

Bleecker Street Dialogue

A Conversation
with Peter Jellitsch
and Joseph Becker

Austrian artist Peter Jellitsch has found a new approach to representing spatial realities, both seen and unseen. With his recent project, Jellitsch has taken to task the idea of a temporal-spatial condition that permeates all of our urban air-space. *Bleecker Street Documents*, titled for the location of the project, rigorously analyzes and explores the micro-measurements of atmospheric change activated by wireless data networks.

Jellitsch has focused on these subtle changes — invisible to our physical perceptions and yet so implicit in our modes of operation in today's world — as a launching point. Our data-driven and hyper-connected society often negates the spatial implications of Hertzian space.¹ We're usually unaware of, or choose to ignore, the vast amount of information that is broadcast intangibly through our homes, streets, and bodies. We undeniably co-exist with data in a very architectural sense, and the *BSD* project begins as an investigation into the mapping, and mining, of the shifting landscape of the engaged electromagnetic field. Peter's work proposes that our virtual world, and its effects, operates in parallel to our physical world. A straightforward proposition, no doubt, but one that presupposes that each sphere's influence maintains a similar cadre of definitions — we could argue that the notion of the infinite might disrupt any parallel existence of the physical and the virtual. By manifesting the measured virtual into the tangible physical, Peter calls attention to this line — one that is becoming increasingly blurry, and not just optically.

I sat down, virtually, with Peter to discuss *Bleecker Street Documents*.

Hi Peter, where are you right now?

PJ Hello Joseph, I am momentarily on an A.i.R.-Program at Citè des Arts in Paris where I am working on a new project and prepare an exhibition for La Panacèe in Montpellier (FR) next year.

¹ Anthony Dunne, *Hertzian Tales: Electronic Products, Aesthetic Experience, and Critical Design* (MIT Press, 2001).

And I'm in San Francisco. We're compressing the 5,500 physical miles between us into the immediate proximity of the virtual, our information transmitted through thousands of miles of optical cabling and terminating in an electromagnetic cloud on either end. It's precisely this cloud that your project begins to interpret. The *Bleecker Street Documents* are the culmination of hours of constant data mining of the nuances of the performance of this wireless atmospheric space. What led you to this as an approach to represent the virtual?

PJ The intersection of actual space and virtual space serves us a multitude of new technical and narrative possibilities. Fragments of these new capabilities are the foundation of my artistic practice. The primary idea for the project in New York was to experiment with methods that unveil visually hidden conditions. Through devices one has the possibility to literally peel-off and distinguish certain capacities as well as leave others in the dark.

John Cage, commenting on the imperceptible physicality of radio, said that we are "bathed in radio waves."² In its poetic essence, Cage paints a clear picture of the immersive spatial quality of electromagnetic transmissions. Other artists have explored this spatiality, but with the *BSD* you are more interested in the climate of the space, rather than its shape?

PJ The work varies between written and unwritten, materiality and immateriality, visibility and concealment, preserving and converting. The original location that the investigation is focused on, with its shape and spatial qualities, had become entirely coated by a new vocabulary that was generated by the interference of its source.

Can you tell me a bit about the intentionality behind the mapping of the data, as opposed to the mapping of the three-dimensional space that Wi-Fi inhabits?

PJ The data was recorded during a residency I had at a collector's apartment in Manhattan.

² John Cage, Excerpt from *Radio Happenings I-V*, WBAI New York City, 1966.

From the very beginning of the project, my ideas culminated around the representation of this certain space where I lived, through the method of fragmentation. I've used a radio wave measuring device several times a day and translated the numeric result daily on notice paper. This repetitive method of post-scripting is something I found in concrete poetry, that Theo Van Doesburg proclaimed in his *Manifesto of Concrete Art*, where he says: "The language is not the description of a situation anymore, but it is itself the purpose and object of the poem."³ Transferred to art practice, it would mean that numeric information is already the ultimate language of space.

With your STB project, you focused on the vectors of motion and flow across virtual objects. The EMI project focused on the space-frame response to specific node quantities. Do you see the BSD project as a synthesis of some of your earlier work, but calling attention to existing urban conditions?

