

The Interopticon

The Interopticon is a proposal for an alternative processes of observation and learning in the shape of a conceptual discursive platform. It regards the subject as an object of research that is simultaneously absorbing knowledge and being studied in a cyclical process of learning and critique. This model deals with a practice of autonomous self analysis, in a spiral-shaped process of development. By transcending its structural precedents, it disarms the political force of the gaze by distributing it to the individual as plan for mutual interaction and enrichment.

The Interopticon grows out of two opposing designs, the Panopticon and the Synopticon. The Panopticon is best known as a penal design that allows one person to observe *pan-* (meaning "all") of its prisoners without the incarcerated knowing whether they are being watched, thereby conveying a ubiquitous sense of unseen omniscience [1]. In this model, the few observe the mass. In the reverse, exists the Synopticon. Much like an audience that watches the celebrity, or the followers that subscribe to a blog, it is a paradigm where (*syn-* meaning together or at the same time) the collective observes the selected few. The Interopticon is a model for a marriage of these two structures. (*Inter-* meaning "exchange") suggests an arena for mutual voyeurism that leads to an indirect dialogue, where each (as we will show) is simultaneously viewed and observed, both becoming a catalogue and a specimen.

The installation will follow the structure of the Interopticon, presenting several sculptures displayed on assorted pedestals placed in the center (the core). They will be surrounded by a wide circular canvas suspended from the ceiling depicting numerous cells (the shell) that act as a catalogue to the central structures. The pedestals in the core function dually as display objects and as pointers, which direct viewer's gaze back at the catalogue shell.

Both the shell and the core will be adopting a practice that studies the other. Wolff's work acts as a cognitive gestural commentary on scientific signifiers that will act as "specimens" and in turn be logged by Ben-Ari's surrounding catalogue-shell. The shell functions as an analyzer of the empiric forms of knowledge- gathering that scientific research employs. Wolff's specimens are comprehension maps that chart the processing of data formation. As the shell catalogues the core, the core is analyzing the methodology used by the shell. By nature, Wolff's process is esoteric while Ben-Ari's is pragmatic, but they both function as research filters for the other in a cyclical process of mutual investigation.

The Specimen Core (Made by Leah Wolff)

The installation in the center of the Interopticon acts as both the subject and the object of the gaze. It works simultaneously as the voyeuristic guard that observes its surroundings (Panopticon), while being studied by the mass group of figures around it (Synopticon). These pieces analyze of the process that the shell employs. Their structures are borrowed from methods of research that use an experiential productive process. This process acts as a map of perception to create an aura of faux scientific discovery. The core is responding to the ongoing method of research, in this case an observational codification, which is utilized in the catalogue-shell.

By relating to proto-research, the intent is not to produce a new field but to instead analyze the existing procedures. It's mental exercise both appropriates and questions the shell's methodology thereby creating a comprehensive investigation. The observed objects are presented as conclusion models for the entire formation of the research. The core regards the shell as a structure for investigation. The shell, acting as a catalogue for the core's process, is mirroring the core's action of observation. The mutual gaze allows the communal exchange.

The Catalogue Shell (Made by Guy Ben-Ari)

The surrounding shell of the Interopticon serves as the Panopticon's confining walls, and the Synopticon's collective gaze. By embodying both subject and object, its actions mirror those of the center. It is in the form of a painted canvas hung in a semi-sphere, depicting numerous compartmentalized figures, dedicated to the empiric logging and systematization of the central installation.

Its research acts not only as a tool to better understanding its documented content, but also to further investigate the processes in which it utilizes. The central sculptures are studies of a pseudo-scientific research model. By cataloguing these models, it investigates the means by which it exists. This way, the shell acts as the panoptic voyeurist who studies and catalogues the objects. In doing so, it becomes the subject of the core's research thereby submitting itself as a singular method for universal synoptic scrutiny.

The Interopticon: Inward Spiral

The objects at the core of the installation function as specimens gathered through a pseudo-scientific method of research. As sculptures, the formal relationship to their subject of investigation is gestural and discrete, distancing themselves from didacticism. Based off of systems in quantum mechanics, methods of established scientific practice join to create a scenario that is ultimately incommensurable. The works' attempt to map data is in direct contrast with their ambiguity, thereby showing an ineptitude for their suggested purpose. Simultaneously, they are conveying an experiential tension where a struggle for a higher understanding is apparent.

