Walch. Curatorial design and locative media: Vince Dziekan). For a full resource of this curatorial project, the reader is directed to the exhibition website: http://www.remoteexhibition.com

outline the critical theorisation and contextualisation of this form of *tele*-image within the history of photographic image making will be interspersed throughout.

Figure 1 *Remote*, Plimsoll Gallery, Hobart, Tasmania (2006).

The paradoxical interconnection between proximity and distance, of a kind that I hope to have evoked through my introductory anecdote, was rendered palpable to me through the medium of exhibition. In particular, this experience came about through an encounter with a museological installation dedicated to one of the founders of photography, William Henry Fox Talbot, at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. The focal point of this arrangement of sundry artefacts associated with early photographic technology was an original copy of William Henry Fox Talbot's book, *The Pencil of Nature*. There, adjacent to this otherwise standard cabinet-encased display, I came unexpectedly upon a digital projection of an oriel window of the kind immortalised by Fox-Talbot in his earliest photographs dating back to August 1835. At first, this fleeting projection could just as easily be dismissed as a case of the morning light outside being cast through the windows lining the length of this narrow gallery. Upon closer inspection, however, the shadow play seemed uncannily to re-enact the exact characteristics of this famous photographic image. To refer to this digital image as a representation seems a somewhat inadequate description in that the image gently playing on the wall surface I was facing involved the direct transmission of the light passing at that very moment, not through the windows in the very room in which I was standing, but through the actual windows of Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire, near Bath in the west of England. Titled*, For William Henry Fox Talbot (The Pencil of Nature)*, the work was an exact re-composition of Fox Talbot's famous 'photogenic drawing', here captured by a solar-powered digital camera and relayed 'live' via an ISDN phone line to the gallery in South Kensington, where it was presented at actual size in 'real time'. This most succinct and deceptively inconspicuous work was produced by British artist Chris Meigh-Andrews as part of a series of site-specific installations commissioned by the V&A between May 2002 and March 2003. Besides connecting two geographically separate sites, the work staged - through its uninterrupted image-flow - the connection that history maintains with the present, and reconnected *phot*ography to its origin as (sun) light (evoking Joseph Nicephore Niepce's earlier assignment of the term, *heliography*).

This transaction between times and places at once immediate (present, proximate, up close) and at a remove (absent, distanced, afar) is central to the modern industrialisation of the production and dissemination of visual images. This feature is clearly present in the coincidental inventions of telecommunication and photography. Both technologies were introduced in the early-mid 19th century and intersect the act of seeing with memory. Eduardo Cadava for one, in his wonderfully poetic meditation on Walter Benjamin and the intertwined relationship between words (history) and light (photography) that sustained Benjamin's philosophical project, alludes to the 'irreducible link between thought as memory and the technical dimension of memorization, the techniques of material inscription' (Cadava, 1997:xviii). Proceeding from the transcription of the lived event into a represented form of memory – such as that achieved through the technological means of the camera apparatus – our relationship to reality is paradoxically brought up-close while simultaneously remaining afar:

> This oscillation between space and time, between distance and proximity, touches on the very nature of photographic and filmic media, whose structure consists in the simultaneous reduction and maximisation of distance.
> (Cadava, 1997:xxv)

Remote

My recently completed curatorial project, *Remote* entertains a telescoping of the relationship of the perceived, immediately experienced event and its transcription (through various ways and means of writing and representation). The implications of instrumental seeing to confound the sense of distance by the speed of instantaneous telecommunications, has been a central theme of the influential philosophical project of Paul Virilio. According to Virilio, the increasing dependence of perception upon technological mediation entails the 'conveyance of sight that produce(s) a telescoping of near and far, a phenomenon of acceleration obliterating our experience of distances and dimensions' (Virilio, 1994:4). The dynamics implicated in this open dialogue can been seen to operate across all works included in the exhibition's inventory, albeit manifesting itself in a variety of ways.

The paradoxical interplay between distance and proximity that is realised through the contiguous meeting of different times and places in a physical space underpins the curatorial rationale of *Remote*. The exhibition form is called upon to provide the infrastructure that locates the viewer simultaneously at the juncture and disjunction of here and there, of the socially instituted and individually experienced. Conceived and expressed through the medium of the exhibition, *Remote* is characterised by its distributed form. Its distinctive *scenography* (as the interrelationship between curatorial thematics, which are expressed through the communicative act of exposition involving scenic design, and the exhibition as the writing of that space) draws upon the particular characteristics of the Plimsoll Gallery and its local environment, which has been incorporated into the overall sweep of the expanded exhibition.

