# New Imaging: Transdisciplinary Strategies For Art Beyond The New Media

Gavin Perin University of Technology Sydney Linda Matthews University of Technology Sydney

### **Abstract**

If the eighteenth century Picturesque can be regarded as a proprietorial strategy for mediating the visual experience of landscape, then the proliferation and configuration of webcam networks to promote iconic city form can be seen as its contemporary counterpart. These digital systems, in their most voyeuristic and passive form as a new privileged vantage point for the 'remote' tourist to view the city, allow civic authorities to curate the visual experience of the contemporary urban landscape.

Unlike the formal stability of the Picturesque view, the webcam's digital conversion of the real provides viewers with the opportunity to adapt and mediate their experience. Importantly, this digital conversion is able to offer the designer new ways to materialize three-dimensional form. This adaptive facility of webcam content paradoxically subverts the surveillant and the promotional uses of these systems and converts it into qualitative and experiential material.

The paper will discuss how open-source digital software can be recruited to process and interpret virtual qualitative data from webcams to the point where it can generate a formal response to civic space. This digital manipulation of the two-dimensional webcam view, asks the designer to relinquish the images commonly used to substantiate urban form and to respond to duplicate virtual and real-time sites whose coexistence shifts the temporal framework traditionally used to guide formal intervention.

The application of this unprecedented technique reveals an opportunity to reinterpret the paradigm both for our experience of 'virtual' and urban space and for material intervention within it.

## Introduction

The use of webcam systems as a promotional tool targeted at the remote tourist has conceptually converted the surveillant function of CCTV systems into the service of the spectacular. This conversion can said to be picturesque both in motivation and experience: not only are these spaces constructed to facilitate tourism but their actual distribution instigates a mode of spatial navigation that can be understood as a virtual counterpart to the physical experience of wandering through the landscape wherein the viewer gradually orientates and forms an image of the whole.

W.J.T. Mitchell writes that "landscape is already artifice in the moment of its beholding, long before it becomes the subject of pictorial representation" (1994). This is because "before all these secondary representations—landscape is itself a physical and multisensory medium—in which cultural meanings and values are encoded, whether they are put there—or found in a place formed" (Mitchell, 1994). Thus if all representations of landscapes intrinsically embed social or cultural values any experience of the real is already mediated and in a sense contaminated by a projected meaning. The techniques of the picturesque can therefore be said to initiate a figurative movement that attempts a semiotic conversion of the real into a universal signifier.

The comparison, in this paper, of webcam systems to the traditional picturesque is, therefore, premised on the belief that the imagistic promotion of urban landscape through webcam technologies is both representational and an 'inhabitable' space that is made comprehensible through temporal spatial negotiation. Furthermore, as in the traditional picturesque, the figurative capacity of these webcam systems, being intimately linked to

the medium of construction and transmission of the image, finds its modern counterpart to be equally susceptible to the exertion of spatial control through the imposition of the aesthetic choices of authoritarian bodies. In these ways the webcam not only duplicate picturesque strategies but also actually extends and diversifies its capacity to mediate and signify experience.

# **Circular Quay Project**

Linda Matthews' 2007 project investigated how urban interventions could be developed through the collection and translation of data sets through a range of digital tools. The emphasis was to quantify the qualitative, and in this respect Matthews developed a methodology whereby non-proprietary medical imaging software named 'ImageJ' was adapted to extract and assimilate the qualitative colour rendering properties of images gathered from different webcam views. Tests of webcam sites in London, Paris and New York revealed different tonal profiles it was decided to see if it could offer an alternative logic to urban form-making. (Figure 1) After investigating a range of sites Sydney's Circular Quay precinct was selected because of the strict planning regulations that aim to protect the visual integrity of the Sydney Opera House. The hope was to see if this process could generate both a programmatic and formal response that challenged this aesthetic regulatory framework.

