Zoe Leonard & Elisabeth Lebovici

The politics of contemplation
A CONVERSATION RECORDED IN PARIS IN APRIL, 2012.


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Elisabeth Lebovici: Here we are, talking before getting our words in written form, about the camera obscura you are installing in Venice. The camera obscura as an apparatus and an experiment has been written about extensively, but what often goes unexamined is the specific experience that each of us has in the space and time of a particular camera obscura. Can we talk, first, about this experience and about what it means?

Zoe Leonard: Maybe we can start by talking about what a camera obscura is. The term “camera obscura” really describes a natural phenomenon: the principal that in a dark room, a small hole will let in light rays that will project an image of the outside world onto the opposite wall. Since light rays move in a straight line, the image comes in upside down and reversed.

There are written observations of this phenomenon that date as far back as 400 BCE. Throughout history various tools have been built to utilize it in different ways; the camera obscura was employed by scientists to understand the physical laws of light. During the Renaissance, the camera obscura was instrumental in the understanding of perspective, and various apparatuses have been used by draughtsmen, painters and architects.

What is interesting to me is that photography has been separated from these other sciences and arts. And yet, the camera shows us a kind of “shared ancestry” — that these various arts and sciences are deeply connected. Perhaps there is a way to think differently about these segregated practices — that there is a common ground, a desire to know and to understand the world around us and our place in it.

I think it’s an interesting time to pick up this tool again. The field of photography is at a turning point, changing so rapidly, and we live in an incredibly image-saturated culture. My curiosity about the camera obscura involves asking questions about how we see, how we look, and what we take for granted about sight. The camera obscura offers us a way of seeing that does not have to result in a fixed image — such as a photograph or a film.

My iteration of the camera obscura offers photographic seeing as a spatial, temporal experience. A space that can be entered and inhabited. The inverted
landscape inside the camera obscura is not a photograph, it is not an object. Rather, you are inside the camera and it becomes a space for observation and contemplation.

Elisabeth Lebovici: I think the series of camerae obscurae that you have built — so far you have made three of these installations: the first in Galerie Gisela Capitain in Cologne, the second in the Camden Arts Centre in London, and now, one in the Palazzo Grassi in Venice — represents a shift in your body of work, which spans thirty years. Could you describe, with a few shortcuts, what led you to these projects and to this form?

Zoe Leonard: I began taking photographs when I was quite young. Right from the start I kept trying to find the limits of the medium. Back then, there were lots of different kinds of film, and I worked my way through as many as I could find: black and white, color, slide and print, infrared and ortho; I also tried to find the full range of my camera’s capability. I tried shooting at every speed, pushing and pulling the film, playing with contrast and grain. When I learned to print, I experimented with various developers and papers. I often used outdated paper that was given to me or could be bought cheaply. I just wanted to see everything photography could do.

The subject was always part of it — I was aiming my camera at something, or someone — but the material was equally important. I was interested in the physical constitution of the photograph: what the print looked like, its size and tone, if it was dark or light, warm or cool, murky or crisp.

A few years into these experiments, I realized that most of this work was incredibly bad! I realized I needed to start all over again, to teach to myself to make a decent picture. So I started in what I thought would be the simplest way, the most stripped down elements: black and white, still life.

This led me down what turned out to be a long path, an extended exploration of different modes of representation, the different kinds of jobs a photograph can do. It can be a document, or a record, it can be used to transmit information, or employed as evidence, or proof. It can be a snapshot, intimately connected to memory and emotion. It can be a kind of blueprint of the world, or
it can be completely abstract. Photographs can be used for both ordering and disordering the world.

I became interested in mapping and archiving. I liked the deadpan appearance of photographs used in science and cartography. I looked at war photographs, especially aerial reconnaissance photographs. I started experimenting with different kinds of situations, taking photographs from planes, in museums and libraries, of maps and books and displays. I was interested in the image as information, and equally in how that information was unreliable or subjective. Various ideas of classification and systems of interpretation created different versions of reality. This was much more interesting to me than the notion of a “fine art” photograph.

I found myself questioning what constitutes knowledge: why things are ordered a certain way, what is accepted as fact, or truth, and how that categorization is connected to power, and to our lives. Photography seemed to be a kind of lynchpin in this structuring.

Around the same time, I started playing with serial images, finding that sometimes it took multiple images to convey complexity. When I look back, I remember my own frustration: the great photographers seemed to be able to take a great picture — one image that says it all. You know, that’s the myth with photography, right? The perfect moment, the decisive moment. But, usually, I couldn’t take one perfect picture, I couldn’t find the decisive moment, the ideal angle. I always seemed to miss it. My work often felt provisional, or even inadequate. I was frustrated with my pictures that seemed to be just to the side of the real action. My frame was somehow outside the frame. Now I realize that this is my work; that for me, the world, or my view of the world, is made of component parts, shattering and repeating, overlapping and simultaneous.