Remote addresses the interface of informatic and physical spaces by not restricting the exhibition to the confines of the Plimsoll Gallery. The range of spatial practices available to art practice and curatorial design far exceed purely architectural factors of gallery space and have come increasingly to include the design of an extended typology of spaces (which today involves digitally-mediated communication spaces, a variety of multimedia modes and the Internet). The exhibition form brings together these features into a distributive, aggregative complex of relations. By inducing the exploration of art across this broader 'ecology' of spaces, the artworks that have been assembled through the connective tissue of the exhibition collectively propose how artistic and curatorial practice might negotiate the tension between virtuality and site-specificity. In so doing, the exhibition environment is expanded to include artworks that are accessed and encountered in supplementary, annexed spaces. These spaces span both the ground and first-floor levels of the Centre for the Arts building. Supporting the idea of the exhibition as 'itinerary' means that the audience/visitor is encouraged to explore 'other' spaces, including 'transit' spaces such as the reception area and foyer, and external environments such as the garden enclosure and courtyard.

Figure 2 Vince Dziekan, installation detail from *V. Travels In The Netherworld* (2006).
PDA, digital video and positional markers distributed throughout the Centre for the Arts, Hobart, Tasmania.

In order to direct and focus the exploration of this range of spaces, I personally contributed a specific artwork to the exhibition. *V. Travels In The Netherworld* (2006) has been developed as a multi-modal artwork that experiments with the use of emerging mobile and pervasive technologies for artistic purpose. As a locative artwork, it has been designed to explore the dimensionality of different places and times. By hyper-linking and cross-referencing other locales in the immediate proximity of the Centre for the Arts, the experience of the overall exhibition is transformed from its physical installation in an enclosed, cubic space. Instead, by

using the gallery itself more 'instrumentally' as a node or meeting point in a wider network dispersed, inter-connected and superimposed components are interwoven back to that space. The work promotes the mobility and agency of the viewer by linking distributed media contents to a series of locational markers that situate this narrative across the 'in-between' spaces of the exhibition. By alluding to the conventional role of a Gallery Guide or 'companion', the psychogeographic relation of these different real and virtual spaces is suggested by the convergence of 'tagged' representational content with the place-based context in which these episodes are encountered.

For their part, each of the artists - Susan Collins, Pete Gomes (UK), Derek Hart (UK/Tas), Nancy Mauro-Flude and Martin Walch (Tas) – explore certain 'transpositional' characteristics associated with the visualisation of virtual space. Each negotiates their relation to the real world and their works demonstrate how the transaction between reality and virtuality might be constituted today when any firm sense of presence (real space) and immediacy (real time) is exacerbated by technologies that problemmatise notions of nearness and remoteness, such as the televisual, telecommunications and satellite navigational systems. While represented through a diversity of expressions that include screen and projection-based moving image work, Web-transmissions, site-specific installation and locative media, a common point of departure for all is apparent: a confounded sense of place and proximity.

