

June 27 - July 26, 2014

Artist Talk
Friday, June 27 | 6-7 pm

Opening Reception
Friday, June 27 | 7-9 pm

Katie Bethune-Leamen

Hologram Tupac. Other Things. ALL-ONE!



Peter Goodfellow *Golden Bough Cover / Greenland Postcard Face*, 2014, screenprint, 30" x 11".
Printed by Meggan Winsley under the auspices of the Open Studio Visiting Artist Residency, 2013-14.

Open Studio

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Gallery Hours: Tues - Sat, 12 - 5 pm



The Mask is the Face

by Kari Cwynar

David J, art historian, has got surfaces on the mind; the word rolling over his tongue as he treads the hot pavement. It's sunny out; he's revelling in thoughts of flatness and depth, how the search for depth in flatness returns again and again in twentieth-century art practices and still now. He's musing over psychological depth born from the surface of an abstract painting; then he's onto the cool affect stirred from the detached flat of postmodern appropriation. There's endless material here, from decades of discourse building up the expectation of finding truth in some unseen, contained interiority.

David rounds the corner and stops in his tracks; he's face to face with the enhanced face of a bus stop plastic surgery advertisement. It bears the line: "Beautiful? Sure. Real? Who Cares!" And now David's just riffing. "If your face isn't real, what is?!" he cries. With these malleable bodies of ours, where is it that we can lodge the self? This ad has unlocked him and he's off: "Forget about the real, it does not exist, or it is everything that exists: *Who Cares!*"¹

I'm right there with him, yes, surface perception as indexical to reality. It's rich terrain; I'm just hanging on. This relationship of inner and outer remains one of the definitive conceits of contemporary art—how much "content" do we trust is embedded within or beneath any given surface? Then: *Who Cares!* Why does this still matter? Probably because the surface, self and screen became so many things.

It's troubling because it's human (skins, shells and faces), but also because it's so simple that it could be everything. Form and content is flatness and depth, exteriority and interiority, face and mind. We exist in relation to the surface: in dissolving barriers, our screens, digital personas, our many masks and what we want them to cover. We're living surfaces, propping each other up. It's Judith Butler²; we're all masked. I hear Sontag: "In almost every case, our manner of appearing is our manner of being. The mask *is* the face."³

By the time we've reached the bar, David is sober and analytical: "There is a great deal at stake in acknowledging that the flatness or depthlessness we experience in our globalized world is more than an optical effect... Flatness may serve as a powerful metaphor for the price we pay in transforming ourselves into images—a compulsory self-spectacularization which is the necessary condition of entering the public sphere in the world of late capitalism."⁴ Go on, David. "We're living in an age where identity is form and form is identity." What he really says is that in an age of flatness, one's subjectivity is constituted in social, political, economic, material and immaterial surfaces—no longer do we expect the self to emerge from an essential interior.⁵ In this way, the surface is the site of psychological, art historical and sensual depth. It holds everything we project onto it, stuff into it and pull out of it.

In May 1965, the year her essay "On Style" was published, Susan Sontag visited her sometimes lover Jasper Johns at his beach house in South Carolina. From her journal that week: "Already it's a great deal to see anything *clearly*, for we don't see *anything* clearly." And then: "There is no neutral surface—something is only neutral with respect to something else (an interpretation? An expectation)—Robbe-Grillet"⁶ A friend once asked, "Is there any neutral language anymore? There's always a rattail of meaning." Extend this to surface. Think of an object in layers: the provisional mask atop of the myths that prop it up and trail behind it.

What is it to isolate the surface: the face, the mask, the cloak of an object or being? How to present "knowledge" or "history" through masks, hoods, holograms, book covers, costumes? To come at each instance from the outside and stay there; to repeat and repeat the surface; to conjure and tease what might be dormant within it, or what just is; to privilege face value; to propose understanding through often-slippery shape, sheen and varying solidity. The why comes from the what. The surface gives a choice; we can look through it to see what is or isn't being said, what could perhaps not otherwise. Surfaces in themselves and representation as research: an insistence on the potential of form. What may seem to be a silence or a surface (the thing between or on top of the thing itself) is a provisional way inside. Sontag says: "Somebody said, [John] Cage showed me that there are no empty objects."⁷

Go on, David. "One of the primary lessons of modern art has been its paradoxical demonstration of the depth of surfaces. It is a lesson from which we still have much to learn."⁸

¹ David Joselit, "Notes on Surface: Towards a Genealogy of Flatness," *Art History* 23:1 (March 2000): 19.