Around this period of time a lot of my friends and acquaintances — my community — began to get sick with AIDS. A couple of close friends got sick and a few people I knew died. I joined Act Up. I became politicized. In those urgent circumstances I started thinking about the political implications of how we organize our looking, how we gather and organize information in the
world, and how we organize the way we make a picture of the world. Defining beauty or truth is never an absolute set of terms; there is a politics to it.

Those times were extreme. I became very aware of the very real cost of homophobia and sexism, and classism, and racism. I saw that the way we were defined and categorized translated into how we were valued. That valuation in turn determined if we would be cared for, if we would be recognized, if we would live or die. I got involved in direct action activism and also worked with two artist/activist collectives (GANG and fierce pussy). But my own art practice remained more idiosyncratic and I struggled to find ways to talk about the institutionalized cruelty and prejudice I was encountering. I wanted to express this situation, and to find my own voice within it. I began to photograph in medical museums, in history and science museums, in libraries and fashion shows, trying to look at the ways beauty was constructed, and also looking at how sexism and bias is built into the institutional framework of our society. I began to understand beauty as a construction, a set of rules and regulations. I became interested in how the frame of my camera could carry the attitude of my gaze. Calling these systems of order into question could be a way of upturning them or destabilizing them. I wanted to reframe the world so that we could consider alternative possibilities.

As I worked with different subjects, I began to think more about the place from which the picture is taken: my vantage point. Perhaps I could say this became the ground of my work. Rather than any one subject or genre (landscape, portrait, still life, etc.), I was, and remain, interested in engaging a simultaneous questioning of both subject and vantage point, the relation between viewer and world—in short, subjectivity and how it informs our experience of the world.

A few years ago I had a survey show, and in every conversation or interview around the exhibition, I was asked if I was still shooting analogue or if I had switched to digital. This persistent question seemed to come with a set of judgments. The implication seemed to be that analogue photography is beautiful, but nostalgic and old-fashioned, and conversely, that digital is not as pretty, but is faster and more contemporary. It felt as if I was being asked
to say that one is better than the other — or rather, there seemed to be an expectation that I would defend analogue photography. The argument about which is “better” didn’t make any sense to me. I find this binary confining and not very interesting. I’m still shooting analogue, but I think artists should choose whichever medium works best for them. Digital and analogue do different things, they have different qualities and different strengths. There’s a larger question here about choosing to work with photography at all — a medium that is reliant on industrial production — but we can go into that later.

About a year after my survey show, I began teaching for the first time. The conversation around photography seemed to be framed in two binary oppositions: analogue vs. digital and subject vs. material. I found myself struggling to find a way to have a more expansive conversation about photography. I found myself asking the students: What is photography? Is it a print? An object? Is it a jpeg on your screen? Or does it only count if it’s a tiff? Or if you print it out? Is it a picture on your phone? Is it a projection? Is it a picture you see in your mind before you click the shutter? Is it that great image you missed? In short, is photography a thing, or a picture, or is it a way of seeing?

At the end of that first summer of teaching, these questions followed me home. My first morning back home I woke up thinking: “I want to make a camera obscura. Begin at the beginning, and see what happens from there.”

Elisabeth Lebovici: Psychoanalytic theory, such as the work of Jacques Lacan, uses the camera obscura as a model for the subject, or for the relations between the outside and the inside of the body — it is only through a pinhole that the world outside is represented and translated into images, which will, in turn, determine the psychic life of an inside surface — a place to stock “all that could be diversely called affects, instincts or drives.”

Zoe Leonard: The way that I approach these installations — making the entire space into a camera — creates a particular experience. You can walk around, sit down, lie on the floor; the image falls on all the surfaces of the room, so you are surrounded by the image. It’s a spatial experience.
The camera obscura makes the mechanics of sight visible. It is a simplified version, but what we see in the camera is like what happens inside our head: our eyes receive an image, light rays enter through the pupil, and the image lands on our retina, inverted and reversed. Then the brain, in turn, processes that image, and turns it “right side up.” There are a series of translations that allow us to comprehend the images we receive.

Inside the installation, you are experiencing images as they would be before they have been corrected: sight before comprehension. In this way, I think the space of the camera obscura is related to the space of the unconscious, to what happens inside the box of the head. Occupying this space allows us to engage with our own process of seeing, to actually track our process of seeing. We experience light, movement, color, contrast and shape, and slowly we resolve these elements into a picture. In the camera, we can be present and conscious and observe ourselves as we go through this process.

Because the space is darkened, there is a certain mood, a kind of quiet. The room feels slowed down. The image is inverted; at first it is disorienting. And this allows for us to consider what it is we are seeing. Maybe it opens up space inside a process we take for granted.

These installations are also social spaces. You occupy this space with other people, and so this experience of looking and understanding is shared. You watch each other. And as the image moves and changes, it becomes a temporal experience. There is no beginning or end; you can stay as long as you want.

Elisabeth Lebovici: This also connects with Jonathan Crary’s theories of the “observer” in Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century, that extract the camera obscura from the evolutionary logic leading to photography. Opposite many art practices — such as video — which produce a material record, even if they document an object or event that is already gone, this experience of the camera obscura produces the sense of a journey looking at things passing by.

