

“No one would deny that the painter has nothing to do with things that are not visible. The painter is concerned solely with representing what can be seen.”¹ This blunt, surprising statement made by Leon Battista Alberti in *Della Pittura* reveals a repressed phenomenon analyzed by Hubert Damisch about the unsettled role played by the cloud in this paradox that consists in representing invisibility in Renaissance painting. Damisch asks:

Do the rules of perspective lend themselves to the representation of phenomena that break through the ordinary bounds of the human order? Or, to put that another way, do divine interventions, which open up this world to the beyond and, more generally, mystical—or even physical—exchange between the earth and the sky provide matter suitable for representation despite the fact that depiction seems to be subject to an organizational principle for the pictorial field that seems to imply, as its corollary, that the illusionistic space constructed by geometrical means is governed by rules analogous to the laws that operate in the empirical universe: body and objects are subject to gravity, and this imposes limitations upon the manner in which they move around, and so on? Can such representations even have a place in this system, unless supernatural manifestations or miraculous events allow themselves to be reduced to the common norms of perception, or vision?

Simultaneously revealing and veiling, showing and dissimulating, clouds—bound to this paradoxical status that is also that of writing—play the visible and metaphorical roles in the perspective system of the material yet unfathomable,² the physical yet ethereal, the static yet moving matter, all that may correspond to the ungraspable mystic dimension and the mystery of the divine. As soon as the world becomes visibly and structurally governed by a rational grid, how can the mystery of the incommensurable be represented, if not by a plastic sign that questions representation itself? Clouds do not only represent a climatic phenomenon, but are primarily the sign of the impossibility of representing the presence of God, the mystical presence

1 Leon Battista Alberti, *De Pictura*, Book II, 78, also in Hubert Damisch: *A Theory of Cloud, Toward a History of Painting* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002), 112.

2 From the old English *fæthm*, that represented the span of outstretched arms.

of infinity. It plays the role of the difference between the profane and the sacred, meaning what might resist representation.

Let us raise the hypothesis that this dilemma, as transposed today, now concerns the combined power of radio waves and algorithm systems. The cloud for Renaissance painting would entail the same kind of mystery as what lies behind the Cloud[©] of the digital age. Something like an ethereal, god-like presence/absence that stores, circulates, and computes data with the help of algorithms, and that ultimately governs everyone's lives. The organic and unpredictable cloud as opposed to the rational mathematical grid being the two systems and episteme that have generated an ongoing dialectical crisis up to now.

Since “technological media turn magic into a daily routine,”³ as Friedrich Kittler stated, how does one organize a critical representation of these pervasive powers—both visible and invisible, rational and irrational, familiar and uncanny—that surround us and populate our daily digital unconscious?⁴ This is precisely the question raised by the work of Peter Jellitsch.

Data clouds

STB, the title of a series of drawings he initiated in 2011, is an acronym for Stream Body Drawings, a motion algorithm software generally used by architects for simulating wind directions and air forces that occur around high-rise buildings. These drawings of nebulous forms are obtained through a rigorous method that Jellitsch elaborated using computer screens⁵ broadcasting different scientific digital patterns of radio frequencies, air streams or data clouds. He affixes a drawing paper on these images, enabling him to trace the shapes that he breaks up into small arrows, a plastic transformation that we can analyze on various levels. Peter Jellitsch remarks that architect Lebbeus Woods describes the way Leonardo da Vinci used curly human hair in order to draw the curves of clouds. The *STB* drawing method does

3 Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young & Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1989), 35–36.

4 The first transatlantic wireless transmission took place in 1901, one year after Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and the realm of the uncanny and presence of ghosts became effective through the new media.

5 The size of the drawings corresponds to the size of the computer screens.

not rely on this conception of correspondence between any fragments of nature: rather, it paradoxically inserts a highly human subjective and material feature in which the virtual scientific model is expected not to betray any expressive affect. The arrows become visible signs as well, they not only describe physical phenomena that can be mathematized, but also refer to linguistic systems. These indexical shifters continuously transform themselves. Like a Möbius strip, they bend on themselves, never revealing their hidden sides, endlessly pointing to another direction and some other visible or invisible adjacent sign. The clusters of individual arrows may therefore reflect and contradict a history of parameterization of behaviors that connects Gustave Le Bon's theory of the crowd⁶ to the algorithms, invented in the 1980s, allegedly able to predict the stochastic movements of bird swarms, also called "bird clouds," later applied back to human behavior by experimental physiology with the help of cybernetics.

After the Second World War, Norbert Wiener clearly explained the goals of cybernetics:

Besides the electrical engineering theory of the transmission of messages, there is a larger field which includes not only the study of language but the study of messages as a means of controlling machinery and society, the development of computing machines and other such automata, certain reflections upon psychology and the nervous system...⁷

Therefore, the world should not be only a book written in the language of mathematics, as Galileo stated, this book should be easily rewritten. Alberti already described his map of Rome as an extremely powerful tool incorporating the control of space and time:

The man who possesses them [the numbers] can so record the outlines and position and arrangement of the parts of any given body in accurate and absolutely reliably written forms that not merely a day later, but even after a whole cycle of the heavens, he can again at will situate and arrange the same body.

