

## Drawing from Virtual Travel: *Regret, Danger, and Magic* Georgie Bennett

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the experiential qualities of drawing from the world of Google Maps. It will consider the possibilities of drawing from digital geographies, and the potential of virtual travel to offer newfound perspectives. Notions of regret, danger, and magic are investigated to support the concept of the artist-cyberflâneur as the practice of observing, revealing, and reclaiming parts of the internet space through artistic endeavours. Regret: how does drawing from the Google Map reality incite comparisons and feelings of longing? Danger: what are the rules of copyright and the restrictions of edited, curated online spaces? Magic: What can the artist's work from Google Maps reveal about our world as distanced observers, and what transportive qualities can Google Maps inspire? This paper will bring in personal experience of drawing from virtual travel as a solo artist and drawing with others, reflecting on social drawing from Google Maps as part of artistic practice.*

Key words: Google Maps; digital geographies; artist-cyberflâneur; social drawing; virtual travel.

### Introduction.

My adventures into the world of virtual travel began as form of escapism from the restrictions and isolation of the Covid-19 pandemic. Like many creatives at the time, I searched for ways to keep myself motivated and engaged with my art practice. For me this was the world of Google Maps, including Google Street View and Google Earth. The ability to discover and draw far away cities and landscapes stimulated my fascination with romantic notions of journey and exploration. I felt as though I was an intrepid new adventurer in this virtual world. Although, of course, I am not the first one to make work in response to Google Street View, and through research, conversations with colleagues, and drawing with others, I found myself gathering more questions about what can be learned by drawing from this world.

In this paper I will be focussing on Google Street View and Google Earth as experienced through a desktop screen. Brenda Laurel, a leading figure in the field of interactive media, strongly maintains 'there is no such thing as "desktop VR"' (2016). Laurel's definition of virtual reality (VR) is resolute: the experience must immerse the senses and have a surround environment. When viewing Google Street View on a desktop the screen acts as a window for the user to peer through. Despite the 360-degree views, and user autonomy of Google Maps, there is no illusion of physically being in another place. Navigation buttons disrupt visuals, and the user remains still, whilst the digital world jumps, spins and turns at command. For the artist drawing from Google Maps the physical act of looking at the screen and back to the paper further interrupts the illusion of being in a different space and time.

Conversely, to describe and promote the use of its applications Google uses phrases such as 'bringing your map to life' (Google, no date). The language implies an embodied, transformative experience. In attempt to discuss the experiential qualities of navigating Google Maps, I will use the word 'virtual' as an adjective to describe the 'almost', whilst understanding that desktop VR cannot effectively stimulate an immersive environment.

Google Street View presents a reality that is not a true mirror of our world; architecture is warped, and stitched together, faces and signs are blurred, and time is frozen, yet it offers something distinctly unique to other forms of media. Its documentary-like photography and 360 interactive Street View invites comparison with drawing on location and can incite feelings of longing, questioning the value of drawing from an online source. The Google Map reality is curated and encourages collective use, prompting questions of authorship, and what meaning, and value can be derived from this digital realm. Can drawing from the phenomenon of virtual travel offer new perspectives on our world? This paper presents an exploration of these questions and discusses the practice of drawing from Google Maps.

### **The artist-cyberflâneur.**

Drawing from the digital world is not new. Artists have been creating work in response to online maps, virtual reality software, and 360-degree experiences since their invention. In recent years, and particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic virtual travel experiences have seen a surge in popularity (Chen 2020) and there has been a rise in articles promoting armchair travel experiences.

Google Maps is a free, online mapping and navigation application. The 360-degree imagery captured by Google cars, trikes, planes, and satellites, among others, promise an authentic, valid version of Earth. In this way Google offers something other and separate to the eclectic range of digital, imagined spaces. Brooke Belisle, contemporary researcher in the field of visual culture and media aesthetics, notes Google Earth Virtual Reality (GEVR) 'rather than promising to transport users into another, virtual world, GEVR seems to promise the actual Earth' (Belisle 2020). The documentary-style raw imagery presented in Google Street View suggests a truthful version of the world. I posit that engaging with Google Maps offers artists a valuable lens of our world from which to draw.