Zoe Leonard: The image in the camera obscura is not fixed. It is photographic seeing unhinged from the print, or even from the notion of a picture.
as a stable thing. Nothing is recorded, there is no way to repeat it or play it back, and no two people who visit the exhibition see the same artwork. The image changes constantly every minute and every day: a cloud goes by and the light shifts. You become sensitized to every small fluctuation.

A traditional camera obscura — an apparatus for drawing or one made in the 19th century as a tourist attraction — is designed for making pictures. There are a number of these tourist attractions still extant. Usually they are housed in small rooms, where the image is directed onto a small white table which provides a kind of frame. A mirror is often used to flip the image “right-side-up,” so it is presented as a conventional “picture.”

In my installations, nothing is gathered into a coherent picture for the viewer. The image falls on the floor, on the wall, on the ceiling. The image is sharply in focus in some parts of the room and out of focus in others. In places it is distended and blown out. It is non-hierarchical: there is no privileged vantage point, no part of the image is more important than any other. This work questions the ways we gather images into a picture, or a fact, or a truth. The whole idea of a “decisive moment” dissolves here. Light comes in, hits the floor and unpredictable things happen. It is fugitive and unstable, constantly unfolding. It relies on your body adapting to it: as your eyes adjust, you see more. A room that appeared completely dark at first is filled with an image.

For someone like me, who has made objects all their life, it feels liberating not to make an object, not to hang a thing on the wall. I come up with a set of conditions, and the work unfolds with its own logic.

In these installations there is another principle that is very important to me, which is that the room remains visible. I don’t build out the space or conceal any of the existing architecture. I want viewers to be aware of where they are. The work becomes a kind of double exposure: an image of the outside world superimposed on an existing room.

Elisabeth Lebovici: Art historian Nataša Petrešin Bachelez commented on this sort of exploration, which recalled for her the “Light and Space” movement
associated with Robert Irwin, James Turrell, Maria Nordman and Eric Orr, which was similarly concerned with the phenomenological experience of the moment of looking.

Zoe Leonard: I love a lot of that work. Irwin especially has been inspiring for me. And I admire Orr and Turrell. But I think there is a real difference here in my approach. I don’t think I can say that my explorations are about pure perception of color, light, and space. For me, this work is about locating oneself in the world, about social space and a consciousness of subjectivity and relationships to others, about histories of looking and picturing. There is an experiential component, which is great, but I think for me it is also tied to politics. Understanding that we inhabit this room together, yet differently — this is phenomenal to me. The idea of a space in which we can think about how we see and how we look — this is a profoundly political thing to do together.

Elisabeth Lebovici: Could this site-specific installation be considered in relation to practices of institutional critique, which often reflect critically on their own place within art institutions? Many of these projects — by artists such as Hans Haacke, Michael Asher, or Andrea Fraser — have tried to “out” the institutions where they are embedded; they have sought to grasp the politics or structure of an institution by turning it inside out and making it visible. A camera obscura, on the other hand, pushes the outside world inside the gallery walls, “queering” it perhaps.

Zoe Leonard: I love that question. What an idea, that a camera obscura can be an institutional critique!

I think of this work as a series. Each camera is a site-specific work, titled with the address of its location. But, as I make them, I also think about each site in relation to the others.

I was thrilled at the chance to make a camera obscura in Venice with a view onto the Grand Canal. This view is so layered. When I consider a site, I’m not really interested in pretty views. I’m more interested in views that are
dirty or complex, contradictory views, views with layers of meaning. At the Camden Arts Centre in London, for instance, the space is a former library; it’s a beautiful space and you could still see the architecture. I loved how the exterior and the interior overlapped. Across the street there was a construction site, and this construction site, the traffic outside, the vanishing point, the way the horizon meets the architecture, the way the sun coming through the lens hit the floor — all this was important.

There is a specific relationship to the camera obscura in Venice: it was a tool for many of the Vedutisti, and Caneletto is one of many artists known to have used camerae obscurae for rendering the city’s architecture. But for me, this is only the beginning. The history of picturing here in Venice is also a nexus for thinking about the relationships between beauty, power, and artmaking, about the role of the picture in our society.

Venice is a mercantile city, a port, a place of exchange. Still a place of great wealth, it was a seat of economic power for several hundred years. It is a very beautiful city, considered one of the most romantic in the world, but simultaneously, it is associated with death and decay. It is a city that is literally underwater.

One can’t help but think of the great works of art which have used this city as material: from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* to Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, to Nicholas Roeg’s *Don’t Look Now*, and Jeanette Winterson’s *The Passion*. For me the installation in Venice is a way to engage with this incredibly rich and complex history of drawing, painting, architecture, and film, as well as a long and complicated history of art patronage.