PJ I have already worked with urban conditions and its connection to the behavior of radio waves before I started with *Bleecker Street Documents* in New York. In my 2010 work *Electronic Topographies*, the historic city center of Vienna was used as a testing laboratory—standing as an exemplarily example of the extremely dense European network coverage. With the *Electronic Topographies* drawing series I have tried to simulate the electromagnetic cones of mobile emitters generated in relationship to the surrounding physical space. What unifies my work is the investigation into how science and media are trying to approach the creation of "reality," through new technological methods of simulation. While these simulations are trying to imitate reality, I am imitating the imitation of reality mostly with my hand—the drawing or more generally the handwork is an essential part of my practice. For me it allows a physical acquisition of invisible digital calculations, and of course includes mistakes

³ Theo Van Doesburg defined Concrete Art in the manifesto titled "The Basis of Concrete Art," published in the only issue of the magazine *Art Concret*, 1930. The manifesto was co-signed by van Doesburg, Otto G. Carlsund, Jean Hélion, and Leon Tutundjian.

and instinctive extensions. Until a work is finished it passes through several stations of analog and digital realms.

You've talked about the evidence of process being very much a part of this project. It's obvious that you approached the *BSD* project both analytically and theoretically. Do you see the presentation of *BSD* as a holistic visualization of your process?

PJ During the work on *BSD* I took a lot of inspiration browsing through scientific publications in libraries and reading media studies. Even if my work cannot directly be seen as contribution to scientific knowledge production, it is obvious too that I am influenced by representation techniques such as mathematical diagrams and explanatory models. To punctuate the inconsistent character of the connectivity subject, I left the milled model directly on the pallet of the workshop and placed the scaled copy right on the floor. In an arrangement like this, I have the vertical axis with the measured notations on the wall and the horizontal axis with the model on the floor. The framed and scaled copy, leaned on the wall, is in dialogue with both the model and the notations. The contradictory fact: to produce static works on the basis of highly flexible data is the only way for me to come close to its origin. Joseph Kosuth said about *One and Three Chairs*: "I liked that the work itself was something other than simply what you saw."⁴

It seems impossible to escape the contemporary notion of a quantified life. New products, and their corresponding smartphone apps, track our every movement, location, our sleep patterns and our caloric intake, and chart infographics to compel us towards a more efficient, healthy, or safe lifestyle. Artists such as Nicholas Felton focus entirely on their own insipid micro-moments, but taken as a whole paint a beautiful holistic interpretation of their tracked lives. I wonder how the documentation and quantification of this digital engagement perhaps calls attention to our contemporary

4 Joseph Kosuth, *Art as Idea as Idea* in Jeanne Siegel, *Artwords: Discourse on the 60s and the 70s* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985).

moment of digital dependency. Is there a subtext to the *Bleecker Street Documents*?

PJ There is some certainty that the *Bleecker Street Documents*, regardless of the exhibition context, are covered by the same haze that they attempt to make light of, and thus induce a number of questions. Through the components of the work, each in constant dialogue with the next, I invite the viewer to layer their own subtext or personal narrative. We are all engaged through this digital haze, which could be read as an overarching conceptual ribbon, but I don't feel that this realization plays a key role in the interpretations of the work.

Peter, thanks for insights into your work. I think that the immersive, invisible, yet increasingly relative information-space has become a new medium for artists to manipulate, analyze, and represent. As José Luis de Vicente and Honor Harger write in the catalog to their exhibition, *Invisible Fields: Geographies of Radio Waves*, the field, through the lens of artists such as Semiconductor, Claire Boj and Diego Diaz, and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer is exposed, interpreted, and engaged in its many incarnations.⁵ Contemporary multi-disciplinary practices are opening the door, and through it we stand to gain some clarity about our invisible extension of the natural world — one that is becoming increasingly ubiquitous and indispensable. The *Bleecker Street Documents* attest to our current condition, simultaneously unveiling an incredible density of information, and our unwavering dedication to its constant flow.

5 José Luis de Vicente, et al. *Invisible Fields: Geographies of Radio Waves* (Barcelona: Actar Editorial: Arts Santa Monica, 2011).

PJ Great to chat, Joseph.

Joseph Becker is the Associate Curator of Architecture and Design at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Since 2007, Joseph has contributed to over twenty exhibitions at SFMOMA, including curating *Field Conditions* (2012) and co-curating *Lebbeus Woods, Architect* (2013-14) and SFMOMA's inaugural reopening exhibition, *Typeface to Interface: Graphic Design from the Collection* (2016) with Jennifer Dunlop Fletcher. In addition, he has been responsible for the exhibition design and visual direction of the majority of SFMOMA's A+D exhibitions during his nine-year tenure. He has moderated and served on numerous design panels, been an invited juror at many national architecture programs, led workshops on exhibition and experiential design, and lectured internationally. He received both his Bachelor of Architecture and his Masters of Advanced Architectural Design in Design Theory and Critical Practice from the California College of the Arts.