Such declarations testify to the extreme plasticity of the algorithm that can be used to analyze,

6 Gustave le Bon's *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895) was aimed at identifying human behavior in collective situations. Many aspects of his theories rely on racist, pseudo-scientific conceptions.

7 Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1954), 15.

“predict” and control, almost indifferently, everything from the motion of local air streams and weather systems, to the trajectory of bird swarms, collective behaviors, language, and the speculations of financial markets,⁸ with the success we all know. The pervasive circulation of data through electromagnetic waves (radio, the Internet...) seems to connect everything with everything.

Once the obsolete notion of ether was incorporated into the rational theory of electromagnetism, science and art already envisioned various interconnections of the senses. Light, sound, electricity, and heat were composed by the same phenomenon, invisible radio waves going through space and matter. The nineteenth-century discovery of electromagnetic fields — which pushed occult speculations about the ether into the realm of positivism — and its consequences on technical tools such as X-rays or distant communications through radio waves, already organized another paradigmatic regime of representation that structurally reshuffled the relations between proximity and distance. Literally immersed into a magnetic bath, reality is not submitted to what is visible, but to the presence of scientifically validated ghosts. Modernity, according to Karl Marx, is compelled by a recurrent uncanny phenomenon according to which “everything that is solid melts into the air.” Imbued by its exchange value, the commodity was transformed, fetishized into an occult, magical phenomenon. Henceforth, the intangible became the rule for immaterial exchanges affecting and controlling reality.

Prompted by a critical relation with the political and economical capitalist system, many artists from the 1960s dealt with the complexity of invisible systems. Hans Haacke gave instructions by phone to a museum in order to modify the temperature of an exhibition space,⁹ and presented climatic control devices in an exhibition as a way to show — as the title of the work suggests¹⁰ — how the art institution was controlling the atmosphere into a highly conditioned environment echoing the power of invisible phenomena in the age of cybernetics and information theory. These two works were proposed at a time when Haacke had rejected the term “system” — around which he had

8 High-speed trading functions with algorithms that are generating billions of immaterial values, circulating independently from human control from one databank to another.

9 Hans Haacke proposed this work for the exhibition *Art by Telephone* (1969, MCA Chicago). This exhibition consisted in inviting artists to transmit their works through a telephone conversation. Their works would be activated, interpreted, and constructed by the staff of the museum on their behalf.

10 Hans Haacke's *Recording of Climate in Art Exhibition* (1970) was presented in New York for the exhibition *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Practices*.

previously based his whole work—because of its use in warfare and by global corporations.

This fantasy of immediate and invisible communication was one of the features on which Robert Barry critically speculated with *Telepathic Piece*, the *Inert Gas Series* or the *Radio Waves* pieces (all c. 1968–1969). Rather than criticizing these new invisible influences, Barry was dealing with the affinity between invisible phenomena and the imaginary. The use of invisible phenomena aimed at reducing the artist's determination over the forms. One of the consequences being the ability to delegate the power of representation to the "viewer-interpreter." These two kinds of position reveal how invisible phenomena and linguistic systems are shaping people's behavior in coercive or emancipatory ways.

Indeed, Barry's and Haacke's invisible yet intelligible proposals coincided with the unprecedented deployment of new possibilities for economic, administrative, communicational, and relational immediacy operated by electromagnetic environments. Already, the social and physical bodies were permeated by invasive radio waves that claimed to calculate and configure behaviors. Today, clouds of data controlled by algorithms govern preferences and desires. A computer native like Peter Jellitsch knows how much these invisible systems can be as acutely glorious as they are appalling: they arouse fantasies of omnipotence, transparency, wealth, empowerment and freedom, they also raise anxieties of intrusion and dispersion, they produce stock market crashes, allow the spread of computer viruses and ubiquitous spying... One of the critical dimensions of Peter Jellitsch's drawings resides in the way they reveal what lies behind the construction of scientific representation. How science broadcasts mesmerizing evidence of mystery. Jellitsch's fascinating, hypnotic, haptic, and ungraspable drawings are analyzing these ambivalent, dazzling feelings. Such ambivalence toward an invisible power—the origin of which may indifferently arise from technology, God, or the id—was represented four centuries ago in Correggio's *Io* (1531). In this painting, Jupiter, taking on a vaporous grey, cloudy form, grabs *Io*'s waist. The turmoil of the

cloud simultaneously represents Io's sexual drive, supposedly aroused by Jupiter, and a terrifying ghostly presence threatening to overshadow her pale, reckless body.