Palazzo Grassi, where I installed the camera, is an 18th century palace directly overlooking the Grand Canal and facing the Ca’ Rezzonico. The obvious wealth of the building is part of the installation — the image coming through the lens falls on the walls and floor, and onto the incredibly ornate carved and gilded ceiling. The histories of the Palace — including its current incarnation as a space for a private collection of contemporary art — are all present. The space merges with the incoming images, each affecting the “readability” and the meaning of the other. I am interested in what this simple gesture can do.
By placing a lens in the window of the Palazzo, I am asking us to look at both the interior and the exterior of the site.

While it is layered with historical references, it is a work that happens in the present, in the now. The boat traffic that goes by speaks to the quotidian: vaporetto and gondola, tourist boats and police boats, fire boats, work boats carrying equipment, cranes and machinery, boats for garbage collection. The water is an extraordinary color, both gorgeous and toxic.

**Elisabeth Lebovici:** *In the camera obscura, you have fluid, volatile, and simultaneous time. It isn’t about duration. It’s a “continuous project altered” all the time. Ian White says something which is beautiful about this continuous alteration in the camera obscura: that it is a space of tension at the intersection of accident and withdrawal.*

**Zoe Leonard:** You made a great point during our earlier conversation, that what happens in the camera obscura is not actually duration. Duration is what happens in cinema; it is a period of time that has been preset by the director: a film has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and you go through it. These installations do something else. They are constantly unfolding in a continuous present.

I appreciate John Cage’s notion of chance as well as his idea of a continuous present. Photography is usually understood as a medium inextricably linked to the past — to memory, to history. But inside the camera, we are only in the now.

The viewer has a kind of democratic relation to the work: you come and go, you stay as long as you like. The piece is happening constantly, 24/7 for as long as it is installed. It is not a projection with a beginning, middle and end. Nor is it a loop that repeats. Inside the camera obscura the piece is happening all the time and it is never the same. The only real duration is the length of the exhibition: when the show is over, I remove the lens and the work is gone. In this way, the work is related to performance; it is ephemeral; there is no object to take away or preserve. It is an experience.
The aspect we haven’t talked about yet is sound: in the installation, you hear what is happening outside. It becomes a soundtrack. The longer you stay in the space, the more become conscious of the sound: the sounds of a small city in Cologne, the sound of a busy high street in London.

The work has a representational aspect, but at the same time it is abstract. I think sound is part of this. Obviously, the sound is in sync with the image, but at times it seems to be slightly delayed, there is a slow and quiet feeling in the camera that allows your listening and looking to be fully engaged. You know what you’re looking at, but at the same time things feel a bit unfamiliar. The expectations of what things should look like are shifted, and at times, the light on the walls and ceiling forms abstract shapes and patterns. The sound provides a link to the outside world, a reminder that the image is of the street just downstairs, and somehow for me this presents a kind of interesting suspension: that reality can be understood as a simultaneous and parallel experience of both narrative representation and abstract sound and image.

As a viewer, I find that spending time in the camera allows me to move past the subject of the picture and into a deeper consideration of how an image is formed, or, how I understand the image — what constitutes reality, or subjective experience.

I hope to create an extended state of observation.

**Elisabeth Lebovici:** I perceive a twist in this work, which relates to the notion of authorship. By not “signing” the view or the image, but letting it happen and be altered continuously, you are conversing with a contemporary point of view, which relinquishes mastery or authorship, for instance of one’s own image, one’s own signature. I would call it a feminist point of view. What do you think of this argument?

**Zoe Leonard:** When I print my photographs, I always leave the black frame from the film around the image. This can be the beginning of a conversation: this is the way I see it, how do you see it?

In the camera the image is framed, but what happens inside the frame is not
fixed. It’s a chance operation. The immersive quality of the work heightens your sense of your own presence, as a physical, social, political viewer. And you are not only a viewer, but also part of the subject, visible to others.

The experiential component is tied to a politics of viewership and subjectivity. I wouldn’t say that the image itself is a feminist image, yet these questions of how we look are profoundly feminist questions. For me feminism is not only about content, but also about form.

Elisabeth Lebovici: Can you describe this feminist questioning of form, and your conversations around it?

Zoe Leonard: I think a lot about Gertrude Stein’s writing. She has characters. There is a story, but she never quite lets you get to the story. Or rather, she never lets you lose yourself in the story; she keeps you in the space of your own reading. You are aware of her writing and of the process of your reading — the words, their sound, their shape, the structure of the sentences, the repetition. So the story is there, but it’s not the only thing.

Virginia Woolf also does something remarkable in her work in regard to subjectivity. Her work acknowledges subjective space. She fully describes the interior of a character’s mind — what they are thinking, feeling, their internal dialogue, the reality of their consciousness — and at the same time, her characters move through the world, they interact. She doesn’t give up the exterior world, the narrative, the social situation that’s outside. She keeps us present in that moment of interaction — where your whole subjective interior meets and interacts with the outside world.

This is what I’m interested in, the way we live an interior and an exterior life, simultaneously and continuously.


15. Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* 44.1 (September 2005), 278-286.