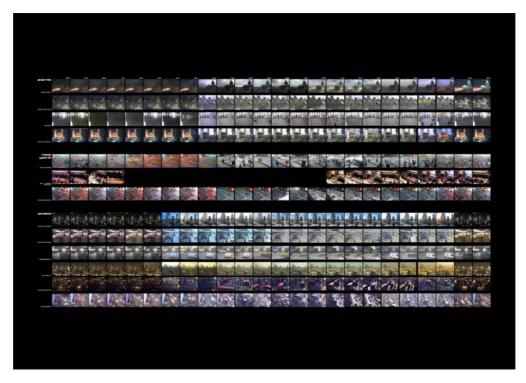


Figure 1: Captured webcam images of Paris, New York and London

To this end the software 'ImageJ' was employed to test how a formal intervention could disrupt the site's existing colour profile. The software revealed Circular Quay's colour profile had a bias to the tertiary purple to blue tonal range. (Figure 2) Given these colours are traditionally associated with passivity and possess a receding or low visibility it was decided to find a formal and material mechanism by which to increase visibility, particularly at night when most virtual tourists would visit the webcam site. For this reason any new intervention deliberately exploited the optical properties of colours in the more visibly dominant purple to blue tonal range

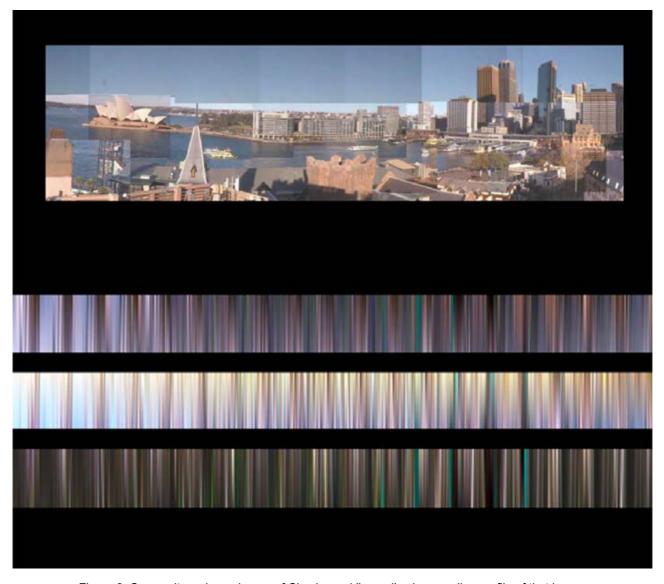


Figure 2: Composite webcam image of Circular and 'Imagej' colour rending profile of that image

Given this desire to disrupt the existing colour profile, and that the webcam digital interface employs an additive RGB colour system, it was decided that any built intervention should employ primary blues and complementary yellows. This was based on the knowledge that not only are these the most visible and luminous colours of the spectrum but also that any combination of these complementary secondary colour produces white. As the 'ImageJ' colour profile in figure 3 demonstates such an intervention increases the overall brightness. This exploitation of the RGB system produced a condition of maximum brightness at the site's prime viewing time. Furthermore, this visual difference was later used to determine programmatic type and distribution, with the the highly visible yellow zones assigned the dominant primary programs and the blue zones, secondary, less active, functions.

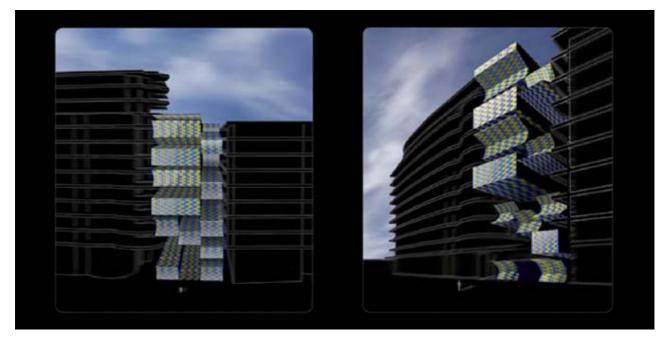


Figure 3: Left image webcam view of experimental theatre at #1 East Circular Quay and right image street view of the same building