Free circulation of signs

For the exhibition *Breaking News from the Ether*¹¹, Peter Jellitsch showed a series of STB drawings, the installation *Bleecker Street Documents* (the electromagnetic portrait of the New York studio he stayed in), as well as *Reference Table (the way you moved through me)*, a site-specific work he did for this exhibition in Montpellier. For this last project, Peter Jellitsch did not only consider electromagnetic fields¹² but also the fields of meaning emanating from the other artworks on display in the exhibition. The installation *Reference Table (the way you moved through me)*, on which he was working during his one-month residency, was placed on the exact same spot as Laurie Anderson's *Handphone Table* after it was removed from the exhibition to be shown elsewhere. Anderson's work is a wooden table that generates sound as soon as two people sit at each end and place their elbows on the wood while curving their palms on their hears. By installing a table that he designed with the exact same measurements as *Handphone Table*, Jellitsch's work embodied a spectral presence of the absent work.

The electromagnetic portrait of the space included detailed notes of his mapping process as well as a series of facsimile of works that resonated with the relations between ideas informing his work and crucial topics he identified in the exhibition that formed a wide, indexical set of artistic references that one can interpret as a mental space of the context.

Jellitsch covered the table with an enlarged photographic scale reference (a grid with a color chart) on which he displayed a large reproduction of Mel Bochner's *Measurement: Plant* from 1969 (that shows a ficus tree in front of a measurement grid). At the intersection of these two images a handwritten inscription, "Demonstration (it could be like this),"¹³ is in dialogue with an image

11 Dernières Nouvelles de l'Ether (curated by: Franck Bauchard & Sébastien Pluot) 07.02.-22.06.2014, La Panacée, Montpellier, FR / Artists: Dominique Blais, Will Potter, Vincent Betbeze, Ugo La Pietra, Trevor Paglen, Superstudio, Sharon Kulik, Robert Barry, Ralf Baecker, Philippe Deloison, Nicholas Knight, Peter Jellitsch, Martin Ratniks, Maria Loboda, Marcel Duchamp, Liam Gillick, Laurie Anderson, Laurent Grasso, Lawrence Weiner, John Cage, Günther Domenig & Eilfried Huth, Hugo Brégeau, Haines & Hinterding, Hans Hollein, François Curlet, Dunne & Raby, Don Burgy, Dominique Blais, Dan Graham, Christina Kubisch, Brian O'Doherty, Bettina Samson, Berdaguer & Pêjus, Bat, Alvin Lucier, A Constructed World.

12 More specifically the mobile phone intensities filling the exhibition space and its surrounding in the historic center of the city.

13 This sentence is part of a work called *Methodology* (1969) in which Bochner wrote three statements: 1. Hypothesis (What if...) 2. Demonstration (It could be like this...) 3. Theory (Therefore it seems that...).

of a tree antenna camouflage Jellitsch borrowed from Dunne & Raby's *Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects*, as well as another Xeroxed image of *Perspective Insert, Collapsed Center*, a 1967 work by Bochner resulting from the photographic deformation of a grid. Over this arrangement, the notebook including Jellitsch's mapping of the area surrounding the exhibition site as well as a map reporting electromagnetic measurements was also displayed. Browsing the booklet, viewers could discover the work's process, reading a quotation he borrowed from Laurie Anderson: "the way you moved through me," a sentence that qualifies both the radio waves and semantic fields he gathered and combined from the atmosphere.

Four milled objects in coated ureol representing the invisible electromagnetic mapping of the space floated spectrally above all this iconographic material like a pale — allegedly harmless — ghostly body.

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He has co-curated numerous exhibitions, including: *The House of Dust* by Alison Knowles, James Gallery, New York; Cal Arts, Los Angeles; Cneai= and La Galerie, Noisy le Sec, Paris; A.I.R 351; Villa Croce ; *Art by Telephone Recalled* CNEAI, Paris, CAPC, Bordeaux, Emily Harvey Foundation, New York, ESBA TALM, Angers, SFAI, La Panacée, Montpellier ; *Breaking News From the Ether* and *A Letter Always Arrives at Its Destinations*, La Panacée ; *A Translation From one Language to Another*, CNEAI, Paris ; *Double Bind, Stop Trying to Understand Me*, at Villa Arson, Nice. *Anarchism Without Adjectives, On the Work of Christopher D'Arcangelo*, at CAC Bretigny, 2011; Montehermoso Art Center, Vittoria; Artists Space, New York; Extra City, Anvers; Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia, Montreal; MAK Center, Los Angeles. He was guest teacher at the SFAI, Barnard College and CUNY in New York, Sorbonne Université, Lyon Post-Master and has lectured in many seminars, conferences and symposiums, among them Princeton University, University of Florida, Centre Georges Pompidou, Jeu de Paume, INHA, Paris, HEAD of Geneva. He has developed the project *Living Archives*, a research exhibition exploring the uses of the document and archives in contemporary art in partnership with Renée Green at the SFAI. He received the "Hors les Murs" grant from the Villa Médicis, the research grant of the CNAP and several grants for the research program In Translation. He holds a master's degree in art history and theory from the EHESS. He is a member of the International Board of Selection AIR351.