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 simplifed 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 evolutionnary 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.

protagonist.
9. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia sexualis* (1886) and *Psychopathia sexualis: Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der konträren Sexualempfindung: Eine medizinisch-gerichtliche Studie für Ärzte und Juristen*, Albert Moll (ed.), 16th and 17th edn, (Stuttgart: Enke, 1924.)
10. Such a program constitutes the "first aim" of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Introduction : Axiomatic" in *Epistemology of the Closet* (London, Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of California Press, 1990-2008), 48.
11. Jacques Lacan, "Dedans dehors (30 April 1969)," in *D'un Autre à l'autre, Le Séminaire. Livre 16* (Paris; éditions du Seuil, 2006), 363. URL: http://lesilencequiparle.unblog.fr/2008/11/29/dedans-dehors-jacques-lacan/ last consulted 27 august 2012.
12. Lacan, ibidem.
13. Sigmund Freud, "The Ego and the Id," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, XIX (London : Hogarth, 1961), 1-6.
14. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: One the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York and London: Routledge Classics, 1993), 75.
15. Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* 44.1 (September 2005), 278-286.
16. Elisabeth Lebovici, "Culs et cubes blancs," *Tina* 5 (2010), 104-111.
17. Randy Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street: the Life and Times of Harvey Milk, Stonewall Inn Editions* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 365.
18. Fraser, "From the Critique...."
19. cf. *Mixed Use, Manhattan: Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to the Present*, edited by Lynne Cooke and Douglas Crimp, with Kristin Poor (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia; Cambridge, Massachusetts/London: MIT Press, 2010)
20. "Radical juxtaposition" is a term coined by Yvonne Rainer and adopted by Douglas Crimp, which refers to the coming together of apparently incommensurate elements. Crimp, Douglas, Katarzyna Bojarska, Luiza Nader and Agata Pyzik, "Coming Together to Stay Apart," *OBEIG* 21 April, 2009, accessed on 17 August, 2012, http://www.obieg.pl/english/10380.
21. Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, (New York: NYU Press, 1999).
22. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth and London : Penguin Books and BBC, 1972), and Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (1975)," reprinted in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1989).
23. In French, the vanishing point becomes a "point of light and of leak."
24. Griselda Pollock, "Screening the seventies; sexuality and representation in feminist practice — a Brechtian perspective," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988).
25. Hito Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth, Withdrawal from Representation," *e-flux journal* (February 2012), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-spam-of-the-earth/.
26. Ibid, and also Hito Steyerl, "A Thing Like You and Me," *e-flux journal* 15 (April 2010) http://www.e-flux.com/journal/a-thing.
27. It is interesting to note here that in the dark space of the camera obscura, the beholder experiences an apparent discrepancy between image and sound; the particular noises that enter from the outside seem distant and remote.
28. Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Technique of the present," accessed on 17 August, 2012, from http://www.usc.edu/dept/comp-lit/tympanum/4/nancy.html.

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."[28]

In the camera obscura, the present is a lateral display, perpetually spaced and altered over an indefinite, formless amount of time; it does not even 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.

We'll take it from here.

Notes

1. Jacques Rancière, "Le concept d'anachronisme et la vérité de l'historien," *L'Inactuel* 6 (Autumn 1996): 53–68; and Nicole Loraux, "'Éloge de l›anachronisme en histoire' Les voies traversières de Nicole Loraux. Une helléniste à la croisée des sciences sociales," *Espaces Temps: Les Cahiers* 87-88 (March, 2005).
2. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 31.
3. This notion of the "afterlife" has been borrowed from the art historian Aby Warburg.
4. Christine Ross, "Suspensions of Time in Contemporary Media Arts," in *Intermediality: History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies* 11 (2008), 125–148.
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, Friedrich), and the disappearance of shapes in the trouble of perception. Goethe's notion of "Trübe" accounts for the atmospheric evanescence of mist (from Friedrich to Monet) and for the abyss of darkness (e.g. in the works of Carl Blechen, Van Gogh, Whistler, Schönber). On this subject, a constructive contribution was made by art historian Pascal Rousseau's exhibition *At the origins of abstraction 1800-1914*, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2003-2004.
7. My use of this turn of phrase is inspired by Cerith Wyn Evans' similarly titled artwork, *Inverse Reverse Perverse*, 1996.
8. Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds, *Sexual Inversion* (London : Wilson and MacMillan, 1897.) This concept of inversion gained additional currency through Radclyffe Hall's 1928 lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness*, which uses the term to refer to Stephen, its