# The Political Dimension of the Image

Unlike conventional physical or virtual translations of picturesque principles the Circular Quay intervention involves the use of technologies and techniques that contest those authorising processes behind the construction of such images. This disruptive act subtly contaminates the attempt by regulatory authorities to curate images of the city, which are of course underscored by highly determined and politically sanctioned power structures that have always governed the image of the city. This thinking is supported by Louis Marin's study of the narrative and descriptive structures of three different seventeenth city 'portraits', in his book *Utopics: Spatial Play*. In discussing the maps and their associated 'supplementary images' of city life Marin makes the following three statements:

- 1. The city map represents the production of discourse about the city.
- 2. The deconstruction of this representation uncovers the ideology controlling it.
- 3. The city map is a "utopic' insofar as it reveals a plurality of places whose incongruity lets us examine the critical space of ideology." (Marin, 1984).

Thus, for Marin, the political dynamics of the monarchy serve as an example whereby power functions around the production of the city portrait and the figurative structures illustrated in the interplay between the main city view and the supplementary images. The exercise of political control, gained through the 'right' to image spaces, is, therefore, inexorably linked to the power structures governing the creation and propagation of images.

Of course, the political import of these maps is facilitated by virtue of the prohibitive expense of manufacture as it did for the need to furnish images of the city that catered to the sovereign's expectations. To find a more contemporary democratic example one must turn to W.J.T Mitchell's analysis of picturesque landscapes in the essay *Imperial Landscapes*. (1994) The import point being that democratic power structures necessitate imagistic tactics that appeal to a much broader audience rather than a single select

sovereign. Extending this argument it is safe to say that the accessibility of webcam systems is yet another vehicle by which to democratisation the city view. However, caution must be exercised here because accessibility is not the same as possessing agency in the creation of that image; one might well occupy that space but is no way empowered to curate or alter the view. If, as both Marin and Mitchell note, the representational agency of such images are tied to the politics behind their creation together with the current technologies of production then the desire to impart figurative meaning to the physical effectively collapses the differentiation between these two aspects so that the image directly mediates and informs the configuration of the real. Like Marin, Mitchell's 'Imperial Landscapes', also reminds us that the decision to frame the landscape from a specific viewpoint, together with the representation techniques and media, inevitably exposes the author's bias. Within this context, the conventions of the representational system can be corrupted to alter the figurative trajectory of the normative that to be effective must inspire acquiescence of people to willingly incorporate these images as their own.

## Signification and Affect and the Affect of the Sublime

Over the last two decades the gradual erosion of the symbolic functioning of images and objects in the discipline of Architecture has seen the rise of two other paradigms, based either on performance or affect. In the case of the former, architectural form has effectively become understood as a prosthetic device that functions to satisfy specific performative criteria and their privileged data sets. In the latter, form is framed within arguments of the experiential. As such Architecture, functioning either as a narrow performative scientific paradigm or as an affective object, has effectively fallen back into the two dominant paradigms of modernism where form either privileges performative functioning over its status as an encultured artefact, or is qualitative, which as in the case with Clement Greenberg, allows the politics of taste to resurface.

In the essay 'A Picturesque Stroll Around Clara Clara', Yve Alain Bois's discussion of Richard Serra's sculptures reminds us that there are two different picturesque traditions and both relate to figural comprehension. The beautiful conforms to the more normative understanding of the picturesque as where the organisational logic of an object or space becomes revealed and thus knowable. (Bois, 1986) In the second, the sublime, any sense of order is refused and there is no immediate capacity for intelligible formal understanding because the object lacks a discernable gestalt. It remains outside the capacity to link form with either a figurative trajectory or a knowable experiential quality. (Bois, 1986) The second point is important because the lack of form ensures its figure remains outside predictable phenomenological experience. Importantly to this discussion is Bois's implicitly assumption that the functioning of the sublime is provisional upon this figural comprehension rather than upon scale. The significance being that any object can be aligned to the sublime picturesque.

