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**Google Street View;
A Way to Contemporary Art
Making**

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Google Street View; A Way to Contemporary Art Making

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Abstract

Nowadays Google Maps provide artists with a different city view than the one showed in Camille Pissaro's oil painting *Avenue de l'Opera* or even Gerhard Richter's *Townscapes* series. The present paper focuses on Google Street View, a largely popular project publicly available online. It covers many countries and has led to an unprecedented collective voyeurism. Has the Google Street View representation led to a 'digital panopticon'? If so, how is this presented through art? How does Art use the imagery provided by Google Street View? The artists who are tempted to respond to the above questions are virtual flâneurs of today's 'post-Google generation'. Thus, they are placed in the most contemporary version of the flâneurs according to the following diagram of flâneur's evolution: distant but central onlooker; flâneur-se; stationary/mental traveller; viewer, a passive figure of modernism; virtual flâneur-se, an active figure of nowadays. Google Street View artists do no longer have to be in streets. In *IMG MGMT: The Nine Eyes of Google Street View* Jon Rafman raises burning issues with regards to the Google Street View experience in comparison with physical experience. In *I've Never been to London City* my virtual ego creates 'digital canvases' while moving in London through Google Street View. Although Google Street View seems to be ubiquitous, not all the places are accessible through it and this asserts criticism. For instance, not other transport systems are covered. This is raised in my project *Metro-Net goes Google*.

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Google Street View project

Nowadays one of the outstanding and most popular technological achievements is the visualisation of the whole world. Since the ‘Digital Earth’ idea was put forward by the scientific community, surface and near-surface visualization of the entire planet through GSTs came into being. (Goodchild, Guo, Annoni, Bian, de Bie, Campbell, Craglia, Ehlers, van Genderen, Jackson, Lewis, Pesaresi, Remetey-Fülöpp, Simpson, Skidmore, Wang, Woodgate, 2012) GST technologies (geospatial technology or geomatics) use geospatial data tagged to electronic maps and aim at representing physical reality with utmost accuracy.

GST technologies make use of a wide range of navigation tools; google maps; google earth; JamCams; CCTV; GIS. Such models are becoming all the more popular nowadays and are often used in navigation, driving direction, pre-visualizations and augmented reality. (Mičušík & Košecká, 2009: p 2906) Despite the fact that data of these tools are presented on two-dimensional screens, their visualisations are either two-dimensional or stereoscopic environments.

The present paper focuses on Google Street View, a largely popular project publicly available online. Its environment is three-dimensional and is created through the montage of 360-degree street-level footage (Google Maps UK, 2011) collected by a 9-eye video camera implanted on top of a moving vehicle. Thus, Google Street View representation of the world is done from the level of the camera’s eyes and depends on the route of the moving vehicle.

Google Street View captures cities in 20 countries across four continents (Anguelov, Dulong, Filip, Frueh, Lafon, Lyon, Ogale, Vincent, Weaver, 2010). Figure 1 outlines in grey the places where Google Street View is available. On the contrary, white areas are not included in Google Street View project.

Has the Google Street View representation led to a ‘digital panopticon’ (Bentham, 1785)? What is certain is that it expands rapidly, as indicated by its regular updates.

Google Street View & the Introduction of the virtual flâneur

Google Street View provides users with the possibility of travelling virtually anywhere. What is exciting about this virtual travelling is the momentous displacement from one place to another -just with one click- and the comfort of travelling conditions; sat in front of a computer screen, travel free of charge, without having to carry any luggage or adapt to the other place’s climate.

Although Google Street View came into being for practical reasons, the user can freely navigate in it for pleasure. This navigation *per se* gives rise to the postmodern figure of the *virtual flâneur* (Souliotou, 2011a: 44-46). Since the *virtual flâneur* chooses where to go through their navigation, he/she is considered to be an active figure in relation to the passive viewer/watcher of pre-Google era. The scheme in Figure 2 indicates the evolution of the figure of

the flâneur-se. It is an elaboration of the scheme which appeared in *Art & Movement in Public Transport Networks of Contemporary Metropolises* thesis. (Souliotou, 2011a: 45)

Google Street View & Art

Since Google Street View has largely affected today's city view, it is certain that it would be used in art. Which artists have been inspired by Google Street View until now and in which way? How do they use Google Street View in their projects?