Artists Martin Walch and Pete Gomes share an interest in mapping the experiential, firsthand encounters with physical places. Both use global positioning system (GPS)-derived data sets that are subsequently translated into visualised notation. This processing literally transcribes the traces of recorded passage through spaces both drawn from actual tracking in the natural environment (from Walch's earlier forays into the Mount Lyall wilderness on Tasmania's remote and rugged west coast, or, more recently, his excursions in the relatively accessible wilderness area of the Tasman Peninsula) and imaginatively filtered by the imposition of distance (London-based artist Gomes' pre-visualisation of a tract of Madagascar coastline that the artist will subsequently inhabit as part of his involvement in a community aid project there). Representative of his performative utilisation of locative media, Gomes' artistic process of mark-making raises to a level of visuality the invisible streams of information that pervade, course through, and envelope any geographical or geopolitical sense of the interconnection of local and global spaces. This also underpins Walch's *Losing the Plot – XYZ/T v15-220206* (2006). The transient act of leaving behind traces as indicative of meaningful intervention contrasts with the way we normally take photographs of - and subsequent transport them from - a particular locale and transpose them into another place. Instead, such location-sensitive and location-aware artworks imbue the space in which these traces are left with a superimposed record or 'meta-tagged' meaning derived from another register of perception of that space.
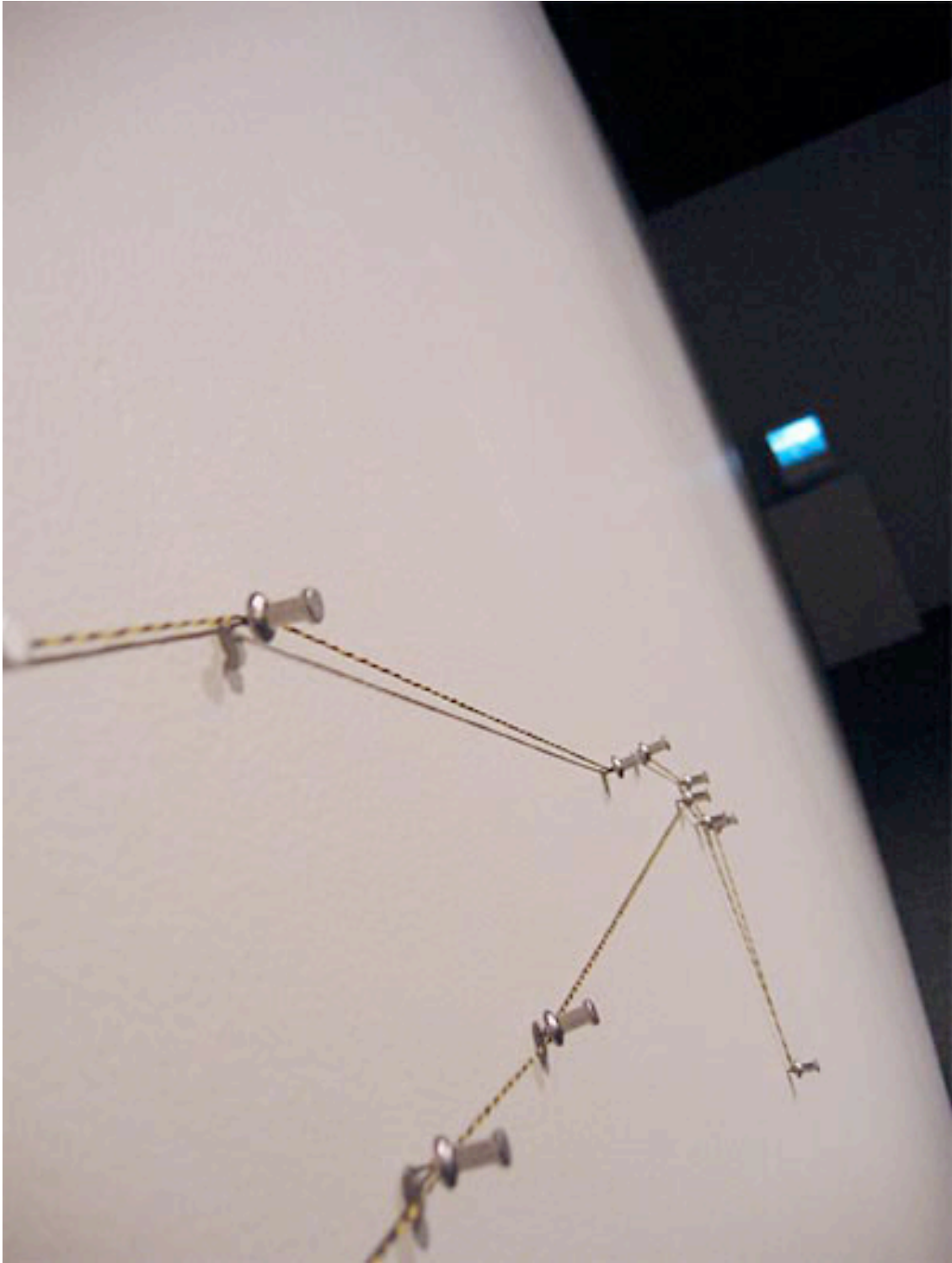
Figure 3 Martin Walch, detail from *Losing the Plot – XYZ/T v15-220206* (2006).
Installation: mixed media, digital media, sound.

Figure 4 Pete Gomes, installation detail from *Littoral Map (Tasmania)* (2006).
Site-specific installation: mixed media, print media, sound.

Figure 5 Derek Hart, installation view of *Maravilha do Rio de Janeiro* (2002).
Distributed installation: digital video, projection and monitors.

