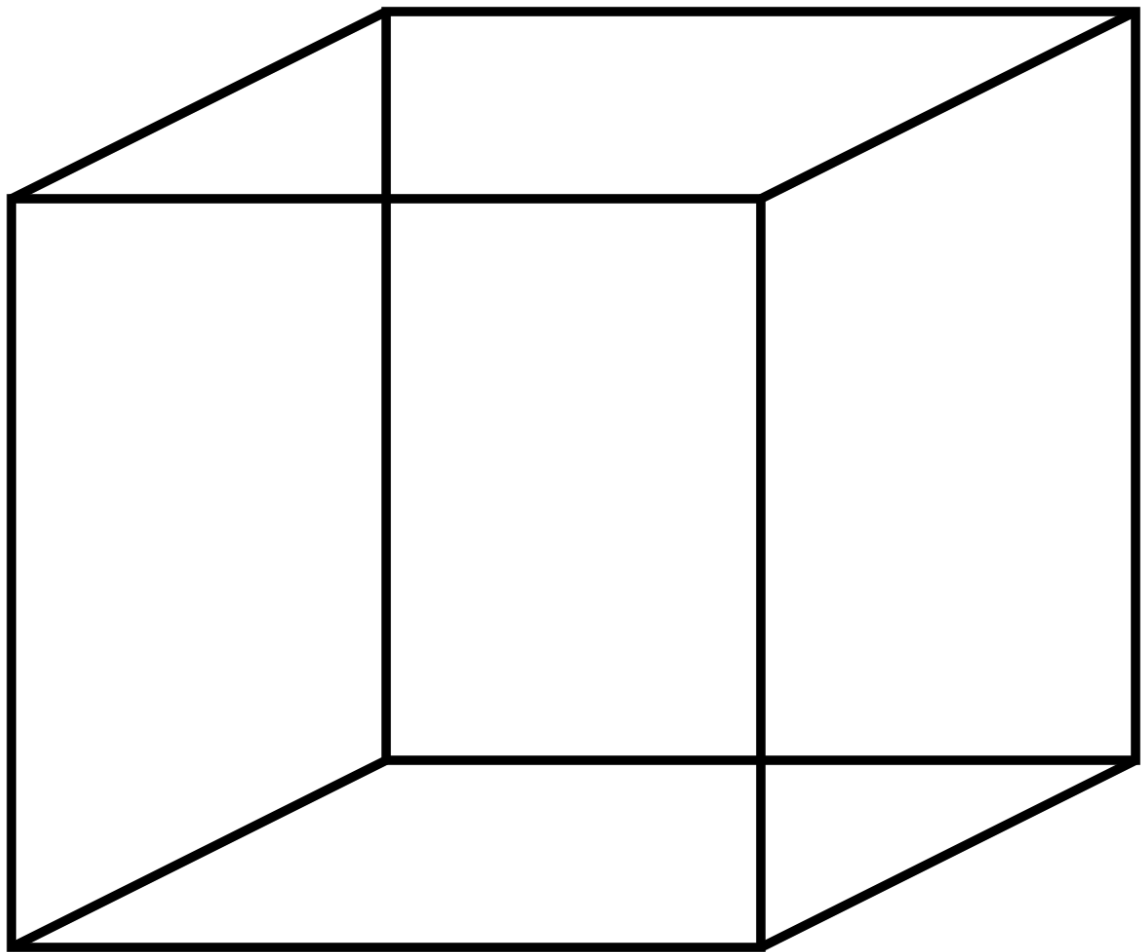


Endlessly Craning My Neck to See Otherwise

I sit transfixed as a red bag of classic Lays and a Coca Cola can flicker alternately, gyrating behind the frame of an old computer monitor. They fabricate an illusion of continuity, crosshatching in time while occupying the same physical space. They appear to be one and the same object, yet I know that I can only see one of the two at any given point.

The effect is captivating. My brain shortcircuits as it struggles to maintain a continuous visual experience whilst oscillating between the two objects. It reminds me of an optical illusion that has fascinated me for a long time: the Necker Cube.

Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Necker_cube



This 2D drawing creates a 3D object before your eyes, that bulges either to the left or to the right, but never both at the same time. The Necker Cube is interesting for two reasons: 1. No new information is provided, yet look at the drawing again and you gain a completely different perspective; there is no continuous in-between phase and the cause for this sudden switch remains a mystery, and 2. Seeing the cube one way is only possible through the *occlusion of seeing it the other way* (Kirbach, 2023). Our mind stitches a continuous reality, until it is thrust into a completely different reality unbeknownst to us until that given moment. Only then do we notice the threadbare gaps that were always there, threatening to turn the fabric inside out, of any and every world that we have.