18. Fraser, "From the Critique..."


23. In French, the vanishing point becomes a "point of light and of dark."


itself. Space is thus the origin of time. It is simultaneously its point of nullity and the whole extension of its successivity. It is the opening of time, the simultaneity of its spacing.

In the camera obscura, the present is a lateral display, perpetually spaced and altered over an indefinite, formless amount of time; it does not show the marks of duration, characteristic of many kinds of (theatrical, choreographical, filmic) performance. This experience will only end with the demise of the installation; that is the nature of its vulnerable, ephemeral condition. In the absence of a film or a video, or a recording device that would offer the possibility to play and pause, rewind, digitize, archive and thus access (a partial) eternity through reenactment or repetition, what we get instead is a moment for contemplation.

Notes


3. This notion of the "afterlife" has been borrowed from the art historian Aby Warburg.


5. Ibid.

6. The question of "visibility thresholds" has been particularly discussed in relation to the Romantic genealogy of abstraction, accompanied by a "solar bedazzlement" (Turner, Romantic Ecstasies: The Beauty of Being Overcome, 1990; 33-68). And Nicole Loeb, "L'éipse de l'anachronisme en histoire. Les voies traversières de Nicole Loraux. Une helléniste à la croisée des sciences sociales,” Espaces Temps 1

7. My use of this turn of phrase is inspired by Cerith Wyn Evans’ similarly titled artwork, Inverse Reverse Perverse, 1996.

crisis... While every possible minority was acknowledged as a potential consumer and visually represented (to a certain extent), people's participation in the political and economic realms became more uneven.

Has empowerment, particularly regarding the feminist project—which is often thought to be primarily concerned with asserting control over one's image (“our bodies, ourselves”)—been turned upside down by the constant stream of social media and the massive glut of self-representations? Perhaps the struggle to construct representations, the camera obscura, has abandoned its symbolic organization, which was generally mobilized to order the picture plane. In the reversal of the ground and the absence of a smooth, rectangular field that would assemble and stabilize the image, the horizon, the frame, the scale, the orientation, the perspective, the picture, the image are abandoned. The camera obscura, given by the lines, surfaces, marks and blotsches, but in Leonard's space does not represent time, like a line that would be the immobile figure of a form of spacing.

Space does not represent time, like a line that would be the immobile figure of a conventional empiricist, in which time is reconstructed as a form of spacing.

From Here to Eternity

Is time a thing that surrounds us, or is it a standard by which to measure experience? A perceptual crisis: what comes first and what comes after? Circumstantial meaning, the earthy weight of things is lifted. The dissymmetry and in the absence of a smooth, rectangular field that would assemble and stabilize an image, the Kitchen table, the frame, the scale, the orientation, the perspective, the perspective, the picture, the image are abandoned. The camera obscura, given by the lines, surfaces, marks and blotsches, but in Leonard's space does not represent time, like a line that would be the immobile figure of a form of spacing.

Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy describes a suspension of conventional temporality, in which time is restructured as a form of spacing:

Space does not represent time, like a line that would be the immobile figure of a form of spacing.
dismantle a structure that positions the male, heterosexual subject at the apex of the cone of vision. Indeed the camera obscura was instrumental in modeling this structure, and what feminist theorists attacked was its positioning of a male subject as the center and owner of meaning. This patriarchal gaze was produced between the viewing position and vanishing point, where the supposed fear of castration suffered by the person gazing would be redeemed or palliated through a fetishized female body.

One of the most potent critiques of this way of looking was enacted by VALIE EXPORT’s Tap and Touch Cinéma (Tapp und Tastkino) (1968): a portable box that the artist constructed and attached to her bare breasts—a dark room made only for touching, and not for looking. It is a closed black box where nothing is accessible to sight; two holes are provided for two hands to enter, humble and fed in the dark. That is, of this way of looking was enacted by VALIE EXPORT’s Tap and Touch Cinéma (1968), a portable box that the artist constructed and attached to her bare breasts—two holes are provided for two hands to enter, humble and fed in the dark.

The theorist and artist Hito Steyerl writes:...
manifests of their own, the camera obscura is discussed in the beginning of texts by both John Berger and Laura Mulvey that attempt to denaturalize and denounce the gaze. In the early 1970s, the site of artistic experimentation by Joan Jonas, Gordon Matta-Clark and other artists on New York's West Side Highway was the heart of New York's gay cruising scene before the AIDS epidemic.

19 He draws a parallel between "communities of subjectivities" — the sexual, affective, personal ties of one's own, vulnerable life — and communities of art, as recorded through the art historical discourse and archives. Subject to "radical juxtaposition," two incommensurate worlds communicate, not only reminding us that they are performed within close proximity of one another, but providing a rich play of exclusions, inclusions, discourses and atrocities, subjects to "radical juxtaposition." Two incomensurate worlds communicate, not only reminding us that they are performed within close proximity of one another, but providing a rich play of exclusions, inclusions, discourses and atrocities, subjects to "radical juxtaposition."