Evolution of City View in Art

The city view has long inspired artists. There are a lot of medieval etchings with depictions of cities, including Munich (see Figure 3), Nuremberg, Rome and others. (Historic Cityviews, 2009)

Painters have also been preoccupied by city view throughout centuries. Canaletto, Pissaro, Kirchner, Braque, Delaunay Kokoscka, Grosz painted townscapes in different painting styles which reflected their attitude towards the urban phenomenon. Camille Pissaro painted Opera avenue in Paris with a view from a building in the end of 19th century. Likewise Delaunay painted the series of Eiffel Tower and Kirchner the busy roads in Berlin at the beginning of 20th century (see Figures 4, 5).

Another way of representing city view came into being with the outburst of new media. Physical Street photography represented city with accuracy, while videos and films recorded city life from many different viewpoints. This, in turn, affected painting and sculpture and gave birth to modern art movements: impressionism; expressionism; cubism; futurism; orphism.

Gerhard Richter's townscapes manifest the influence of aerial photography on art. Even more, photos from the Apollo mission to the moon completely altered humanity's view of the earth (Hemment, 2004). Virtual flâneur does not have to be in streets, on an airplane or on the moon in order to access a city view. Instead, just a computer screen and a mouse let them navigate in distant places around the world.

Google Street View Artists

In *IMG MGMT: The Nine Eyes of Google Street View* Jon Rafman raises many burning issues with regards to the use of Google Street View and seems to note primary level rough findings from his navigation. His project seems to lack coherency, although his subject has to do with Google Street View. In my view the main points in Rafman's work are the excitement and freedom of this new virtual world and the juxtaposition with the risk of losing privacy.

An even more important point for Contemporary Art, though, is his realisation that one can be (come) a photographer of any kind, 'landscape photographer', 'photojournalist', portrait photographer etc. (Rafman, 2009) Personally, I shall broaden this notion for any artist. My own projects indicate

that I can be any kind of painter or digital artist through Google Street View projects.

Doug Rickard in *A New American Picture* unveils life in a murky territory of America through Google Maps Street View and boldly reveals the life conditions of unprivileged people to the American middle class (Newton, 2011).

Michael Wolf's projects with Google Street View are thought provoking. His project *Fuck You Google Street View* (Wolf, 2011) raises the question of the public's point of view with regards to a project that aspires to be imposed on a worldwide scale. A photographer who is used to high quality images with an equivalent sensitivity for frame, composition and subject-matter is now preoccupied by the 'artless' and low resolution images of Google Street View.

Mishka Henner presents women soliciting sex in 'No man's Land'. This project also constitutes a critique on voyeurism and surveillance within the framework of Google Street View, an up-to-date raw archive which is ready to be worked out by internet users. This enormous project enables users to better perceive and understand contemporary world. (Henner, 2011)

Personal Google Street View Projects

World Concord Square is a cosmorama which joins together cities from all continents. Each city is represented with an image of a street derived from Google Maps and all streets converge on World Concorde Square.

World Concord Square was presented in 18th CIVD Intercultural Festival in Paris VIII University, 2-4 May 2012. Figure 6 shows a detail of the cosmorama and Figure 7 as it was presented in CIVD Paris Intercultural Festival, 2-4 May 2012.

Metro-Net goes Google; a meta-Kippenberger e-globality (Souliotou, 2011b) is a collection of metro entrances/exits as they appear in Google Street View. Since the user cannot enter underground transport networks with Google Street View, these entrances/exits seem to be useless. *Metro-Net goes Google; a meta-Kippenberger e-globality* renders them potential nodes of a global network, the virtual 'Metro-Net'.

Difference between Google Street View and Panoramio unfolds in *Metro-Net* project. Figure 8 is a table of the differences between the two. In *Athens & London; Intersecting METRO-poleis* exhibition I showed two images originating from *Metro-Net goes Google* project: one from Google Panoramio showing an entrance/exit to Omonoia Station, Athens Metro, Greece and another from Google Street View showing Leicester Square Station, London Tube. As stated in *Art & Movement in Public Transport Networks of Contemporary Metropolises* the purpose of presenting these two images was not only to intersect two major European metropolises, but also to demonstrate their different sources, Google Panoramio and Google Street View respectively. (Souliotou, 2011a: 28-30)

One can flip through the images of entrances/exits and travel around the world following erratic routes. Artist's book *Metro-Net goes Google; a meta-Kippenberger e-globality* (Souliotou, 2011b) suggests such a route:

London, UK→ Madrid, Spain→ Bangkok, Thailand→ Athens, Greece→ Moscow, Russia→ Los Angeles, California, USA→ Dubai, United Arab Emirates→ Toronto, Canada→ Munich, Germany→ New Delhi, India→ Sofia, Bulgaria→ Sao Paulo, Brazil→ Sidney, Australia→ Stockholm, Sweden→ Beijing, China→ Constantinople, Turkey→ Santiago, Chile→ Cairo, Egypt→ Paris, France

I've Never been to London City exhibition manifests the freedom of the user to go anywhere on the planet with Google Street View. (Souliotou, 2011c) *I've Never been to London City* poetic trilogy (Souliotou, 2011d), part of the self-titled exhibition, delineates Google Street view navigation experience. The *google.citescapes* project is the capture of movement of user's virtual ego while navigating in Google Street View, which leads to the creation of 'digital canvases' (Souliotou, 2011e). *google.citescapes* project was presented in *I've Never been to London City* exhibition and published in an artist's book which is exhibited in *platform20* exhibition in Institute of Greek Contemporary Art, Athens, Greece (iset, 2012) .

Google Street View portraits represent blurred figures of Street View environment put on a 'vehicle', a canvas on wheels. Figure 9 shows one of these vehicles. It signifies the return from virtual environment to materiality and constitutes a reconsideration of the relationship between the artist and the sitter. (Souliotou, 2011f).

Conclusion

Google Street View is a recent project which has already inspired artists and largely altered our perception of cities and of the whole world. However, since Google Street View is already a huge project which is growing rapidly, it can be further explored in future. Within the arts field there is a lot more to do using Google Street View or applying its logic to artistic projects.

Figure 1. *In which parts of the world is Street View available?* http://gmaps-samples.googlecode.com/svn/trunk/streetview_landing/streetview-map.html