"...even the finest act of seeing is necessarily always the act of not seeing something else" (Danielewski, 2000).

Phenomenologists have referred to this phenomenon as adumbration, which literally means "to cast a shadow". It describes perception as a faint sketch, an outline or prefiguration of something, like the moon that always retains the dark side regardless of where you are gazing at it from. Similarly, the three creators behind *Marginal Evidence* – Claudio Tola, Nadia Sotirova Abadjieva and Severi Aaltonen – provide not more than sketches, as they tease at the fraying seams of our realities.

Entering Tola's *As Far as It Can Be Seen (Notes around a "Desert" Island)*, I skirt around the meticulously framed void, an eternal myth of a *terra incognita* whose name is not revealed to us. The exhibition informs only enough for me to retain the faint knowledge of my ignorance regarding the island and its residents. "You'll never see the island itself, as it is always screened", says Tola. He is interested in the act of seeing and appearing, especially their artifices and situatedness. The Necker cube tells us that this act of seeing is always seeing-by-something, this something being an agent with specific affordances that create for a particular perspective. By this logic, the act of appearing is also always an appearing-to-something. I locate cables sustaining small monitors that display satellite imagery and cartographic illustrations, and an old film projector that only sporadically illuminates a view of the island from a distance. Those who barely weave the tapestry of the island's story, and the holes in between, are more prominent than the tapestry itself. "I work through fragments – I feel that things should be scattered in space," Tola tells me. Advancing further, a strobing video of an islander in dark silhouette catches me from the corner of my eyes, perhaps the most unsettling work of the show. It threatens to destabilize the otherwise tranquil (-izing; the aesthetics is vaguely reminiscent of vaporwave) experience of strolling through the exhibition. I look closely to find a mouse pointer in the middle of the screen, hastily chasing the ever-elusive islander who seems to be advancing towards us themselves. It has been said that the dimmest of stars cannot be witnessed when stared at directly, but only reveal themselves within peripheral vision due to the light-sensitive rod cells being concentrated in the edges of the retina. My experience as a viewer starts cracking, as I am forced to consider the possibility that I am not only seeing, but also being seen. Only I do not know what that means. I recall that next to the entrance of the project space, facing the outdoors, is a projector casting what one can only imagine to be the view of an islander towards the outside world. Alas, that too is a projection. Even the reverse side has a reverse side.

How am I to comprehend the experience of being a resident on this island, through the thickets and morasses of (neo)colonization and stereotypical notions such as the 'untouched nature' or 'noble savage'? For Rancière, visibility, let alone comprehensibility, is never pre-politically defined. Rancière notes how in ancient Greece, the so-called birthplace of democracy, many people – women, those of foreign origin, etc – were outrightly denied political right, and yet this contradiction has been apparently unapparent for a long time. The only explanation he can draw is that these individuals were simply not perceived as part of the 'demos'. More

pernicious and systematic than conscious choices that deny entry to marginalized members of society, is the perception of the viewer for whom these individuals are invisible, hence nonexistent. After all, *nobody* lives on a desert island, so how could we see them? For Rancière, true democracy must therefore constitute of disjointed miscounts, fragmentary moments where those who are not supposed to count, *are counted*, per mistake. Hallucinations that trigger more enduring shifts in perception. "Much like how slips of the tongue were for Freud no mere absentminded mistakes but the signifiers of a hidden discourse, neckerological slips in perception can reveal the gaps or inconsistencies in our being-in-the-world" (Kirbach, 2023). Perhaps Tola is describing something of an intrinsic impossibility – a never-closing gap between the seer and the seen, and between seers themselves (perhaps those are the same – if I can even begin to imagine how my car air freshener or Google sees me). I am tempted to reverse this logic, to say something about possibility – seeing as an act *only possible at a distance*. The void that concocts a mirage which, as it happens, was always a reality of its own.