The surrounding catalogue-shell classifies the objects based on an empiric model of codification. This attitude of elucidation acts in opposition to the incommensurable nature of the specimens. The shell's purpose is to document, clarify and report the objects of its study. In a scientific context, it acts as a log of the specimens in the center, and as an entry point for the audience, to work as a didactic reference tool. This is similar to that of an exhibition catalogue. The catalogue, the log and the shell are all meant to function as an itemized list that provides a physical structure and a hierarchy which puts the subjects' theme in context. As opposed to the interior, the shell's method is transparent as it analyzes the core.

Just as the shell scrutinizes the core, the core analyzes the established scientific methods used in the shell. The shell's method of research is empiric while the core's is theoretical, but because they each study the other, both of their actions embody that of a scientific journal that is aware of it's audience. Therefore, the dialogue within the Interopticon takes the shape of a spiral, where each gesture is processed by the audience and then feedback is given so that the next entry will be informed by the last. Instead of a circle (a closed circuit) this a spiral trajectory.

In the Interopticon, the findings of the core and the shell record the method of the other's findings. Instead of working off of external responses, their commentary is in the form of a loop feedback so instead of growing out, it spirals in. Studying a subject that analyzes your process of analysis turns the model into an autonomous design for self critique. Their mutual gaze embodies two facing mirrors, where as the spiral tightens, their findings become increasingly concentrated and abstract. The Interopticon's practice of isolated inner reflection becomes the specimen itself within its own habitat.

The Diorama as Spectacle

Celeste Olalquiaga writes, "Enclosed spaces where moments have been captured- like the creatures inside them- for visual delight, dioramas' 'educational' or Utopian intent (to give us a slice of life) becomes completely secondary to their impact as voyeuristic spectacles- that uncanny feeling of secretly watching what is forbidden or impossible. Dioramas materialize the reconstructed memory of reminiscence, forgetting both the specimens' lived moment and their death." [2] Viewing the inward spiral of the Interopticon is like viewing an extinct animal from behind the glass. Formally, it functions in the same way as a diorama. The viewer will see the "specimens" in the center surrounded by the panoramic catalogue painting. This painting will be the submersive landscape that frames and contextualizes the sculptures. This displaces the viewer spatially and temporally as they view the scene. Instead of gathering any conclusion from the specimen-as-scientific-art-practice objects they are instead solely engaged with the spectacle.

The Voyeur and the Other

A crucial element in the Interopticon is the simultaneous vision and visibility inherited in both the core and the shell. It is that both entities coexist as a subject and an object at the same time. For Jean-Paul Sartre, the gaze is the thing that permits the subject to realize that the other is also a subject: 'my fundamental connection with the Other-as-subject must be able to be referred back to my permanent possibility of being seen by the Other' [3].

The voyeur derives gratification from surreptitiously watching others, making them objects of a discrete observation. However, the voyeur also has the desire to be recognized as a subject, by becoming the object of the gaze. In the Interopticon, both sides are given the agency of the gaze. It exposes both participants in the act, thus identifying them as voyeurs. Both fulfill their wish for scrutiny by doing so to the other.

The Mutual Reinforcement Mechanism

The Interopticon presents a scenario where this mutual scrutiny becomes mutual reinforcement. One's citation of the other verifies them both. Similarly, a judge uses a precedent to reinforce his own decision. Jacques Derrida claims that by alluding to the precedent, the judge is reinforcing the present decree along with the previous ruling [4].

Likewise, the Interopticon creates a structure where the exchange between the two sides examines and reinforces them both. By adopting a given statement (as when following a general law or a precedent in Derrida's example) one must "assume it, approve it, confirm its value, by a re-instituting act of interpretation". [5] Thus the correspondence between the shell and the core allows both a critical exchange and a constructive discourse. The Interopticon creates a dialectic process of evaluation where there exists simultaneously mutual critique and reinforcement.

The Political Efficacy of the Utilized Gaze

The Panopticon model began as an ideal plan for a penitentiary, where a single guard surveys and controls a mass of prisoners [6]. The Synopticon was later developed so that the many would watch over the few, as in the common recruit of all citizens to “remain alert and point out any unusual behavior or objects” in crowded public places [7]. Both models are tools of the state, that use power structures to control personal freedom via the knowledge gained by observing one’s location and behaviour. Each intends to control and survey the governed population, by employing an omnipotent and unrequited gaze.