A user of Google Maps can virtually travel in most directions, whether that is 'flying' in three-dimensional (3D) or satellite modes, or 'sailing', 'driving' or 'walking' in Street View. Within the world of Google Maps a user can choose to view places of interest or wander aimlessly through virtual landscapes. To wander the world of Google Street View is to observe the everyday, the unusual, the familiar and unfamiliar territories of our planet. Explorers who experience these digital landscapes remain hidden and anonymous, behind the screen, such is the luxury of armchair travel. I suggest this notion aligns with the flâneur, the lone figure, observer of modern urban life, as originated by nineteenth century poet Charles Baudelaire and further theorised by Walter Benjamin.

Ideas surrounding the flâneur have since taken on new meanings, and identities, which no longer limit the flâneur to its white, aristocratic, male origins. In the mid-90s the concept of the cyberflâneur arose. Just as the original flâneur who observed the streets of Paris, 'the cyberflâneur strolls more for the journey, the experience, the flow of the digital landscape, all to seek without any one destination or goal' (Hendel 2012).

Baudelaire likens his flâneur 'to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness' (1964: 9). The cyberflâneur when wandering Google Maps Street View, is similarly one with crowd, oft at eye-height, wandering incognito as an anonymous yellow Pegman, the frame of the screen providing a barrier and window of perspective to frozen moments in time. Unlike the flâneur on foot, the cyberflâneur turns a corner by using a cursor, tracing journeys of previous Google vehicles, and users who have captured the scenes on camera. The Google lens offers further perspectives from ariel view, gifting the cyberflâneur with a distanced perspective of the world.

During the Covid-19 pandemic I unknowingly adopted the role of a cyberflâneur when I began virtually exploring the city of Berlin via Google Maps. I had no objectives from this activity other than to explore and record my experience through drawing and feel a sense of escape from the lockdowns. I travelled through the city using Google Street View, using the timeline and 3D tools, documenting my findings through drawing and painting. Through this process I became aware of my position as a distanced observer, and my drawings would slip between drawing elements of the screen, and omitting the screen completely, as if I were there, drawing on the streets of Berlin (figures 1 and 2). When traversing Berlin, I would often allow my Pegman to 'drop-down' randomly, moving down streets aimlessly until I found a scene that called me to draw. This led to exciting discoveries, away from tourist hotspots such as a restaurant night scene, captured by a Google user (figure 3).

The idea of adopting the role of artist-cyberflâneur led to more intriguing, unique results, and intuitive ways of making work. The freedom to become lost in digital geographies opened up my drawing practice to work expressively, without worrying about the result. I found the quiet nature of cyberflâneur-ing through digital geographies introspective, and I could become lost in uninterrupted thought.

I view the series of drawings I created in response to exploring Berlin through Google Maps as an illustrated report. The act of drawing from Google Maps collected and documented the little scenes I had discovered with my own hand. This project enlightened me to the value of strolling online more for 'the journey, the experience, the flow...' (Hendel 2012). I was able to reflect and respond to the documented world before me in quiet contemplation, and I found this 'quietness' presented itself in the drawings. My drawing became slower, and more selective in what I was choosing to omit and record.

In his article 'The Death of the Cyberflâneur' Evgeny Morozov proposes the internet is 'no longer a place for strolling – it's a place for getting things done' (2012). Morozov assesses

Google's need to organise and catalogue the world and argues social platforms such as Facebook encourage social sharing over the individual experience. The rise in personalised advertisements punctuating our interaction with the virtual space diminishes the sense of choice and freedom one might hope for when cyberflâneur-ing. It could be contented that this modern idea of employing the digital realm for 'getting things done' (Morozov, 2012) eliminates the possibility of getting lost online. The internet landscape is curated, and is primarily used by most to socialise, buy, sell, navigate, and search for instant answers, implying the need and want for immediacy, and efficiency.