In this sense, Abadjieva's *The Autobiography of my Father* illustrates a very tangible portrait of an absence. There is little that I can grasp of her father's persona from a row of ceramic car air fresheners or enlarged sculptures of perfume bottle caps that he supposedly collects. It is as if the show intentionally avoids all aspects that one would often tap into in order to understand a person; I walk out of the show not even having learned the name of the person in question. I suspect from the artist's statement that Abadjieva herself knows little of her father, hence the motivation for this show. She and her father "... don't talk about much ... [u]nfortunately". But then again, can we ever 'know' someone in their fullness? What determines the extent, or the depth to which we know someone? "I cannot remember the books I have read any more than the meals I have eaten. Even so, they have made me" (attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson). Who is to say that I am more accurately described through (rather abstract) notions such as being an agnostic, vaguely proenvironmental middle-class Korean woman who lives in the Netherlands and works in the communication industry, and less through the meals that I eat or the books that I read? It would be delusional to think that those two realms of identity are separate from each other. What I eat and read probably have everything to do with me being a non-religious middle class Korean woman working in the Netherlands as a communication professional who wants to be proenvironmental, and vice versa. Yet at any given moment I can see but one side of the story at a time. "I don't understand much about my life", the artist confesses. So I look back, and notice the incredible attention to detail that she put into recreating the small artifacts, or if 'artifact' is too grandiose of a word, remnants, or traces of the everyday, literally elevated on pedestals that too require equally painstaking craftsmanship. I look again at the pipes and bolts jutting out of the basement wall, highlighted in her father's favorite color. Perhaps an homage to him having worked in construction. Perhaps just a playful instinct. Maybe both. Abadjieva's show mediates at least two degrees away from what is conventionally understood as an autobiography. First, it is the familial history and environment within which she grew up in, that one might miss when seeing her directly, and secondly, it is the objects in the periphery of one such family member that are seldom seen as being essential to that person. Fascinatingly, this mediating away is so apparent a distance that it also hints at what I do *not* see (for 'distance' necessarily involves at least two standpoints, one of which is shown). For example, I cannot help but perceive a subversive wink to the hypermasculine ideal of a Balkan man and father figure from the softness and childlikeness of the display, although that might also tell something about the way in which I see things. My hallucination. I am told that the show is the artist "... introduc[ing her father] to you the only way [she] feel[s] right, the only way in which he would never dare to introduce himself". If this is an autobiography, it is because the neckerological vantage point here is hers. But the distance between the artist and myself is a chasm in and of itself, triggering a switch. As Abadjieva describes, "All of my art is autobiography... [they are] not about me directly, but also about me ... But [they] could also be about anyone".

Out of the three shows, Aaltonen's *Spectator* takes the most straightforward dive into the void. His want for an neckerological switch is palpable from the moment you enter the space where you confront literally behind-the-scenes of the AI vision. I see backings of computer monitors and cables strewn about the cold metallic floor. And then there is the video – epileptic, hypnotic, anaesthetic. Despite being discordant, it is anything but uncured – Aaltonen went through some hundreds of thousands of images and fifteen audio samples, and laboriously arranged them into compositions that create the illusions that inspired me to use neckerology as a metaphor to begin with. I know that during the set-up he struggled with the cables, four of which were broken despite having been purchased new. Things mostly remain invisible in our day-to-day-lives, or rather, are concealed behind their functions that we have assigned for them. Perhaps the only moments when things assert their being to us is when they malfunction or break down (Brown, 2001). In his exhibition text, Aaltonen quotes that in today's society, "The image becomes the concrete reality and the world is only a pretext". His emphasis on the materiality of the computer systems, stripped bare to the extent that they appear pitiful in their sustenance of the image, seems to be an attempt to bring the pretext back to the foreground. As Kirbach claims, "... this [neckerological] way of reading (of thinking, seeing, etc.) is especially poignant now, in the twenty-first century, when so much of our lives have been subsumed by the interface logic of computer networks. What we 'see' on the computer screen in an array of brightly-colored visual metaphors – but what these really are is code, ones and zeros, voltages, and electromagnetic radiation that, in baffling and often uncanny ways, stare back at us" (Kirbach, 2023). A dreadful calm fills me as the images unfold before my eyes. Does a deer in headlights feel like this?