20 There was a time when artists could still conceivably take up a critical position against or outside the institution. Today, the argument goes, the outside no longer exists. What if a process of "queering" were to replace this politics of "coming out" or "outing" attached to institutional critique? Perhaps it would let in something "perverse" — something that has not been invited to enter and unfold itself inside the institution. In Leonard's camera obscura, not only do we see the outside world formed as an image inverted within the room, but we also imagine its social geography, its human geology, and its politics. At stake, nowadays, is the exercise of power and dispossession embedded in the city's present forms. Perhaps it is a process of "queering" that could replace this politics of "coming out" or "outing" attached to institutional critique. Perhaps it is a process of "queering" that could replace this politics of "coming out" or "outing" attached to institutional critique.

21 In their present forms and particular surroundings, each of Leonard's camera obscura does not merely function as a "camera obscura" that forms an image inverted within the room, but also as a tool for imagining the social geography, its human geology, and its politics. At stake, nowadays, is the exercise of power and dispossession embedded in the city's present forms. Perhaps it is a process of "queering" that could replace this politics of "coming out" or "outing" attached to institutional critique. Perhaps it is a process of "queering" that could replace this politics of "coming out" or "outing" attached to institutional critique.

From Control to Release

Looking upon the edges of a critical anthropologized terrain, the camera obscura is discussed in the beginning of texts by both John Berger and Laura Mulvey that attempt to denaturalize and denounce the gaze. In the early 1970s, the site of artistic experimentation by Joan Jonas, Gordon Matta-Clark and other artists on New York's West Side Highway was the heart of New York's gay cruising scene before the AIDS epidemic.
outside, and of a border in between. The connections between institutional critique and sexual politics have not been studied very closely, although they find their starting points in similar impulses: a politics of authenticity, of throwing “mehr licht,” very much linked to a history of western subjectivity and consciousness. Artistic practices that make visible social and economic relations which are normally obscured (for instance “the complicities among apparently opposed spheres of art, the state, and corporations”) perhaps run parallel to the project of “outing” a person: exposing someone’s sexual orientation in contrast with his or her manifest discourse.

For my part, I have tried to track parallels between Brian O’Doherty’s series of essays known as Inside the White Cube (1976) and the admonishments of Harvey Milk to come out of the closet (1978) “to your parents… to your friends… to your neighbors… to your fellow workers: ‘We are coming out! We are coming out!’”

When Brian O’Doherty published his investigation, the politics of considering the supposedly neutral or universal white cube as an ideologically constructed site coincided with a self-revelatory politics of the emancipation of the body. These efforts to articulate gender policies of the enunciation of the body and of transcended people, people of color, or other marginalized groups, where the cube and the closet were not simply spaces, but processes, they intertwine.

The critique of the presentation of the self and the display of art objects have been studied very closely, although they find their starting points in similar impulses: a politics of authenticity, of throwing “mehr licht,” very much linked to a history of western subjectivity and consciousness. Artistic practices that make visible social and economic relations which are normally obscured (for instance “the complicities among apparently opposed spheres of art, the state, and corporations”) perhaps run parallel to the project of “ outing” a person: exposing someone’s sexual orientation in contrast with his or her manifest discourse.

The connections between institutional critique and sexual politics have not
model for the subject. It is only through a pinhole that the world outside is represented and translated into images, which will, in turn, determine the psychic life of an inside surface — a place to store impressions and sensations, whatever or moreover, the institution through which acts of supervision and sabotage, whether for instance, what has emerged in the practice known as Institutional Critique. Whether Institutional Critique exposes the structure known as Institutional Critique, the question of an inside and an outside has become central to the relation be-

From Outing to Queering

membrane.

holds the procedures of the camera obscura. This „skin“ is a sensitive

whereby images are never simply, definitively given form, in the surface that

spatialized distinction is perpetually negated. This permanent negation, the interior not exterior to the subject, but the permanently unstable site where that

distance is „neither outside nor interior to the subject, but a radical epistemological distance from the subject“ Butler contends, this object is an object just like any other. As Judith

other and already the self is perceived as an object just like any other. As Judith

imagines the subject that any specular image, even of one’s own self, is external

the body finds its unity in the image of the Other, which is its own antipode.

imagine, the subject that any specular image, even of one’s own self, is external

one’s own body: „The ego is thus and foremost a bodily ego: it is not merely

The question of an inside and an outside has become central to the relation be-

model for the subject. It is only through a pinhole that the world outside is

thing external to any work of art but the irreducible condition of its existence as

it forces us to reconsider the world we inhabit, and elsewhere, whether or not some-
not appear in the dictionary until 1892) as an inborn reversal of gender traits.

Using a binary language — in which homosexuality was counterweighed by heterosexuality — sexologist Havelock Ellis dubbed same-sex attraction "sexual inversion."

Ellis's term referred not only to sexual preferences, but also to a departure from stereotyped gender behavior; similarly, psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing defined homosexuality as a nurtured deviance of "the masculine soul, heaving in the female bosom."