The Interopticon, a synthesis of both models, is using their communicative potential, while trying to exceed the negative historical and political connotations of its foundations. This new model adapts these power structures to form a new prototype of dialogue where both elements, the core and the shell, are empowered. Both sides are simultaneously the active voyeur and the passively watched: In this system, the observed is also an observer. The Interopticon undermines the previous power relations of its foundations and brings forward a new form of dialogue, where the function of the gaze evolves from restriction to enlightenment.

The Pseudo Scientific Diary

A diary is written with the desire to be read by a receiving anticipated audience. The author’s mode of consciousness travels both inward [8] into the research and outward towards its readers. In the 18th and 19th centuries, personal diaries would be published years after their author’s death, following a long process of editing and censorship. Today, blogs facilitate an immediate and direct exchange between the writer and their audience, allowing both sides to feed into each other in an outward constructive spiral [9].

The Interopticon uses the model of a contemporary diary, acting as a scientific blog. The shell functions as the author, cataloging the core’s research. The core functions as the readers by viewing the catalogue. At the same time, the core, as an active audience, also responds to the same process of cataloguing. It produces its own text by referring to the procedure that surrounds it. It is this very procedure that also documents and refers to the core as its subject of study. The mutual exchange allows both sides to evolve and extend their research in the shape of a an inward spiral, through a perpetual process of critique and constructive feedback.

The Sculpture Center: Embodying The Species

The hand-built clay sculptures installed in the core read as a possible historical remainder for the Sculpture Center's past, founded in 1928 by Dorothea Denslow under the initial name of The Clay Club. In the diorama, the display of extinct species creates a temporal shift that presents the viewer with a spectacle from the past, that acts as a frozen archetype. Likewise, the Interopticon embodies that species in The Sculpture Center. The clay objects act as the immortalized specimen from the center's past.[10] As the core cites the past, the painting-shell will be a direct formal reference to the present space in which it resides. The arch's form repeats in the semi-spherical shape of the painting. Also, the repeating pattern in the surrounding painting-catalogue portrays the architectural shape of the space (that of a cubic cell). Just as the white walls were built to create a display shell for presentation in the Warehouse's existing structure, the Interopticon uses that same method with the painting shell, to set up a dioramic territory for the shell.

Sculpture Relations

The installation plays with the different intersections of sculpture/painting/object relations. Each facet of the piece is transgressive, examining its own categorical borders. For example, a panoramic painting being utilized as a surrounding wall (painting/object/territorializer), hand crafted objects that are drawn upon (sculpture/drawing/map), pedestals that exceed their formal purpose and become pointers (object/vector/pedestals), and lastly- clay pieces displayed as artifacts or specimens (specimen/sculpture/object). Their ambiguity shows the way that the Interopticon blurs the historical borders and reinforces its advocacy of agency within prior political constrictions.

Conclusion

The Interopticon presents the practice of autonomous self-analysis as a specimen for research. By experiencing the temporal dioramic shift, the viewer gazes upon the inward spiral of exchange as a new model which allows for an increasingly abstracted dialogue. In it, he or she encounters a design for the reclaiming of agency in our contemporary state of constant and mutual voyeurism. This new scenario allows for the shell and the core to both simultaneously exist as the scientist and the specimen. It proposes a utopian avenue for both players to free themselves from the historical limitations of their precursory models, and to reclaim the power of the gaze.

Notes:

1. Bentham, Jeremy The Panopticon Writings. Ed. Miran Bozovic (London: Verso, 1995). p. 29-95 – Pag. 5 of 48
2. Olalquiaga, Celeste. The Artificial Kingdom : A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience. New York : Pantheon Books, 1998. P. 275
3. Sartre, Jean-Paul, Being and Nothingness,1943: p, 256
4. Derrida, Jacques - Force of Law - p. 961
5. Ibid, Ibid
6. Foucault, Michel, Discipline and Punishment, 1975, p. 3
7. Lyon, David, 9/11, Synopticon, and Scopophilia , Watching and Being Watched, p. 39
8. Karlsson, Lena, Acts of Reading Diary Weblogs, Lund University, p. 7-8
9. Ibid, Ibid
10. Wikipedia - Under "Sculpture Center"