In 'A field Guide to Getting Lost', Rebecca Solnit recalls Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, on this she writes, 'For Woolf, getting lost was not a matter of geography so much as identity' (Solnit 2006: 11). Solnit examines Woolf's need to dissolve one's identity, to become a solitary, anonymous, tramp, which could be on a walk, or in an armchair (2006: 11). The act of cyberflâneur-ing through Google Maps can be a solitary, anonymous one, however Morozov maintains in the online world 'solitude and individuality, anonymity and opacity, mystery and ambivalence, curiosity and risk-taking – is under assault' (Morozov 2012). Perhaps this is the case for online spaces which are overly curated and controlled, directing user journeys and behaviours. The ad-less, directionless, and user autonomy of Google Maps can allude to feelings of freedom, yet it is important to remember that the user experience is engineered, censored, and edited. The choice of direction in Google Street View is restricted to certain streets and paths, floating icons showing shops and restaurants can persuade or distract user journeys, and regarding travelling in the 'real world' location sharing can be enabled, and user history can be recorded. Admittedly, I do not always roll the randomisation die and spend aimless hours clicking through Google Maps streets. I will search or utilise Google Earth Voyager to efficiently find exciting destinations to draw, allowing Google to guide me.

Jaron Lanier, computer scientist, author, and known as the godfather of virtual reality, is critical of technical economics. He states there is value in understanding technology so users may be 'less likely fooled by it' (Lanier 2017). Lanier offers, 'If you have learned a little bit of magic, you are less likely to be tricked by a magic show, but you still might enjoy the performance a lot' (2017). This is how I feel about engaging with and drawing from Google Maps. I am aware of the Google lens, and in my experience if onus on the destination is removed, thoughtful, valuable experiences of being 'lost' or 'strolling' in the Google Map world can be derived, and the magic, the performance, of virtual travel can be felt.

Solnit notes Woolf's desire and love to 'reside in your own mystery and the mystery of others' (2006: 11). Google Maps offers us a window into far away destinations, beyond our homes and everyday lives. We can lose ourselves in unknown territories, involving ourselves in the mystery of place. We become anonymous amblers, ghosts, projections in this archived reality. For me, this becoming 'lost' is a form of escapism, and by engaging with this strange, uncanny representation of reality I can reside in the unknown. I find the practice of cyberflâneur-ing in combination with drawing offers up space to reflect on my own perception of reality. I can reside in the mystery and awe of place from a distance, away from grounded reality, and float through digital landscapes, allowing my cyber-self to wander and become lost in the process.

## On location vs the screen.

The Google Map digital reality, as a phenomenon, acts as a replica, a digital representation of physical space. It is an 'almost' reality. Drawing from this type of media invites comparison with drawing on location and can incite feelings of regret or longing because it mimics real life. Now that the Covid-19 lockdowns have ended, should we continue to draw from Google Maps? Is it a valid resource?

At the 2022 Transitus Illustration Symposium, illustrator, and researcher Ksenia Kopalova, asked the intriguing question; do drawings made from Google maps always bear a trace of regret over the insufficiency / inferiority of the virtual experience? (Kopalova 2022). Brian Price, theorist specialising in the intersection of moral philosophy and film, offers that if we regret something we presumably wish that we had done something otherwise (Price 2017). The question implies drawing on location is preferable to drawing from the screen, that the virtual experience is insufficient to being 'there'. It is proposed that drawings made from screen hold regret because we are working from a substitute; we wish to be physically there, and we regret that we are not. Price observes that regret is a 'problem of calculation especially if we suppose regret to be the mischievous relative of virtue' (2017: 32). The word mischievous here suggests the moral complexities of regret are difficult to pin down but are no less intertwined. A feeling of regret does not necessarily mean that an action needs to be wrong to be regretful. If regret is a problem of calculation, it would imply that when I draw from Google Maps, I am regretting my choice in doing so. In most cases I am unable to physically travel to the places I am drawing due to time, destination, and financial cost. There is no real option or choice that I can regret.

There is, however, a longing, a regretful feeling, that I cannot visit these places in person. Can a trace of that regret be seen and felt in the drawings? Perhaps a sense of regret can be felt from the viewer. Once revealed the drawings are inspired by virtual landscapes rather than from memory, or from drawing in situ, there could be unconscious judgement. The idea that regret implies some relation to virtue (Price 2017) is intriguing. Does the question infer that drawing from the screen is less virtuous? Virtue meaning good and or of quality suggests that drawing from the screen, from photographs, has less value. Can drawing from the screen be viewed as the less virtuous, easier option to drawing the 'real thing'? There is also perhaps some relation here to the virtuoso. Price explains the virtuoso 'has special skills, is in possession of more than mere mastery' (2017: 34). I wonder if romantic notions of painting en plein air, as championed by the Impressionists, still permeate modern day perceptions of what makes 'good' art. Feelings of 'regret' in relation to drawing from virtual travel are tricky to unpick and speak to larger questions around artistic practices which employ digital technologies.