For his part, Derek Hart presents a distributed artwork that has adapted itself flexibly to the expanded environmental conditions of the exhibition's distinctive scenography. In this particular

iteration, *A Maravilha do Rio de Janeiro* (2002) was exhibited in three parts and distributed across three separate locales. The work is based on the televisual representation of six of the most scenic attributes of Rio de Janeiro, including Guanabara Bay, Maracanã football stadium, Sugarloaf Mountain and the Christ the Redeemer statue. Inspired by a populist survey that ranked these prominent, iconic locations, the artist directed the shooting of source footage, executed as an instructional relay between the English artist and the Brazilian pilot of a TV Globo news helicopter. Image-making in this example is reduced to that purest act of 'sighting' and 'targeting'. Creative visual subjectivity of the photographic medium is submitted to the production of technical effect. Hart (along with Mauro-Flude and Collins) utilises the instrumental operability of vision in this work, resulting in an 'ambient' machine vision, or *visionics*, of the kind that Virilio identifies with computer-aided or surveillance imaging.

Tele-image

It is in the transmission-based pieces of Nancy Mauro-Flude and Susan Collins that the movement of time as it is constituted in the photomedia image – as distinct from its 'arresting' in still photography – is most thoroughly addressed.

In the installation of *Remote*, Mauro-Flude's *Take Me There: Bring Me Back* (2006) and Collins' *Glenlandia* (2006) are presented adjacently in a darkened expanse of exhibition space. Intriguingly, because of the time zone difference between continental Europe and Eastern Australia, the middle of the night coincides with the opening hours of the exhibition. This translates Mauro-Flude's relay of a live video feed from her window overlooking a canal in Amsterdam as a predominantly dark screen. Only the twin reflections of street lamps on the inky surface of water breaks the surface of the otherwise indiscernible image. Reprising her earlier Webcast *Tradestream* (2005), the Webcam image is refreshed at six-second intervals, not unlike the intermittent traffic along the watercourse; the open channel transmission of the image's feed via the Internet likened to the steady passing of the ordinary time of life. Like the perpetual ebb and flow of the canal, it seems arbitrary to think of the work as having either beginning or end. The artist's thorough immersion in the contemporary networked culture of the data-sphere is exemplified in the work's continuous performative exchange – which is indicated by the insertion of an intimate, personal aphorism updated regularly (*'Is starlight a wireless signal?' 'The unruly has been censored'*) and the interjection of different visual tableaux that interrupt the otherwise steady image 'flow'. Acting like thoughts for the day, these phrases are juxtaposed with the textual insertion of the transmission's recorded time and date stamping. This set of textual excerpts are superimposed upon whatever incidental image 'happens' to be within the camera's field of view at the time (an ordered pair of seabirds frozen in centre frame, a dispersing flock amongst bare tree branches, a blue cargo ship whose name, truncated to read 'C - - MAX' by the partial obliteration resulting from the fortuitous placement of a tree limb in the foreground, one can't help interpreting as 'CLIMAX'). Day and night, the artist's fleeting thoughts and impressions provide a tone that colours these 'slices of life', existing somewhere in between ritual or routine, the happenstance of waking-reality or nocturnal dream episodes. Dawn rises in Amsterdam with the closing of the exhibition's viewing hours in Hobart.
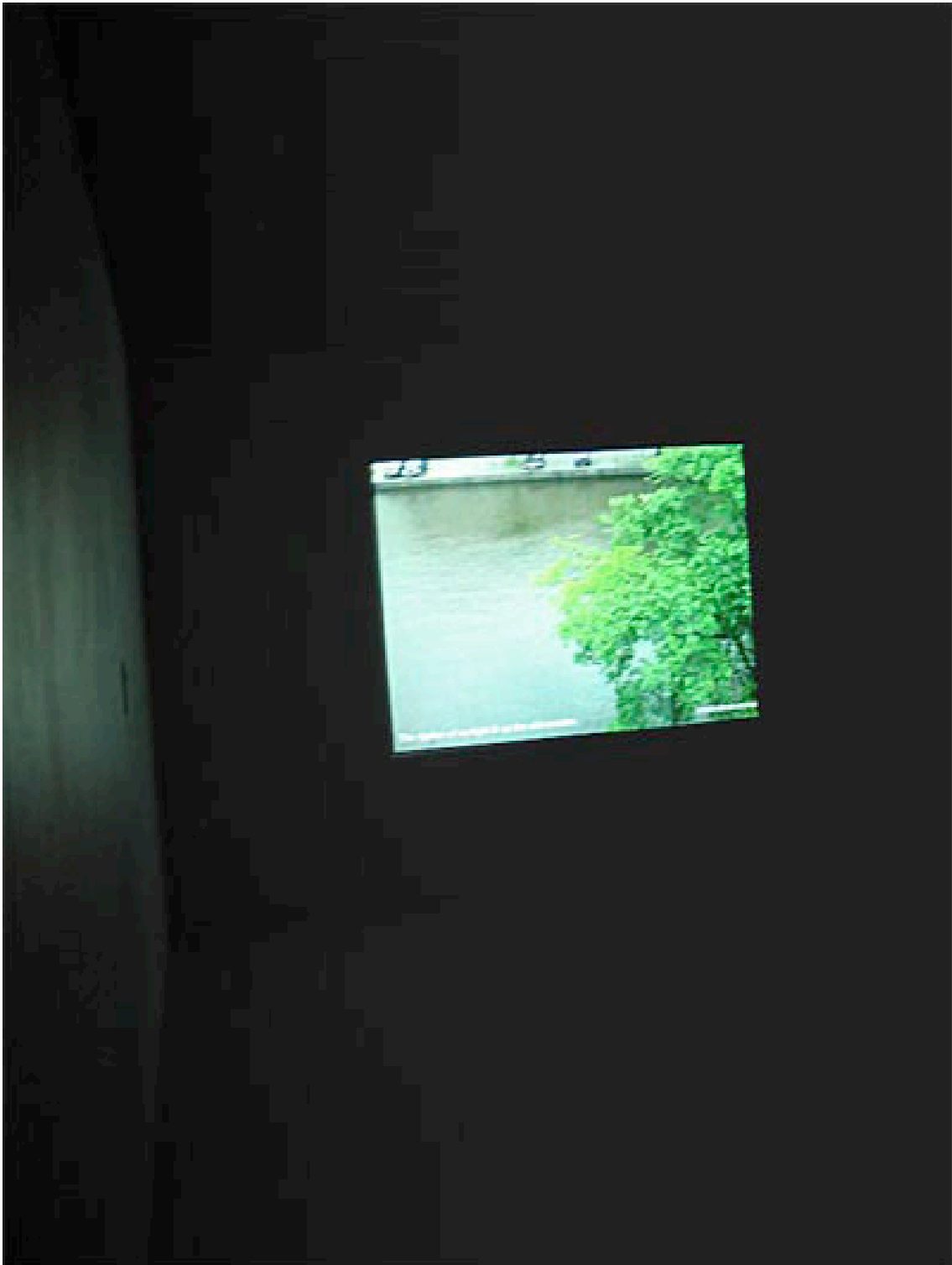
Figure 6 Nancy Mauro-Flude, installation view of *Take Me There, Bring Me Back* (2006).
Web transmission, projection.