² In Judith Butler's seminal *Gender Trouble*, she puts forward the theory that gender is always performed; one's identity is thus constituted through a chosen exterior and appearance.

³ Susan Sontag, "On Style," in *Against Interpretation*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966, 18.

⁴ Joselit, 20.

⁵ Joselit, 32.

⁶ Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals & Notebooks, 1964-1980*, edited by David Rieff, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012, 83.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Joselit, 32-32.

Kari Cwynar is a curator and writer based in Toronto. She is currently Director (with Kara Hamilton) of Kunstverein Toronto. She was a participant in the 2012-2013 de Appel Curatorial Programme, Amsterdam, and has held curatorial positions at The Banff Centre and the National Gallery of Canada. Working independently and with a range of collaborators, Cwynar has curated exhibitions including: <laughter>, apexart gallery, New York (2013); *Bourgeois Leftovers*, de Appel arts centre, Amsterdam (2013); *Lynne Cohen Photographs from 1973 to 1978*, The Banff Centre, Banff (2012); *The Work Locates Itself*, Columbia University, New York (2012); and *The Collector's Circle*, The Banff Park Museum, Banff (2012). As a writer, Cwynar contributes to catalogues, publications, and magazines on contemporary art, including *Frieze*, *C Magazine*, and *Metropolis M*.

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Katie Bethune-Leamen works in installation, sculpture, video and other mediums. She holds an MFA from the University of Guelph and a BFA from Concordia University (Montreal). She has exhibited across Canada, in Iceland, Japan, France, Australia, the USA, the Netherlands, England, Australia, and other countries. Recent solo exhibitions include *Shiny Object Person* (Young Gallery, Art Gallery of Ontario). Recent residencies include Fogo Island Arts (Fogo Island, NL), SIM (Reykjavik, IS), The Model (Sligo, IE), and The Banff Centre for the Arts with ones upcoming at the Illulissat Art Museum (Ilulissat, GD), and The American Museum of Natural History (NYC). Richard Rhodes, editor of *Canadian Art* magazine, listed her as one of the top three Canadian artists of 2012. She is the recipient of numerous grants and awards. Her writing has appeared in *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *Border Crossings* and others. www.katiebethuneleamen.com

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Mitch Robertson is a conceptually based artist using photography, sculpture, the internet, installations, printmaking and drawing to create work that considers the intertwined paths of religion and superstition with globalization and consumerism. With over sixty exhibitions since 1998, Robertson has shown regularly across Canada and New Zealand as well as in the USA, Switzerland, N. Ireland, England, Germany, Scotland and Australia in public, artist run and commercial galleries. His work is in the collections of private, corporate and public galleries & institutions across Canada. He is represented by Birch Contemporary in Toronto.

Mitch Robertson would like to thank Robert Birch, Earl Miller, Nick Shick, and Daryl Vocat and the Open Studio staff.

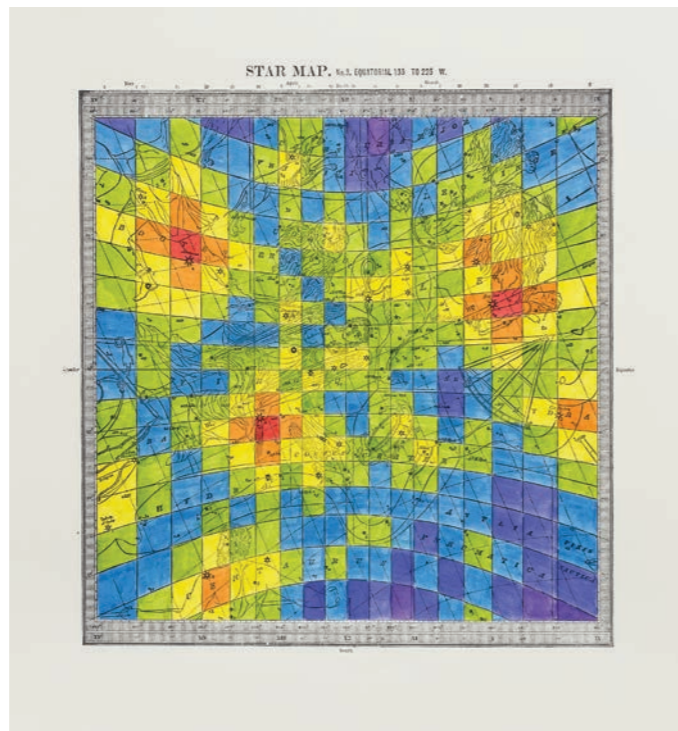
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Mitch Robertson