Drawing on location plays a key role in my illustration practice, and I often document my drawings in situ by taking a photograph of the sketch with the landscape/buildings in the background. It is upon reflection that I realise I do this not only because I find this way of sharing my work aesthetically pleasing but also because I feel the need to evidence that my drawing was achieved on location. Figure 4 shows my drawing of Exeter cathedral. When I observe this drawing, I remember the weather, who I was with and where we went next. My memory of

drawing is tied to my experience of being there. The oncoming weather acted as a time restraint, and I had to work quickly to commit the cathedral to paper. I selected and edited the visuals which spoke to me, utilising omission, and energetic line. Rain drops worked their way into my drawing, documenting my being 'there'. By photographing my sketch within its conceived location, I am perhaps trying to revive some of its original aura when sharing the image. I am trying to present my drawing as an authentic interpretation of place.

I feel elated when I believe my drawing has been successful in translating the three-dimensional space around me into the restricted flat planes of my sketchbook. This process is something I value and is not something that can be replicated from behind a screen. Artistic practices which engage the act of walking and drawing from a place in real time align with the sentiments of phenomenology. 'There is no substitute for personal experience, for being there' (Tilley 2009: 26). Tilley, professor of Anthropology and Archaeology, expresses the importance of phenomenological fieldwork and how the only way to comprehend landscapes is through embodied experience. Behind the screen the artist is sheltered from the elements, the noise, smells, and tastes, limiting the sensory, physical, and lived experience of a place.

Trevor Borg discusses his practice of walking and drawing in collaboration with the landscape. He examines how his approach aligns with Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* (cited in Borg 2021: 291-306). The theory of being in the now, connected and one with the world, our environment. Borg describes drawing methodologies which directly translate knowledge from the ground up (2021). He states 'By and large, drawings born outside from direct experience of place and the environment cannot be replicated in the studio' (Borg 2021: 296). Even the word 'born' here is noticeably evocative of something that has risen or emerged from a natural, authentic experience. Drawing a place from a screen feels, in comparison, disconnected and removed from the world. There is no direct discourse with the physical place or feeling of 'thereness' (Borg 2021: 294).

In comparison, Figure 5 shows my drawing Salisbury Cathedral using the 3D layer in Google Maps. Utilising this feature allows me to view the cathedral from above, I can virtually fly above the cathedral, pushing, pulling, and twisting my position in the air to find the best position to draw. I have a discourse with the screen, my body remains seated, and I cast my mind into the virtual space. I draw, choosing in this case to omit the navigation buttons and draw as if I were there, floating above the building. Hidden from view, and from the elements of working on location, I can take my time completing my drawing. The 3D mode is not perfect, and there are wobbles and variations in the photogrammetry technology, which can add an uncanny 'oddness'. I can view the cathedral from multiple angles and positions, I can take a break, and come back to the archived reality later.

Walter Benjamin discusses how technology can reveal new information and knowledge: 'Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye' (1999: 230). Benjamin examines the qualities of film and photography and how they can illuminate and reveal new ways of seeing. Google maps offers a range of layers to impart knowledge, including satellite, live traffic, and cycle paths, as well as the option to measure distances. You can view

cities in 3D, captured by photogrammetry technology and the 'see more dates' option in Street View allows you time travel to different years. Google Earth can reveal historical imagery and information on geography, culture, communities, and nature.

There are particular qualities that differentiate Google maps from drawing in situ and from other medias, that I believe qualify the experience as a separate valid entity. The nature of the digital landscape; the 360 views, and panoramic scenes that have been stitched together to create a walk-through experience present a unique warping, fish-eye lens effect. I find this result intriguing, particularly when observing buildings. The Google lens invites exaggeration when drawing, adding character and 3D dimensional qualities. My drawings from Google Street View will often lean into the amplification of perspective lines and curvature of buildings. The difference with being able to navigate, shift and zoom in on different aspects of the building allows for an agency which is not always possible on location or from observing photographs or film. The photogrammetry technology used to present major cities in 3D similarly reveals information, which would not be accessible to view with the naked eye.