Figure 7 Susan Collins, installation view of *Glenlandia* (2006). Web transmission, projection.

In contrast, British artist Susan Collins' *Glenlandia* (2006) presents a stratification of time within the single image surface (the technicalities of this effect will be expanded upon to follow). In this jewel-like image that emanates from out of the expanse of the gallery's enveloping blackness the image is banded into horizontal strata that separate phases of daylight and night. The work

entertains the possibility that the online world supersedes the dichotomy that separates notions of the real and virtual, and instead offers the means to be 'elsewhere'.

Collins' exploration of the technologically mediated exchange between geographically remote locations has been ongoing concern in her multi-media practice. Previous work like *Transporting Skies* (2002), which involved the transmission of images linking exhibition spaces 300 miles apart in Yorkshire and Cornwall,[3] introduced a number of the concerns that continue to resonate in her more recent 'pixelscapes', including the 'attempt to make visible what it means to send information across time and place, and to expose the material that we use to do that with' (Collins, 2005: unpaginated).

The *tele*-image of *Glenlandia* endures as a continually refreshing image feed. Each pixel records a different second in time throughout the duration of the exhibition period, cascading from top left to bottom right corners of the continuously 'overwritten' single image frame. Time, according to the artist, becomes the 'dynamic fabric of the work' (Collins, 2004:55) as the total number of pixels captured by this 320x240 resolution image translates effectively into a single day (76800 seconds, or 21.33 hours). While digitally updating the techniques of the cinematic time-lapse or photographic long exposure, this method of image production also entails a conceptual shift in focus:

> The image loses its characteristics of instantaneousness to become a stratification of the passing of time. It's an elaboration which involves a remarkable conceptual leap compared to the creative use of the shutter speed in classical photography and which contains one of the peculiar characteristics of digital technologies (the accumulation of information), applying it to the domain of time and of visual effects.
> (Ludovico, 2004: electronic source)