Bois's identification of the issue of figural comprehension is thus doubly significant: in the first case it allows the object to fall into a semiotic condition; it is asked to "stand in for" or represent something else. In the second, one's capacity to know is linked to the ability to simply make sense of its form. The "beautiful" picturesque tradition functions to contain and stabilise the object through establishing a defined viewpoint and frame. This stabilising of the image is crucial because it is the very mechanism by which the author can facilitate a semiotic reading of the object's figure. This point is crucial because it effectively establishes the continuance of a particular type of intellectual tradition that dates back from late as post modernism and at least as far back as the eighteenth century picturesque, irrespective of whether the object was presented within phenomenological or linguistic tradition. (Taylor, 1992).

Bois's exposure of the sublime as a condition of figural indeterminacy, rather than object scale, provides a way in which to better understand the affective potential of the use of optically unstable patterns in Matthew's Circular Quay project. The type of sublime affect Bois raises is one where the figure of form is experientially incomprehensible, hence the increased luminosity caused by altering the colour rendering of the Circular Quay site requires further tactics to produce a formal instability that becomes experientially beyond categorisation and also duplication. On one level this indeterminacy is produced by use of the Munsterberg pattern as a metric by which to scale the façade. (Figure 4) On another level the project also exploits the logics underpinning digital pixel systems. Thus the scaling of each façade component, to match variations within the camera's depth of field, produces a virtual view of the façade that constantly shifts in and out of focus as the camera is manipulated. This blurring was exacerbated by the proposal to construct the façade out of a panelling system where alternating solid black and transparent white sections cause the light to bleed around every joint.

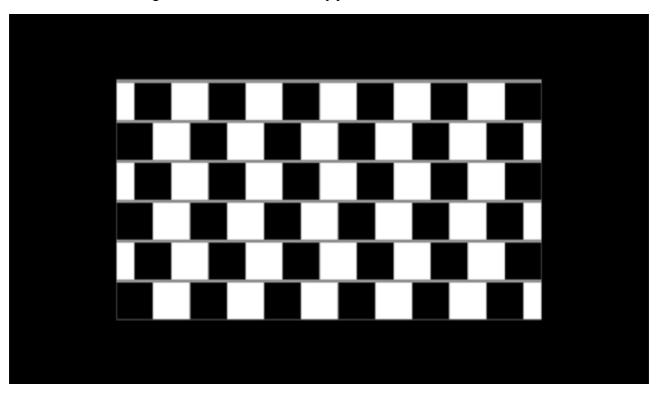


Figure 4- The Münsterberg Pattern

These formal manoeuvres produce a variation in density patterning, which when distributed across vertical and horizontal webcam's picture plane, works to create an experiential disjunction between the webcam and real space of the Circular Quay precinct. The desire to impart spatial depth to the façade further enhances the digital disruption caused by the anamorphic projection of the Münsterberg pattern, ensuring that the experience of 'real' site is disjunctive to what one sees from the webcam. (Figure 5) Cumulatively these design acts subvert the desire of authorities to control and co-opt these city views into a figurative, and therefore, ideological construct. Unlike the beautiful, which has the potential to fall into the linguistic through referential play, the form here is closer to attaining a condition of the sublime because, being beyond comprehension, it is inevitably posited in the realm of indeterminate affect. This notion of affect is fundamentally different from the functioning of the figure in modernist phenomenological aesthetics because, being a product of the figured object, it can exist without resorting to semiotic abstractions. This avoids the fate of modern and post-modern phenomenology, where the abstract is converted into a new semiotic structure. Consequently, what Bois offers is a conception of

phenomenology that by incorporating the object's figure allows it to always sit outside any conceptual framing and therefore the politics of taste.