Google maps blurs parts of imagery to protect anonymity and privacy, and there can often be accidental digital configurations left floating or jolting in the imagery. Navigation tools and digital idiosyncrasies disrupt the screen and illusion of reality. Figure 6 shows an image from my works for the 'Haunted Landscapes' symposium in Falmouth, titled: *Almost reality: A Virtual Travel series*. In these illustrations I am playing with reality, imagination, and omission, whilst revealing the make-up of the virtual space. My hope is that by including elements of the screen I also reveal something of the reality of the experience of virtual travel, and the strangeness, uncanny, altered spaces it exhibits. By including edits and elements of navigation in my drawings I reveal the origin of the work; there is no illusion that these were completed in situ. This revealing of the Google lens through drawing documents the virtual reality as a separate, valid experience. It could be said that these drawings are more honest, more authentic, and truer to the experience of exploring Google Maps.

The Google lens presents an inspiring resource to draw from; a virtual mirror of our world with new visual heights, angles and exaggerated, stretched aspects of reality, unattainable to view with the naked eye. Perhaps drawing from this replica will always be subject to traces of regret, as it incites comparison with being 'there', yet it feels distinct as its own entity. Contemplating feelings of regret has proven useful in untangling my emotions towards drawing from the screen. Is drawing from the screen *equally* valid? (Kopalova, 2022) Can it ever be an authentic interpretation of place? Regarding my own practice, I have found I favourably value my drawings conceived on location; they hold memory of being present within the sketchbook space. Drawing a place from the screen feels limited in the sense I am drawing from the past, through another lens, even if there is an illusion of agency. Once accepted, however, that the very nature of virtual travel is to be limited, I believe the phenomenon of the digital landscape provides much scope for interpretation and creativity.

## Questions of authorship.

One of the dangers implied from making work, either directly taking or drawing from, Google Street View imagery is one of claiming copyright and authorship.

Note the qualities of Google Street View: the rawness of the photography, the 360-degree walk-through experience allude to authentic representations of reality. In 2008 artist Jon Rafman collected screenshots of images from Google Street View, re-framing, and organising Street View content in a project he calls 'Nine Eyes'. He remarks on the 'supposedly neutral gaze' of Google Street View, 'unspoiled by the sensitivities or agendas of a human photographer' (Rafman, 2009). Rafman's collected images from Street View speak to the joys of navigating and observing the vast contrasts of our world through the lens of Google. His collected imagery portrays a range of uncanny, humorous, and quite often dark or disturbing moments. His observed selection of imagery offers up newfound perspectives and narratives, illuminating and commenting on aspects of modern society, culture, and the human condition. Artist and writer Jenny Ordell takes editing and the organisation of imagery one step further in her Street View and Satellite collections. Her cataloguing process of isolating and composing specific elements such as *125 Swimming Pools* (Ordell 2009 – 2015) make unique visual connections. Unlike Rafman's process, Ordell's collected work implies constraints and set goals in mind, with a scientific approach to cataloguing. Yet both Rafman and Ordell's practices seem to share similar methodologies involving discovery and selection from a readily available online source. Their work requires exploration, and acknowledgement of the online space to find new knowledge and meaning.

Pete Brook explores the question of authenticity, directly comparing Rafman's *Nine Eyes* and Michael Wolf's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, whose work often crosses over, taking compositions from the same Google Street View scene (Brook, 2011). Rafman will include the idiosyncrasies of the Google Street View navigation screen, including the line of copyright. Wolf and Ordell edit, crop, and select the imagery to eliminate elements of the Google lens. There are blogs, websites, and social media profiles which use Google Maps imagery, to catalogue, and create aesthetically pleasing compositions. Brook poses the dilemma of ownership and discusses the range of opinion that surrounds the usage of Google imagery (2011). With the advancement of AI (artificial intelligence) questions around creative ownership continue to create complex grey areas for artists to navigate.