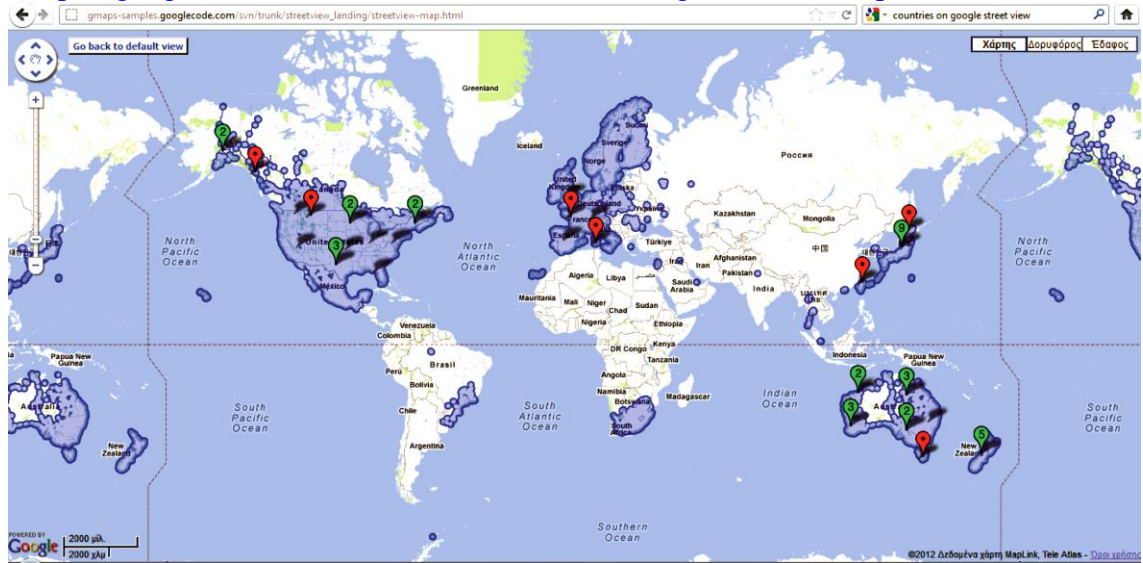


Figure 2. *Souliotou A.Z. Diagram of Evolution of the flâneur, 2012*

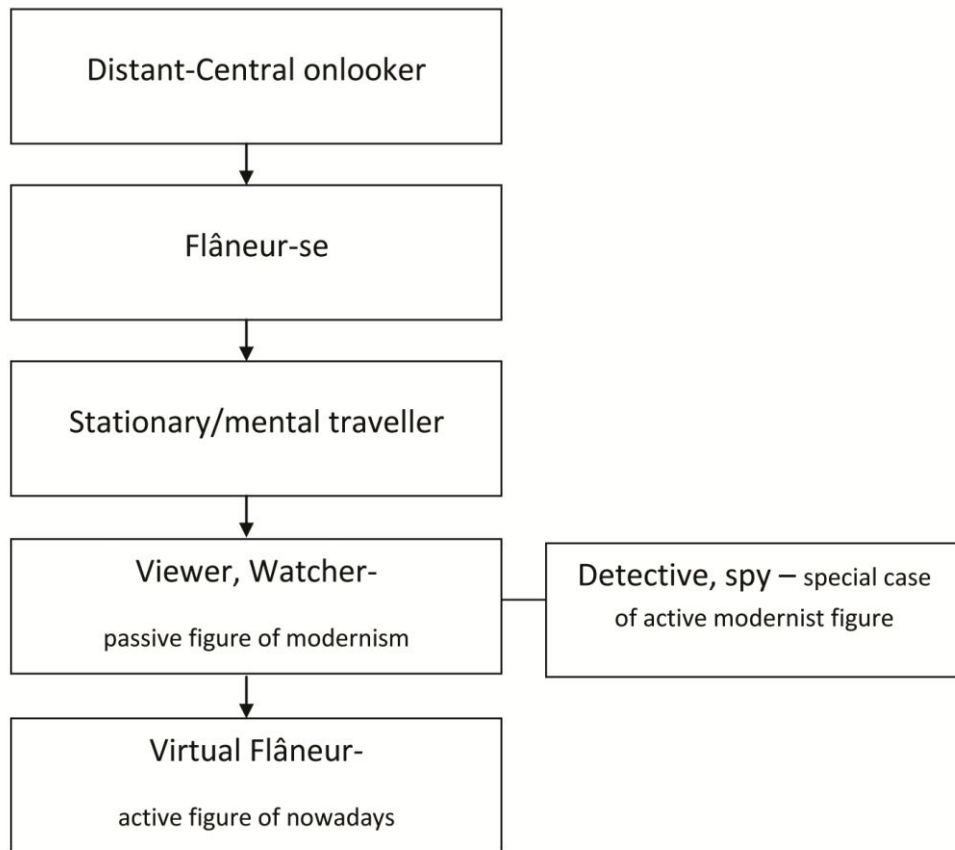


Figure 3. *Gravure of Munich.* Source: *Historic City Views*, <http://www.sky-scrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=1010911>



Figure 4. *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Nollendorfplatz, oil on canvas, 69 x 60 cm, Berlin 1912*

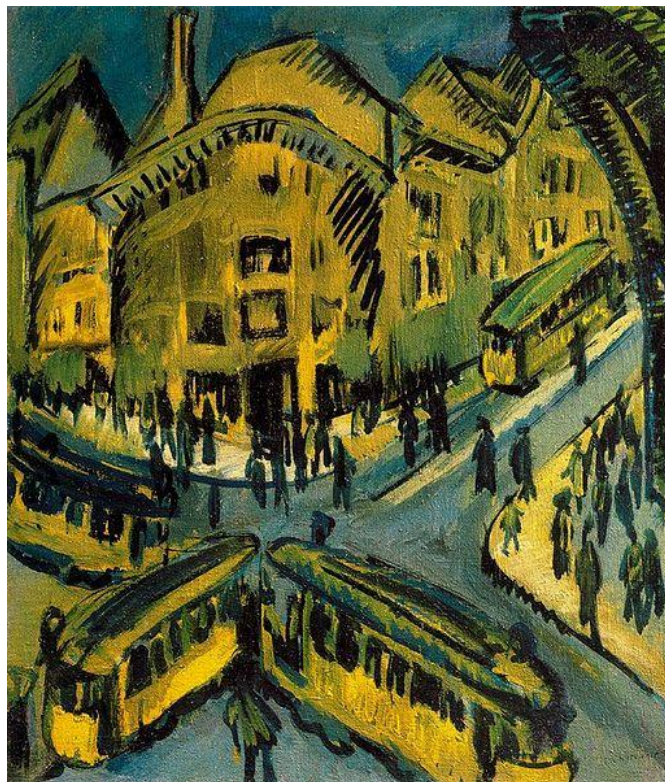


Figure 5. *Georges Braque, Viaduc à l'Estaque (View to Estaque), Oil on Canvas, 1908*