Star Values



Star Values (2nd variation, map 3), 2014, screenprint and calligraphy ink, varied edition 2/5, 22 1/4" x 20 1/4". Printing by Nicholas Shick; created under the auspices of the Open Studio Visiting Artist Residency, 2013-14.

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Mitch Robertson: *Star Values*

by Earl Miller

“And like art, cartography reveals fragments of reality through a tissue of lies.”¹

On June 15, 1936, an ambitious A. Dean Lindsay claimed ownership of all extraterrestrial objects, an outrageous claim nevertheless taken seriously enough that he received numerous purchase offers.² Such a lottery-like faith in the uncertain rewards of the unknown has recently been fuelled by advances in spaceflight technology and a progressively bought-up planet. The consequential desire to exploit anything left anywhere rises to ludicrous proportions in Mitch Robertson’s 2014 suite of prints titled *Star Values*. These star chart prints propose buying stars *en masse* in blocks of outer space divided inexplicably by squares of earthly latitudinal and longitudinal lines. Robertson parallels the absurdity of this displaced, thus unreliable real estate mapping to the absurdity of a capitalism so addicted to speculation, dominance, and colonization that it must procure the unknown and the infinite.

Each of the six maps comprising *Star Values* shows all the stars and constellations visible from a particular view: one from the North Pole, one from the South Pole, and four from along the equator. Robertson has screenprinted arced latitudinal and longitudinal grids onto them as if he were mapping terrain. The ensuing squares set the property boundaries for star owners even though the lines represent space of limitless depth. Robertson then hand-colours the squares: a technique used prior to the development of colour print technology in the mid-nineteenth century. The colours, which match those of Newton’s spectrum, form a property value ranking system common to many earthly real estate maps: warmer colours—red, orange, and yellow—represent higher values, while cooler colours—green, blue, indigo, or violet—represent lower ones. The six maps classify into five unique editions, each setting property values differently. For instance, in the first edition, a square’s value ranking depends on the total magnitude of all stars within it. In the third, a square’s value raises as a result of a neighbouring block’s high value. Location, location, location.

Of course, infinite empty space is hardly a location. Robertson’s colour values are as incompatible with outer space as his longitudinal and latitudinal lines. His cartographic incongruity recalls failed attempts to map the earth when it was believed flat. The source of his altered maps, an astrology atlas from the 1890s, reinforces his maps’ lack of scientific accuracy.

Their flawed cartography recalls Douglas Huebler’s map works. Huebler, following the Conceptual ethos of eliminating the aesthetic object, substituted photographs with what he called “systems” to “suspend appearance.” One of these systems was mapping, which he used to document land sites he visited. While Huebler replaced photographic imagery with maps, he still mistrusted them:

“Of course, by making a dot on a map, you are really covering perhaps twenty or forty square feet, or circular feet. And there’s no proof that when you get there you’re pointing your camera, or putting your marker on the exact spot...It could have been three or four feet over, or you could have miscalculated just because your pencil was too thick...any number of things.”³

Huebler indeed nihilistically dismisses his own documentation systems: “These systems do not prove anything either. They’re dumbbell systems.”⁴ His subsequent critique of representation of all kinds precurses that of postmodernism, which Fredric Jameson defined as a “resolution to use representation against itself to destroy the binding or absolute status of any representation.”⁵ Robertson exaggerates cartographic misrepresentation to destroy representation’s credibility.