Any valorisation of the aesthetised instant proves irrelevant as the image's decisive moment shifts constantly: from when it was instrumentally captured, digitally archived or - as when viewing - successive single pixels refresh, moving the image inexorably forward into the future. Yet, as both artists have acutely observed, it is through the pulse, the continuous disturbance of this 'time shift' that the image finds itself delicately poised between banality and epiphany. As Collins summarises, in the midst of the *tele*-image surprising revelations are to be found: 'for instance the occasions that a full moon is captured passing through the night sky, gives a real sense of planet/earth movement which serves to really consider nature in time and space' (Collins, 2005: unpaginated). In the midst of day passing into night and light turns to darkness, 'stray' pixels capture presence in all its fleetingness – as cloud pass and birds fly, human life intrudes, stops awhile before dissolving back into flux.

These works by Mauro-Flude and Collins reintroduce the 'durational' character of photography, first revealed in the fluctuating luminosity and the blurs and wipes of vague amorphous form that characterise many early photographs due to the technical limitations that resulted in prolonged

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[3] The choice of this particular location took its inspiration from the fact that this was from where Marconi transmitted the first transatlantic Morse code message.

exposure. In a strange way, the long exposure times characteristic of early photographs produced a coherence of illumination and atmosphere that resulted in a 'correspondence' between subject and technique. This short-lived period of 'congruence' would soon become 'incongruent' when, according to Benjamin, 'advances in optics made instruments available that put darkness entirely to flight and recorded appearances as faithfully as any mirror' (Benjamin, 1979:248).

Conclusion

To capture fleeting images has long been the objective of representational art; sought after since at least the technical invention of the *camera obscura*. It is worth remembering, particularly in relation to *Remote*, that the first 'camera' was actually a room that the artist was required to erect *in situ.* Before the advent of the substantially more miniaturised, table-top *camera lucida,* the 'black box' had to be constructed in the selected location, placed to best frame the desired vantage upon the view to be transcribed by the artist – from within the camera's sealed walls.

Corresponding to the way that the camera might thus be seen to operate in relation to the image, techno-social networks have come to now operate as the site for contemporary art and media practices. The highly individualised 'aesthetics' of the artists that have been brought together – framed by the curatorial and architectural parameters of the exhibition – are indicative of the burgeoning of what has been termed *distributed aesthetics*.[4] A number of positions currently developing within this genre are encompassed by terms such as 'net art', 'locative media' or 'networked narrative environments'. In terms of digital aesthetics, one commentator has observed:

> The exploratory movements of locative media lead to a convergence of geographical and data space, reversing the trend towards digital content being viewed as placeless, only encountered in the amorphous and other space of the Internet. (Hemment, 2004: electronic source)

By connecting digital media to the real spaces (in which they are encountered) or environments (to which they are inter-connected), it is the network that 'provides the technical backdrop that enables a remote and open-ended dialog between these spaces' (Zapp, 2004:12).

The technologised interface between physical and virtual spaces has consequence upon how communication and meaning is culturally negotiated and the act of involvement or participation is socially organised. How might the relationship between perceptual experience and its aesthetic re-presentation find material, media or mediated expression through visualization,

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[4] The reader is directed to the most recent issue of *Fibreculture Journal* which was dedicated to this field of enquiry. See *Fibreculture Journal*, Issue 7, 'Distributed Aesthetics', 2005 ISSN 1449-1443. Editorially, this issue proposes that techno-social networks are crucially constitutive of the distributed aesthesia of contemporary networked encounters. The issue was edited by Lisa Gye, Anna Munster & Ingrid Richardson, and included contributions from Darren Tofts, Anna Munster & Geert Lovink, Greg Turner-Rahman, Mark Amerika, Simon Biggs, Edwina Bartlem, Susan Ballard, Keith Armstrong, and Vince Dziekan. http://www.fibreculture.org.au

digital imaging and communications technologies? It is the ambition of my current research project to engage with this subset of research problems arising from the situating of art in increasingly virtualised spaces of the contemporary museum. The interdisciplinary nature of this project aims to focus its discussion on the underpinning issue of the relationship of art to its institutionalised space and how this becomes particularly pronounced when negotiating the display/presentation of digital media artworks. As briefly touched upon in this short paper, the curatorial project *Remote* – and its associated research involving distributed aesthetics and the *tele*-image – is indicative of the influence that the digital has on matters involving curatorial design and the 'dimensioning' of the exhibition form itself.

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