This condition is, of course, a very different functioning of the figure to that which Mitchell discusses in Augustus Earle's 1827 painting Distant View of the Bay of Islands, New Zealand. Mitchell is careful to point out that Earle subverts picturesque conventions to rupture the normative narrative associated with these types of images and makes particular note of Earle's subversive use of the Maori totem disrupts the traditional function of the picturesque side-screen 'lead-in' figure. Mitchell notes that:

"It does not provide a dark refuge for the viewer to hide behind, nor does it provide a convenient stand-in for the beholder's gaze within the composition. On the contrary, it is a hazard, an emblem of an alien vision that stares back into the space of the beholder. The carved figure alludes to the traces and vestiges of the picturesque side-screen; the figure may "stand in the place of" but it does so only to show that convention displaced by something else." (Mitchell, 1994)

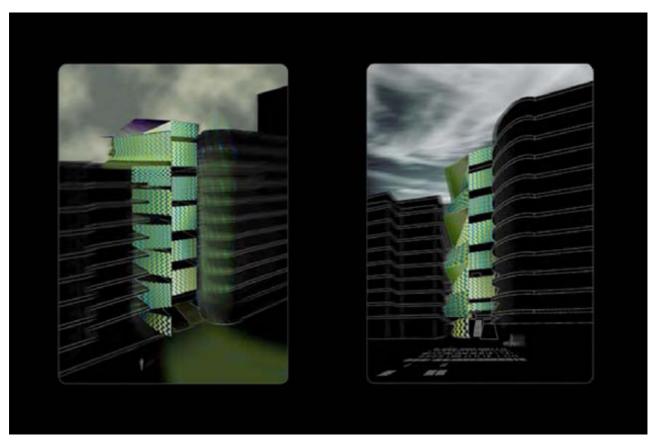


Figure 5- Left image is the webcam view of karaoke club at #7 East Circular Quay and the right image is the street view of the same building

For Mitchell this contestation is about the conventions of the representation; as he adds this "something else" is neither the landscape or nature "but another convention for organizing and perceiving the landscape, one that contends with and reshapes the convention that Earle carries as picturesque traveller. (Mitchell, 1994) The point Mitchell makes here is that the Maori carved figure is not only a figure that contests the conventions of the European picturesque but also one that demonstrates that the picturesque notion of surveying and viewing the landscape is not a distinctly western understanding of the same. The figure's view may be oriented differently to that of the western gaze but it still "indicates at a minimum that "stopping still just to look" at the land

is so important to the Maoris that they erect a statue to keep surveillance over a place." (Mitchell, 1994)

The collective disruptive effect of all these tactics on the webcam's picture plane in Matthew's Circular Quay project therefore acts in a similar way to Earle's carved figure. The point of difference being that these interventions do not lie within the narrative conventions of the image but instead disrupt the experience of viewing on site, both as a real time, physical, and 'virtual', visual experience. The project's agency does not rely on Earle's figurative disruption of meaning and signification but rather on the inability of the interventions to imagistically stabilise and form. As with Bois's reading of Serra's sculptures, the figure of this intervention acts as a sort of deceptive formal index that fails to deliver the experience we expect on first sighting.

In the co-authored essay, 'Montage and Architecture', Bois's discussion of Sergi Eisenstein's cinematic procedure to achieve visual instability is instructive in better understanding the import of the deliberate production of disjunctive "affect" of the webcam. Eisenstein, who attributes this notion to Piranesi's deliberately disjunctive visual technique, explains this affect in the following way:

"(But while) the eye expects to see behind the arch the continuation of the architectural theme preceding the arch normally reduced by perspective, (it is, in fact) another architectural motif that appears behind the arch, and moreover, in a reduction of perspective almost double what the eye had supposed. ... Hence an unexpected qualitative leap from the space and the grand scale. (Bois & Glenny, 1989)"

Piranesi obviously constructs this effect by exploiting the inertia of the eye to continue a movement once it has been directed. The collision of this "suggested" path of movement with another scopic path produces a jolt, and as Bois remarks on Eisenstein's work "this analogous ability of retaining imprints of a visual impression (are)—the phenomenon (on which) cinematic movement is built.' (Bois & Glenny, 1989) In this light the failure of the virtual tourist to focus the webcam image turns the passive consumption of the iconic view into a type of experience that is initiated by the camera's path.