Perversion and inversion were said to have been related to an evolutionary regression, a belief that was held up by new and recent histories of the laws of gravity; inserted in the present experience, makes us feel, at the same time, this release from image, regulating one's body from such need. At the same time, this release from camera obscura refines the drive to "correct" the inverted and framed position simultaneously in front and around, enveloping one's eyes, Lacan's Camera Obscura, of course, is a camera obscura, of course, is a device for producing an image from the back rather than the front, and it is not surprising that Lacan would want to use this device as a metaphor for the way in which he views the relationship between the subject and the world.

This strange view stems from Lacan's take on a philosophical history of sex. In fact, the psychoanalyst and theoretician held the camera obscura as a great answer to a question in a counterrhythm, we experience a dis-orientation, a queer vision. Despite their perception in the here and now, come from very far away, Lacan refers to the present, to the here and now, come from very far away.

"Unexpectedly plural, varied and contradictory historical understandings... Homo/heterosexual definition are far from being naturalized and where, counterculture of bodies and their desires, where issues of modern counterculture of bodies and their desires, where issues of modern want to be linked to an evolutionary regression, a belief that was held up by new and recent histories of the laws of gravity; inserted in the present experience, makes us feel, at the same time, this release from image, regulating one's body from such need. At the same time, this release from camera obscura refines the drive to "correct" the inverted and framed position simultaneously in front and around, enveloping one's eyes, Lacan's Camera Obscura, of course, is a device for producing an image from the back rather than the front, and it is not surprising that Lacan would want to use this device as a metaphor for the way in which he views the relationship between the subject and the world.

"An inside and an outside seem obvious when we consider the body, knowing from inside and an outside seem obvious when we consider the body, knowing from

From Inside to Outside

Taking a stance in a counterrhythm, we experience a dis-orientation, a queer vision. Despite their perception in the here and now, come from very far away, Lacan refers to the present, to the here and now, come from very far away.

"Unexpectedly plural, varied and contradictory historical understandings... Homo/heterosexual definition are far from being naturalized and where, counterculture of bodies and their desires, where issues of modern want to be linked to an evolutionary regression, a belief that was held up by new and recent histories of the laws of gravity; inserted in the present experience, makes us feel, at the same time, this release from image, regulating one's body from such need. At the same time, this release from camera obscura refines the drive to "correct" the inverted and framed position simultaneously in front and around, enveloping one's eyes, Lacan's Camera Obscura, of course, is a device for producing an image from the back rather than the front, and it is not surprising that Lacan would want to use this device as a metaphor for the way in which he views the relationship between the subject and the world.

From Inside to Outside

"An inside and an outside seem obvious when we consider the body, knowing from
With this invitation to stare at the Medusa-like sun, seeing is linked to visual pleasure, and a potentially dangerous desire to see the unseeable. Walls that Leonard has photographed in the past also come to mind. **Red Wall** (both 2002) are frontal views of bricked up houses, where all human traces of occupation are erased. With a mortared-over window or blocked door, walls raise an inaccessible barrier between the surface and what is underneath: a private interior space is made inaccessible to the viewer. These blind walls obstruct the light; they refuse to reveal depth and stand forever as monoliths and monochromes, even if the subject of the photograph is now in ruins. Thus, the image too becomes survivors in the afterlife of the image. Zoe Leonard has never favored “pretty images.” Instead, she creates messy, cluttered and muddled ones, protean images that are also shifting and fortuitous at the same time. By and by other events in the world outside the walls had survived a long journey — represented, perhaps, by the sharpened image transmute unexpectedly. Paradoxically, the image is like a ghost. It is present even before it has been seen. Zoe Leonard has never favored “pretty images.”

From survival to inversion

In the experience of the camera obscura as an immersive environment, the surrounding landscape enters the room as a picture. It is as if the image of the world outside the walls had survived a long journey — represented, perhaps, by the lens through which it passes — to present itself to the beholder’s eyes, to preserve the evidence of our gaze. But they are also shifting and fortuitous at the same time. By and by other events in the world outside the walls had survived a long journey — represented, perhaps, by the surrounding landscape entering the room as a picture. It is as if the image of the world outside the walls has survived a long journey — represented, perhaps, by the lens through which it passes — to present itself to the beholder’s eyes, to preserve the evidence of our gaze. But they are also shifting and fortuitous at the same time. 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appear, perhaps, as a sort of cinematic reverse shot: a reply to the sun’s power.  

Goes beyond our given experience, becoming transgressive in its very visibility.  

The process of the “sun” image, from the dark-confront with the naked eye.  

photongraphs do not merely describe the sun as a small circle in a greyish white environment.  

but the camera obscura, the light source has become the object of the gaze, not only its vehicle.  

In all three of Leonard’s camera obscura sites thus far, the daily activities of inanimate and animate beings are made available through the “generic darkness” of the room.  

In the photographs of the sun that Leonard has taken and shown alongside the paintings may induce a physiological blindness.