As a practitioner who currently makes work inspired by virtual travel, I find myself referring to Google Street View artist Bill Guffey when asked questions about copyright. He argues 'this is not like painting from someone else's photograph, this is you finding your own composition.' (Google Arts & Culture, no date) Bill Guffey's practice of painting from Google Street View and encouraging others to do so in his 'Virtual Paint Outs' (2009-2018) is championed by Google Arts and Culture in a feature. On his website Bill Guffey offers that 'Google's Legal Team has confirmed that artists *can use images* from Google Street View as reference for creating paintings and drawings, and the artists *can sell these works without fear of copyright infringement claim from Google*' (Guffey, no date). Google Maps arguably invites

collaboration; users are welcome to add their own 360-degree imagery and can create customized maps to share with others.

So, what happens when we draw from the Google Map reality? Employing the analogy of a magician and surgeon Walter Benjamin writes 'The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web.' (1999: 227). Working with this analogy the artist making work from Google Maps Street View is drawing from 'the cameraman's work', i.e., photographs. An artist is deriving source knowledge from the surgeon/photographer and creating work with a sense of 'magic', which I propose in this case to be interpreted as imagination, or non-reality. When I draw from Google Street View, I am drawing from a 'natural distance'; I am distanced geographically and from the time the original image was taken. I am also drawing distantly from reality, fusing what I see on the screen with my own ideas and experience of the now. The screen acts as a window, and the virtual experience is documented through drawing, creating something tangible to an otherwise intangible experience.

Questioning authorship and copyright is important to discuss, however I contend that is more important that we respond, we make, we draw from Google Maps; artists should engage with new technologies. The world is complex, and grey areas of copyright and ownership pervaded by big corporations can incite anxiety around engaging with and interpreting new medias. Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska, in their creative media manifesto, call for 'critics of the world, create!' (2012: 205). They argue for new ways of critiquing and interacting with media, that are less binary, and call to dispel notions of seeing technology as mere instruments. Drawing from Google Maps offers an alternative perspective to the Google reality presented to us. My drawing from Google Maps is not intended to critique, celebrate, or steal from the platform, but rather to interact with the medium and explore possibilities for artistic practices. I view drawing from Google Maps as a conversation I am having, both with myself as an artist to find new ways of drawing, and with the technology itself.

### **Drawing with others.**

It should be noted that like travelling in the real world, one doesn't have to virtual travel alone. My drawings from Google Maps, began only briefly as a solitary activity. I have so far experienced virtual travel as solo explorer, companion traveller, and expedition leader. These three approaches offer different ways of seeing and experiencing the Google Map reality. This section offers a reflection of drawing from Google Maps with others.

The principle of the lone, solitary, traveller feels an important characteristic of the cyberflâneur; to experience the virtual space in mediative contemplation. Anonymity somewhat vanishes when virtual travelling with others. Direct address and talk of navigation disrupts the illusion of the virtual world. Yet, I have found that drawing with another brings exciting new dimensions to exploring Google Street View. Drawing online with friend, and fellow artist Shana Lohrey during the Covid-19 lockdown, created a motivational space to workshop ideas and discover the potential of virtual travel for our art practices. Janine Skyes notes that many authors 'refer to the

potentialities collaborative online activities have in reducing social inhibition, increasing productivity and motivation'. (Sykes 2012: 97) I found when drawing with Shana, I could draw for longer periods of time and talking through our ideas and discoveries encouraged more playful responses.

Shana and I drew, geographically apart in the real world, but live in the same archived Google Street View reality. Google Street View imagery appeared the perfect platform to replicate our previous expeditions as reportage, in situ, artists; allowing us to crop and find our own compositions from which to draw. We utilised the platform to practice painting and drawing techniques as well as workshopping how we could integrate imagination and storytelling. And we would chat, as friends do, often talking about other things than the task at hand. Synchronously drawing with Shana, in a virtual space and time created a shared, live, experience.

Morozov presents a bleak critical view of the flâneur in the age of modern age of technology and questions society's 'fear of solitude' and the new age of 'frictionless sharing' (2012). Morozov's critique on meaningless sharing has merit, however I believe workshopping and experimenting with how we can utilise online sources for drawing, and sharing this knowledge with others has value. We have the agency and means to respond to Morozov's declaration of the *Death of the Cyberflâneur* (2012) to reclaim those parts of the internet we have power over.