While the Circular Quay project stops at the façade there is no doubt that such visual strategies can utilise the scopic regime of CCTV systems to affect interior real and virtual experience. However what Matthew's Circular Quay Project indicates is that the deliberate shifting nature of the image produces an experience of and engagement with the view that constantly defies stabilisation and therefore creates a disjunctive moment between image and experience that sits outside comprehension. The operation of the sublime picturesque within this contemporary context means that its function is duplicated by its performance within both virtual and the real contexts and inasmuch it stands outside any quantifiable or stable frame. Consequently there is neither a moment whereby the figure can ever be completely understood semiotically or experientially. This tactics not only act to deliberately challenge the governmental by-laws but also challenge the promotional agency of the webcam system itself. The use of the figure and form shifts the issue of representation from portrayal to affect but does so in a way that operatively undoes the viewer's capacity to simultaneously read architectural materiality or the figure's form. By disrupting the regulatory control of these images it also opens a space for productive engagement with the making of these city images that refuses to privilege sanctioned forms or render stable and unproblematic postcard images of the urban landscape.

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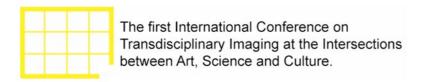
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### INTRODUCTION

A profound shift is occurring in our understanding of postmodern media culture. Since the turn of the millennium the emphasis on mediation as technology and as aesthetic idiom, as opportunity for creative initiatives and for critique, has become increasingly normative and doctrinaire. Mediation and the new media arts have in fact become the new medium of critical and pedagogical discourse: like water is for fish, like culture is for cultural studies, mediation is a concept that is taken for granted now because it is itself the medium in which we think and act, in which we swim. We need a concept that is amphibian, and that can leave its medium. The concept we propose is a remediated apprehension of the image: an active image and activity of imaging beyond the boundaries of disciplinary definition, but also altering the relations of intermedia aesthetics and interdisciplinary pedagogy. This concept will need to incorporate a vibrant materialism of the image's sensory and cognitive strata and an evanescent immaterialism of its affective qualities. Rather than locate our conference in the space of negotiation between disciplines or media (the "inter-"), we propose the opposition, transit and surpassing of the interdisciplinary by a "transdisciplinary aesthetics", and its conceptual and physical practice of a "transdisciplinary imaging."

The aim of the conference is to bring together artists, scholars, scientists historians and curators.

The conference will explore areas related to: Painting, Drawing, Film, Video, Photography, Computer visualization, Real-time imaging, Intelligent systems, Image Science.

# Participants were asked to address at least one the following areas in their abstract:

- remediated image
- hypermediacy and the iconic character of the image
- politics of the image and/or image making in a transdisciplinary context
- life sciences and bioart in relation to the living image
- distributed and networked image
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- illusion, process and immediacy
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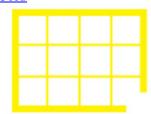
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"New Imaging: transdisciplinary strategies for art beyond the new media".

Takes place on 5 - 6 November at Artspace, 43/51 Cowper Wharf Rd, Sydney, NSW 2011.

Deadline for Abstracts: June 25, 2010

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### **Proposals**

You are invited to submit an abstract for an individual paper relevant to a conference theme as described above. The deadline for abstracts is June 25, 2010. Abstracts for individual papers should be no longer than 250 words. Please provide full contact details with your abstract.

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