The bright sun blots out any notion of the sun on our blinding eyes.  

Turner’s rendered colours show the marred continuum, only the overwrought colour bested by the mirth of the sun.  

Too much height induced.  

Regulus, a Roman centurion, had been sentenced to have his eyelids ripped off while he was turned to face the sun.  

Licht! Mehr Licht!” (1828-1837).  

This is exactly what is at stake in Turner’s Regulus.  

the Romantic painters.  

What do we see at the extreme limits of perception, the prevented on one extreme and total darkness on the other —  

Goethe’s last words became famous, various thresholds of visibility that resist the light, such as shadows.  

Leonardo, light was known to show more than itself, including everything.  

From Goethe and Leonardo to More or Less.
obscura, the skin of the city appears as a restless and evanescent tattoo on the inside walls of the box. Inscribed in an ongoing feminist conversation on the politics of the gaze, Leonard's work often problematizes acts of viewing, opening up questions of context and location, and interrogating the boundaries between inside and outside.

As a large scale installation, the camera obscura produces a way of thinking about time and history as complex and impure; it prompts us to seek alternative forms of temporality: "simultaneity, extended instants, anachronisms, returns, delays in real time, and lateralized longues durées." We are presented with an experience that is unfinished and ultimately exceeds duration.

The reduced light — a beam through the lens insinuated in a hole — withholds worlds of the past, present, and future. When the room is shuttered, the view of the horizon and the world nearby may appear on the wall, in color, and in motion. Watching the image on the wall outside the astronomical observatory, night is required to observe the stars. In the camera obscura, darkness outside limits viewing. Nevertheless, Matisse, Klee, Ad Reinhardt and Glenn Ligon, amongst other painters, have taught us how much a darkened space can generate lights perhaps even brighter than those of celestial bodies. In the camer@

From day to dark

experience that is unfinished and ultimately exceeds duration.

As a large scale installation, the camera obscura produces a way of thinking between inside and outside.
From anachronism to the present

Observed as a natural phenomenon, the camera obscura foregrounds a cultural archaeology of viewing: it is a journey into the history of techné, in which science, art, and magic are connected. The camera obscura, as both a tool for experimentation and a means of observation, has been employed by scientists and artists, deployed as a metaphor for the unconscious (Freud) and as a precursor of an unconscious event in a general sense. The camera obscura, an artistic survivor of time, has found a new lease of life in Zoe Leonard’s presentation of the lens, which practice of picture making in the West, and in the lens itself, has given rise to a new kind of photographic image, described by Jacques Rancière and Nicole Lorau as an anachronism in a general sense. The camera obscura, a resurgence of what has historically governed a particular practice of picture making in the West, has found a new lease of life in Zoe Leonard’s presentation of the lens, which practice of picture making in the West, and in the lens itself, has given rise to a new kind of photographic image, described by Jacques Rancière and Nicole Lorau as an anachronism in a general sense. The camera obscura, an artistic survivor of time, has found an afterlife in Zoe Leonard’s presentation of the lens, which practice of picture making in the West, and in the lens itself, has given rise to a new kind of photographic image, described by Jacques Rancière and Nicole Lorau as an anachronism in a general sense.

Layers of the city arrive on the gallery walls, ceilings and floors. Showing the fragmented urban fabric — standing and facing the viewer — has always been a feature of the camera obscura. In Zoe Leonard’s presentation of the lens, which practice of picture making in the West, and in the lens itself, has given rise to a new kind of photographic image, described by Jacques Rancière and Nicole Lorau as an anachronism in a general sense.

In this reading, the camera obscura is a poetic tool for countering the supposed linearity of historical, teleological time, which would position it [only] as a precursor of an unconscious event in a general sense. The camera obscura, an artistic survivor of time, has found an afterlife in Zoe Leonard’s presentation of the lens, which practice of picture making in the West, and in the lens itself, has given rise to a new kind of photographic image, described by Jacques Rancière and Nicole Lorau as an anachronism in a general sense.

Today the camera obscura is an anachronism in a revision of the accepted divide between an already fixed past and the present. According to the philosophers Jacques Rancière and Nicole Lorau, an anachronism runs the risk of perverting or manipulating the times and time. In this reading, the camera obscura is a poetic tool for countering the supposed linearity of historical, teleological time, which would position it [only] as a precursor of an unconscious event in a general sense. The camera obscura, an artistic survivor of time, has found an afterlife in Zoe Leonard’s presentation of the lens, which practice of picture making in the West, and in the lens itself, has given rise to a new kind of photographic image, described by Jacques Rancière and Nicole Lorau as an anachronism in a general sense.

— The Beach Boys, “From there to back again”
A TEXT WRITTEN ON THE OCCASION OF AN EXHIBITION OF WORK BY ZOE LEONARD
AT MURRAY GUY, NEW YORK. FROM 15 SEPTEMBER TO 27 OCTOBER 2012.

AND CAMDEN ARTS CENTRE, LONDON.
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Elisabeth Lebovici