He rejects mapping not only for inaccuracy, but also for intrinsic bias. Cartography may be classified a science, yet it often lacks objectivity. Consider, for one example, how on May 1, 2013, after

much political and public pressure, Google Maps changed the Palestinian Territories to Palestine. Israel opposed the renaming, and science could help neither side. Robertson’s mapping of space based on values determined by corporate colonialists reminds us that maps have stood as cultural signifiers of colonial power and domination since the Renaissance.⁶

Robertson’s disbursement of outer space to big business stands impervious to the reality that private property does not exist in outer space: in 1967 the UN established the Outer Space Treaty to prevent its manifestation. Defining outer space as “a province of all humankind,” the treaty remains the legislative frame for space.⁷ Nevertheless, with spaceflight technology becoming increasingly affordable, private interest in space could soon become a reality.⁸ For instance, The Space Settlement Institute, a New York-based advocacy group, has drafted the Space Settlement Prize Act in hopes Congress will pass it and thus legally recognize land claims “for any private entity which has, in fact, established a permanently inhabited settlement on the Moon, Mars or an asteroid.”⁹

Robertson makes a crucial distinction when dividing stellar property not in accordance with the stars themselves but the outer space surrounding them. Ownership of outer space differs from that of planets, asteroids, and yes, stars, given space’s emptiness and the difficulty of marking, maintaining, and if necessary, defending boundaries. Furthermore, outer space is enigmatic and sublime, making it elusive to define materially. Modesto Seara Vázquez, an early space law expert, summarized the transcendental quality of space in a landmark colloquium on outer space law held in Stockholm in 1960. He reflects on “its strange agential character which allows it to ‘possess us’ rather than become an object possessed by us.”¹⁰ Robertson likewise satirizes the futile drive to capture something whose sublime limitlessness actually overpowers us. In doing so, he effectively counters Kant’s assertion that reason and attendant scientific knowledge allow us to understand, and therefore, conquer the natural world. Mapping should symbolize this conquest of knowledge. However, Robertson’s measurement and division of outer space shows an utter lack of reason. Perhaps it indicates that we now live in an age of unreason in which the manic forces of the market trump knowledge.

Capturing the unknown is a god-playing, soul-stealing takeover bid for the mysteries of the cosmos. The ludicrousness of *Star Values’* flawed cartography matches that of a hypercapitalism, which, as Robertson notes, aims even to “own what we do not fully understand.”¹¹ Mitch Robertson forcefully illustrates that while maps and art may cover reality with “a tissue of lies,” they can raise awareness of the problems plaguing it.

¹ Evangelos Livieratos and Alexandra Koussoulakou, “Vermeer’s Maps: A New Digital Look in an Old Master’s Mirror,” *e-Perimtron* 1.2 (Spring 2006): 138.

² Virgiliu Pop, *Who Owns the Moon? Extraterrestrial Aspects of Land and Mineral Resources Ownership*, Vol. 2 (Houten: Springer B.V.: 2008), 2.

³ Gordon Hughes, “Exit Ghost: Douglas Huebler’s Face Value,” *Photography After Conceptual Art*, eds. Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iverson (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2010): 73.

⁴ Hughes, 73.

⁵ Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 110.

⁶ Livieratos and Koussoulakou, 139.

⁷ Joel D. Scheraga, “Establishing Property Rights in Outer Space,” *Cato Journal*. 6.3 (Winter 1987): 892. <http://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/serials/files/cato-journal/1987/1/cj6n3-10.pdf>; accessed 6 March 2014.

⁸ Rand Simberg, “Property Rights in Space,” *The New Atlantis* 37 (Fall 2012), <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/property-rights-in-space>; accessed 5 March 2014.

⁹ Simberg.

¹⁰ Kathryn Milun, *The Political Uncommons – the Cross Cultural Logic of the Global Commons* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010): 131.

¹¹ Mitch Robertson. E-mail to the author. 2 February 2014.

Earl Miller is an independent curator and art writer residing in Toronto. He has curated exhibitions at galleries including Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programs, The Art Gallery of Peterborough, and Galeria Vermelho. He has written for periodicals including *Art in America*, *Border Crossings*, *C Magazine*, and *Flash Art*.