

This Experience Does Not Exist / Landscapes with Google Earth

This might be my favorite photograph. The heliograph, taken around 1826 by Joseph Niépce, records rooftops from the window of his home in France. As the oldest known extant camera photograph, it is an artifact of inchoate technology. The results of the all-day attempt to register objective reality are suggested, rather than precisely captured. The fingerprints of man are reflected in the roughness and offness of the recording, and therein lies its beauty.



Today satellites and aircraft provide our rooftop view. Their programmed cameras sweep the globe, as if mowing the lawn of the earth, robotically taking millions of photos. The image data is superimposed on a 3D topographical grid over which photographed textures are laid, creating a mosaic of the world.

Google Earth's system has been taught to define the land in a spectacular way. But like someone learning to read, mispronunciations and misreads occur. Sometimes image data misaligns with the 3D terrain data, serving up a confusion of shapes and colors, View-Master-like arrangements of field depth, and flatness where there should be three-dimensionality. At times the underlying 3D grid framework appears, and one witnesses squares of data falling into place before the complete image appears, revealing the transition between what is finally presented and the structure it hangs on. In remote locations Google Earth's low resolution satellite imagery manifests a lack of detail, as if the cameras are painting with broad brush strokes, often simplifying textures with cartoonish results.

The combination of algorithmic misreads and low-resolution aesthetics create rough artifacts, so similar to the ones in Niépce's rooftops photograph, and these are the images that interest me the most.

The algorithmic hallucinations create distortions that project a tension between fact and fiction. Their offness creates a weird simulacrum of reality: the images seem otherworldly — but it's our world. As the system algorithms improve, this group of initial recordings will most likely disappear. With this book, the photographs of my simulated travels in part record a cabinet of curiosities of the remarkable, impressionistic and surreal artifacts of the technology as it now exists, before it is perfected.

Some will take issue with the virtual capture process employed here, considering these images dislocated from life, and derived from an experience that did not exist. My own psyche, however, does not object to the absence of ground level encounters. Any experience depends on the openness and imagination one brings to it. The process was as exhilarating as any of my artistic endeavors, no bonds with creativity were broken. In the years that were spent viewing Google Earth images, hundreds of miles were often covered before the recording of a particular landscape from a particular distance, angle and height. It felt similar to analog landscape experiences, where after walking or driving for a good period, one finally stops to photograph a compelling view.

The numen of this landscape series is Genesis Day 4: before birds, animals and man were created. The views depict archetypal frontiers, absent of political and social constraints, yet to be recorded by human memory. The reality, however, is that technology has shrunk the world, and no corner of it is unfamiliar. The new frontier is now technology itself.

Because the human psyche constantly craves newness and exploration, which in essence is the quest for the ideal over reality, more and more of life will be

viewed through its filter. We employ cognition, common sense, and intuition to understand reality. Because our perception is attuned to our human scale, and has not developed to comprehend on a very small or large spectrum, we penetrate a narrow range of what exists. Technology enables us to probe existence in those spheres beyond human perception, and through it we are often able to access the sublime.

On an autobiographical note, Antarctica has always held a particular fascination for me. The polar desert has an aesthetic which approaches nothingness on a visual level and everything on a spiritual plane. The main catalyst for this series was inspired by a decades-old dream. In it, I found myself in a pristine expanse of Antarctica. Though clothed with only a long red scarf, cold was nonexistent. Movement was like that of an Olympic skater, elegant and fluid, and manifest with the rapidity of thought. The effort and limitations that constrain and impede human existence were supplanted by infinite possibility and joy. I would describe the state as one of pure spirit, perfectly euphoric and enthralling. Most would say it was an experience that did not exist, but the event has served as a reference point seminal in my thinking and way of being. These photographs were my curious attempt to rediscover the landscape that only existed in my mind and re-touch the phenomena it provoked. My travels began in Antarctica, then over a period of years, segued to other remote regions, eventually gravitating to the equator.

These vistas were created 2019-2023. Their making is my musical interpretation and scoring of Google Earth's data. Viewing the world from hundreds of miles above is sublime. The experience novelly displays Earth's wondrous beauty, and renews the importance of how it should be protected, especially from man himself.

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