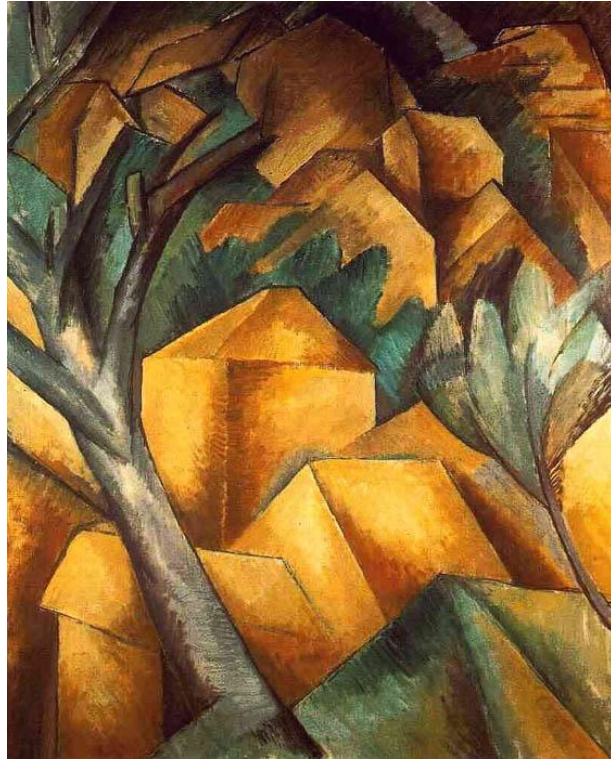


Figure 6. *A.Z. Souliotou, World Concorde Square (detail), 3.80 X 0.25 m digital print, 2012*



Figure 7. *A.Z. Souliotou, World Concorde Square in CIVD Paris Intercultural Festival 2012*

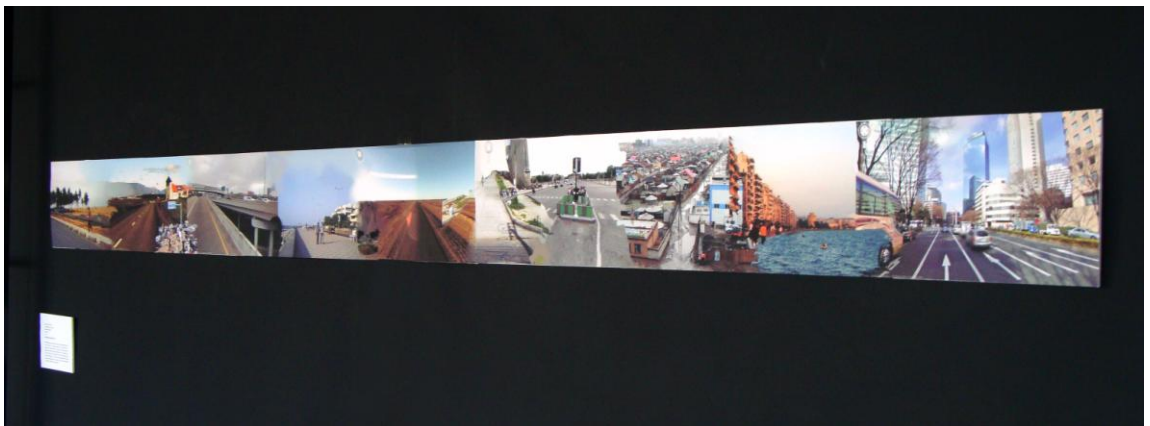


Figure 8. A.Z. Souliotou, *Table of Comparison between Google Street View and Panoramio, 2012*

Google Street View vs Panoramio	
Google Street View Imagery	Panoramio Imagery
neutral aspect of place (Rafman, 2009)	nice aspect of the place, usually touristic
Spontaneity, even patchwork	prim photos
Imagery derives from photos taken by Google Street View moving vehicle	Imagery is taken and tagged by users
photomontage by Google technicians	dispersed photos uploaded by users
blurred faces	clear faces
High level of accuracy	not always accurate
navigation with pegman – user’s virtual ego in a stereoscopic environment	Navigation/Flipping of photos from every place
Continuous space	Discontinuity in space

Figure 9. A. Z. Souliotou, *UK Detective on Wheels, Painting (Oil on Canvas) on Wheels, London 2012*



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