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."[25]

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 massive glut of self-representations? "Perhaps the struggle to become a subject has now left the scene of representation," Steyerl suggests. [26]

An archetypal tool for constructing representations, the camera obscura could exemplify here a potential to refuse, or better yet, to release our vital grip on our figurations, to defuse the image and unleash imagination. In the camera obscura — the epitome of a symbolically charged tool for converting the view into a gaze — one is reminded of what Meyer Schapiro called the non-mimetic signs: the ground, the frame, the field, the scale, the orientation, positioning, and spacing; all are semiotic devices that eventually offer a way in for an iconic substance, given by the lines, surfaces, marks and blotches. But in Leonard's camera obscura, these signs have abandoned their symbolic organization, which is generally mobilized to order the picture plane. In the reversal of the ground and in the absence of a smooth, rectangular field that would assemble and circumscribe meaning, the earthly weight of things is lifted. This dissymmetry leads to a perceptual crisis: what comes first, and what comes after?[27]

From Here to Eternity

Is time a thing that surrounds us, or is it a standard by which to measure events? We have accustomed ourselves to the urgent demands of instantaneous communication. 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 mobile process, but space opens time, distends time, distending the very moment to expose this present that does not pass, and that is time itself, negativity imposed for

dismantle a structure that positions the male, heterosexual subject at the apex of the cone of vision.[22] 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.[23] One of the most potent critiques of this way of looking was enacted by VALIE EXPORT's *Tap and Touch Cinema* (*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, fumble about and feel in the dark, that is, to experience a separation, a dismemberment from the outside, visual world.

The metaphor of an androcentric view has thus been played in reverse — Griselda Pollock picked up the feminist critique of the male gaze as her model of feminist critical practice, and the editors of the feminist film review *Camera Obscura*, for instance, selected the name as a metaphor for the convergence of ideology and its representation in film, reading the film text as a conjunction of social, political, economic, and cultural codes.[24]

Many artists have used the photographic or moving image camera to record their performing bodies and the marks of gender, race, and class, occupying and resisting the identities they claimed and strategically marked. But one of the major questions amidst a radically transformed media landscape concerns the emancipatory and political value of representation itself in a globalized cultural field that is saturated by images and recording devices.

The theorist and artist Hito Steyerl writes:

"For a long time my generation has been trained to think that representation was the primary site of contestation for both politics and aesthetics. . . . It was hoped that changes in the field of culture would hark back to the field of politics. . . [but] while visual representation shifted into overdrive and was popularized through digital technologies, political representation of the people slipped into a deep

ing simultaneous activities on two piers on New York's West Side Highway in the early 1970s: one the site of artistic experimentation by Joan Jonas, Gordon Matta-Clark and other artists, and the other 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 inclusions and exclusions in what they expose, what they exhibit and what they conceal of each other.[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 rhetorics of marketing, branding, and social engineering in cities like Cologne, London, Venice, and of course New York (the latter explored incisively in Samuel R. Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.[21]) In their present forms and particular surroundings, each of Leonard's camerae obscurae does not explain or narrate, but suspends the flow of overlooked gestures that compose and recompose the ground of the city. A slowed down and inverted process of looking embodies a critical anthropology, trained on a choreography of urban motions.

From Control to Release

Manifest or latent, the camera obscura is discussed in the beginning of texts by both John Berger and Laura Mulvey that attempt to denaturalize and

outside, and of a border in between. [15]

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,[16] 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 to fight the lies, the myths, the distortions! We are coming out to tell the truth about gays! That's What America Is!'"[17] 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 how gender is normalized amidst the heteronormative prerequisites of sexual orientation coordinated the diverse expectations of women, of gays, of lesbians, and of transgendered persons. In both cases, 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 indeed crossed paths more than once: not only in recording the absence of women (and of transgendered people, people of color, or other marginalized groups) from the walls of the gallery or the museum space, but also in revisiting the inclusions and exclusions of art history and art criticism. Gender, in fact, was exposed as an "irreducible condition" of the artwork's existence, amidst "the interplay between what is inside and outside the field of art."[18] Indeed, feminism, queer politics and AIDS activism helped us understand how crucial subjectivity was to the institutions of art. In this regard Douglas Crimp's ongoing memoir — a new, anachronic art writing form — is particularly exciting: Crimp has rearticulated our way out of the white cube by juxtapos-

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 stock representations "and everything else, what we call, diversely and confusedly, affects, instincts, drives."[12] But how do we know about this "inside box", if not by perceiving it as an image — that is, from the outside?