Before I leave, I turn back to see the bottom half of the other viewers, half-concealed behind the monitors as they sit on the ground like children fixed to televisions in their heydays. I become a spectator of their spectatorship, of AI spectating our daily lives. How the AI sees me is even more a black box to me than how a computer sees me. Here again, the neckerological shift is triggered in seeing one's being seen. The transition from Tola's show with the strobing images of an island resident becomes more pertinent in hindsight. Regarding the implications of such a switch, Aaltonen's stance remains unclear. He and I spoke only briefly about the breaching of privacy and consent in the online realm through which information that ought to be private – MRI scans, family photos – become open-source, and his own conundrum of featuring such photos. Aaltonen mentions little about the web scraping methods he used, although his silence may be a reflection of the curated neutrality and indifference with which data engines operate itself. The four broken cables are long gone.

As I close my thoughts regarding the exhibition, a new door opens, and in comes a new series of thoughts. I wonder if what I wrote was less of a review than an analysis. I wonder if it has been sufficiently evaluative, or if my own philosophical musings took over the goal of evaluation. Did I involve the artists and the curators enough? Was I *critical*? After all, I will be assessed in my assessment. This neckerology is making me paranoid.

It is not enough to simply know that my seeing is always limited. I realize that this is perhaps the most defining difference between my and the artists' approaches. If *Marginal Evidence* were to be preceded by a verb, it would not be "Hunting for" nor "Seeking" – this exhibition seems satisfied after vaguely gesturing towards blindspots, if it is not deliberately turning blind to them in the first place. These blindspots lie within but also outside of the artists' scopes, such as between their individual visions in creating this group exhibition. Meanwhile, for some reason, I must perpetually crane my neck and squinch my eyes. Neckerological investigations confront us with the fact that the different modes of seeing are oppressed through one of them, albeit not through conscious means, but for that very reason all the more persistently so. Numerous political factors condition this mode of seeing. Must an artist learn to alternate between multiple modes of seeing? Is it their role to elucidate the sociopolitical conditions that bring one

perspective to the fore and not others? Or to capture the moment of neckerological shift, the cleft that brings about the inversion? Or must they break open this cleft as the curatorial rationale states, "...looking at the overlooked", which now reveals itself to be a never-ending pursuit? Or are these the responsibilities of an art critic? A viewer?

"For it is necessary to reverse the common opinion and acknowledge that it is not the harshness of a situation or the sufferings it imposes that lead people to conceive another state of affairs in which things would be better for everybody. It is on the day that we are able to conceive of another state of affairs, that a new light is cast on our trouble and our suffering and we *decide* that they are unbearable" (Sartre, as quoted by Bourdieu).

I struggle. My neck pains from all this writing and rewriting. I still do not understand fully when and how this switch happens, within myself just as in anybody else, for it is only in hindsight that I only know that a shift has happened, but by then, I am already standing from a new point of view. In fact, it is only then that I see what I have been seeing and no longer, hence the realization. Just like how Rancière describes postmodernism as "...simply the name under whose guise artists and thinkers realized what modernism had been". What this means is that before making this shift, I have not been seeing what I thought I was seeing. I haven't been seeing *anything!* But if the world operates on an Exclusive-OR function, how is it possible that we take the leap to the other side? After drawing the famous duck-rabbit, Wittgenstein poses the impossibility for someone who has never seen a duck or any duck-adjacent thing in their life to see anything other than rabbit when they encounter this illusion. That we can switch our perspective from a rabbit to a duck and vice versa indicates that we have seen both or at least their look-alikes in our lives. To see something, we need to have already seen them. SIGN itself is all about picking up what we already see, and see a lot of – its name is inspired from the Prince album *Sign o' the Times*. Seen from this angle, rather than never being able to see anything properly, on quite the contrary, I (always) see it all. Between these counterpoints of binary Truths, I try to grapple at any logical in-between.

Tug at the stray end of a thread, and the neatly knitted work begins to unfurl. The gaps grow bigger and bigger, until there is but a single stranded string of yarn. On the strand stands a tightrope walker. Straddling between multi(un)stabilities, the walker treads between the two sides. With each step a bead of sweat crystallizes on their forehead, a leap of faith over the gaping void. They would know better than to look below, where the bones of their predecessors lie. Neckerology. Necrology. One absent-minded step and they will fall into the trap of Truth. Narrowly escaping this philosophical death, they inch forward and survive another second of suspension. I thank Tola, Abadjieva, Aaltonen, Marie-Jeanne and Ron whose work has intrigued, tranquilized and hypnotized us with its carefully and flawlessly weaved voids. Perhaps the voids have grown in the meantime, and are now bigger and deeper than any one of us can imagine. It is time that we also join the tightrope.

So we go, over the abyss –

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