Freud connects the formation of one's ego with an externalized idea formed of one's own body: "the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself a projection of a surface."[13] The relation between outside and inside is constructed not only as interaction, that is, a play on inside and outside between bodily sensation and image, but also as a surface: a skin or a membrane, like the two sides of a piece of paper. When Lacan argues that the body finds its unity in the image of the Other, which is its own anticipated image, he signals that any specular image, even of one's own self, is exterior: other and altered. The self is perceived as an object just like any other. As Judith Butler contends, this object is at a "radical epistemic distance from the subject." Butler continues her exploration by specifying that this distance is "neither interior nor exterior to the subject, but the permanently unstable site where that spatialized distinction is perpetually negotiated."[14] This permanent negotiation, whereby images are never simply, definitively given form, is the surface that holds the proceedings of the camera obscura. This "skin" is a sensitive membrane.

From Outing to Queering

The question of an inside and an outside has become central to the relation between art production and its physical, mental, perceptual, and social sites. Take, for instance, what has emerged in the practice known as Institutional Critique. Whether Institutional Critique exposes the structure of museums and galleries or antagonizes the institution through acts of subversion and sabotage, whether it focuses on specific institutions in the art world or whether it is "not something external to any work of art but the irreducible condition of its existence as art," what persists is this questioning of a relationship between an inside and an

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."[8] 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."[9] Perversion and inversion were said to have been related to an evolutionary regression, a belief that was fuelled by new studies that had been conducted in prisons and mental institutions. Homosexuality was pathologized, linked not only to the lower classes and social degradation, but also believed to be a negative manifestation of modernity. In its relation to positivist, chronological time, this construct of homosexuality and its heterosexual other informed virtually all aspects of Western culture.

Positioned simultaneously in front and around, enveloping one's eyes, Leonard's camera obscura twists the drive to "correct" the inverted and framed image, relieving one's body from such need. At the same time, this release from the laws of gravity, inscribed in the present experience, marks its relation to a counter-history of bodies and their desires, where issues of modern homo/heterosexual definition are far from being rationalized and where, "unexpectedly plural, varied and contradictory historical understandings… [may]…denaturalize the present."[10] This also contributes to the feeling that the images, despite their perception in the here and now, come from very far away. Taking a stance in a counterrhythm, we experience a dis-orientation, a queer vision.

From Inside to Outside

"An inside and an outside seem obvious when we consider the body, knowing an individual is in effect just that. The inside is within your bag of skin. The outside is everything else. To think that all that is represented on this outside must be, also, within this bag of skin, seems at first a modest and harmless step."[11] This strange view stems from Lacan's take on a philosophical history of optics. In fact, the psychoanalyst and theoretician held the camera obscura as a

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. *Wall* or *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, they 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 walls too become survivors in the afterlife of the image.

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. Paradoxically, the image is like a ghost. It is present even before it has been glanced at. A lapse of time is necessary for our eyes to adjust. The sharpened details as well as the blurry zones are equally the subject of our gaze, but they are also altered and forgotten as time goes by and as other events in the image transpire unexpectedly. Zoe Leonard has never favored "pretty images." Instead, she creates messy, cluttered and muddled ones, protean images that are liquid and oceanic in scope. In this dark room, the survival of the image entails a complex set of operations. The feeling of constantly forgetting, a sense of floating in one's own body, involuntary memory, and unforeseen rediscovery all work in unison.

The camera obscura as an environment or installation retains the upside down image that our eye has been trained to reverse with the "good sense" of the Renaissance painter. Inversion, reversion, and perversion are words that are not only relevant for optics, but for sexual politics too.[7] At the end of the nineteenth century legal and medical writers described homosexuality (a word which does

clouds, complicated by the visual murmur of a busy intersection and the cranes of a large, constantly changing construction site. Children, I recall, searched for the splashes of sunlight brought in by the lens and bathed in the light — a haptic event. In Venice's Palazzo Grassi, the view highlights the historically charged waters and the patrimonial facades of the Grand Canal, goods, inhabitants, tourists and even the scattered phantom of an outdoor sculpture flow through the gallery space. 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.[5] In order to pass through the camera, their days take on the condition of night.

From Goethe and Leonardo to More or Less

For Leonardo, light was known to show more than itself, including everything that resisted light, such as shadows. "Licht! Mehr licht!" (*Light! More light!*). As Goethe's last words became famous, various threshholds of visibility — bedazzlement on one extreme and total darkness on the other — preoccupied the Romantic painters.[6] What do we see at the extreme limits of perception, where form disappears? This is exactly what is at stake in Turner's *Regulus* (1828-1837). Regulus, a Roman centurion, had been sentenced to have his eyelids ripped off while he was turned to face the sun. Too much light indeed. Turner's rendering doesn't show the martyred centurion, only the overwhelming luminous saturation of the sun on unblinking eyes. This shift from the figure to the figuring may induce a fusional blindness.

With the photographs of the sun that Leonard has taken and shown alongside her camerae obscurae, the light source has become the object of the gaze, not only its vehicle. Translating all colors into a black and white image, these photographs describe the sun as a small circle in a greyish white environment: an achrome, pale, almost transparent ball, yet dangerous and forbidden to confront with the naked eye. The processing of the "sun" image, from the darkroom, to the print to its display on the white walls of the gallery, troubles and contradicts our given experience, becoming transgressive in its very visibility. It appears, perhaps, as a sort of cinematic reverse shot: a reply to the sun's power.

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."[4] We are presented with an experience that is unfinished and ultimately exceeds duration.

From day to dark

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 blackened space can generate lights perhaps even brighter than white. In the camera obscura, day is exchanged for a darkened room. It is only when the room is shuttered that a view of the horizon and the world nearby may appear on the wall, in color, and in motion. Watching the image on the wall and ceiling and the sparkling bursts of sun on the floor is not the same as looking at the view outside. A magical feeling is created by the intimate space and the sensation of watching the world upside down without being seen by the world in return.

The reduced light — a beam through the lens installed in a hole — withholds the architectural characteristics of the room, all the while exposing them to the continuously surprising and eventful landscape of the site. At Galerie Capitain in Cologne, these included the comfortable silhouette of a row of traditional buildings and the features of a calm, tree-lined street, where the few cars passing seemed to adapt their pace to the more gentle rhythm of bicycles and pedestrians. At the Camden Arts Centre in London, an elevated point of view in the former library emphasized the skies and the ongoing passage of the

Through the compromised paradise / It's just another place upon the wall
Through the common change of it all / We had a lot to live, we gave it all
Through the consequence of the war / Another place in time
Parara, padapaparara / Papapapapararara / Papapapararararara.

— The Beach Boys, "From there to back again"

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 technè, in which science, art, and magic are connected. Used for experimentation and as a means of observation, as a tool for draftsmanship and astronomy, as philosophical model and as technical apparatus, the camera obscuras has been employed both by scientists and artists, deployed as a metaphor for the unconscious (Freud) and ideology (Marx and Engels), and adapted for popular entertainment.

Today the camera obscura is an anachronism: a revision of the accepted divide between an already fixed past and the present. According to the philosophers Jacques Rancière and Nicole Lorau, anachronism runs the risk of perverting or manipulating the times and time.[1] 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 precursor or an inaugural event in a genealogy leading to the birth of photography."[2] The anachronism of the camera obscura signals a resurgence of what has historically governed a particular practice of picture making in the West. The camera obscura, an artistic survivor of time, has found an afterlife in Zoe Leonard's present use of the lens, which in effect turns the world around us upside down.[3]

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 preoccupation of Leonard's photographs, from her first city maps to the model of New York City in the Queens Museum to the fenced trees, the gum-marked streets and the whole ensemble of *Analogue* (1998-2009). In the camera

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Elisabeth Lebovici

From there to back again