In January 2021, as a reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic, I launched a free, online drawing series called *Sketchbook eVenture* using the platforms Google Maps, Instagram, Zoom, and Padlet. This series was created to offer a space for individuals to come together in a live, online setting to experience and draw from virtual travel, specifically Google Maps. Feedback from *Sketchbook eVenture* artists have encouragingly reviewed the sessions as motivating and friendly. The nature of these sessions being 'live' gives the impression of being seen and accountable, while remaining hidden behind the screen. There is still a sense of anonymity; at one with the crowd, yet apart. Alone, behind the screen observation of both the captured Google Street View crowd and the artists themselves can occur. Feedback from others have noted that this way of practising drawing gives more confidence to try new things. The online environment allows for observation, whilst remaining unobserved.

When leading these sessions, I create a controlled workshop with set constraints and timed drawing exercises. These qualities seem in conflict with the values of the cyberflâneur and feel more aligned with the principles of psychogeography as observed by Joseph Hart. Hart contends that by utilising patterns or constraints when walking we can confer 'significance on seemingly insignificant spaces like an empty alley, a fresh tree stump, a set of hidden stairs, a bank sign, an abandoned church.' (2004). The use of rules, of constraints can aid in the art of creativity. Brenda Laurel discusses techniques for orchestrating human responses in her seminal book *Computers as theatre*. Referring to the work of Rollo May, Laurel contends 'limitation – constraints that focus creative efforts – paradoxically increase our imaginative power by reducing the number of possibilities open to us.' (1993: 101). When creating a plan for *Sketchbook eVenture* sessions my aim is inspire creativity, and imagination through gameplay. The instructions I use vary from encouraging the use of different navigational tools or a specific drawing method,

to inspiring an imaginative leap into the digital world. Some examples include *use the timeline feature to observe how a building has changed over time, draw only using continuous line, find a shop to buy some local goods, now draw.*

At times the instructions are a combination of all three of the above. One *Sketchbook eVenture* artist noted 'I never thought of drawing what I saw. These drawings allowed me to not only know a different place, but also to create little stories about them, imagining what was happening there.' (Anonymous 2022). It is encouraging to see artists respond to Google Maps in a variety of ways and utilise the visuals to prompt imaginative stories beyond literal interpretations.

During the lockdowns of January 2021, the *Sketchbook eVenture* weekly workshops would average an estimated 50 participants at a time. Currently, at the time of writing, our monthly sessions average around 6-8 participants. The significant dip in participation implies a need to move away from the screen. Orr and Shreeve discuss the importance of 'materiality' as a signature teaching practice in art and design education (Orr and Shreeve 2017: 94). This concept is challenged with online art courses and workshops. I understand the want and the need to move towards in-person activities post-pandemic where interaction between others and the 'materiality' of artistic practices can be more greatly felt.

Although we have dropped in numbers, I have discovered that I am able to connect more meaningfully online with a smaller group of artists. The vast numbers of the previous sessions made it difficult to get to know individuals and allow time for general chatter outside of the directed workshop. The accessibility of Google Maps, and the raw, documentary 360-degree views it exhibits allows for the *Sketchbook eVenture* sessions to mirror some of the sensibilities of drawing on location, whilst offering a plethora of different landscapes and perspectives to draw from.

### **Drawing conclusions.**

Questioning the dangers of technology aligns with Heidegger's concern for mis-understanding technology as separate from us, as an abstraction which can lead to seeing nature as a resource; 'Technology is therefore no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing' (Heidegger 1993: 318). In review of Google Earth Virtual Reality (GEVR), Brooke Belisle proposes 'GEVR might also analogize something like a dynamic production of being-in-a-world and worlding' (Belisle 2020). Here Belisle references Heidegger's concept [of being-in-the-world, an existential idea which emphasises the deep interconnected condition of our existence within the world](#). Belisle's statement offers a hopeful alternative and perhaps suggests technology can help us to see and understand our place and connection within the world, rather than uprooting ourselves from it. So, what are we doing when we draw from digital landscapes? I argue the act of drawing reclaims some ownership and understanding of virtual spaces, of the dangers and pitfalls but also the new perspectives and opportunities technology can offer.

On watching film, Walter Benjamin argues 'The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one' (1999: 234). When drawing from the Google lens I am aware of my position as a distanced observer, and my drawings slip between drawing the screen, and omitting the screen completely. I project myself there imagining the atmosphere, and sense of physical space and there is a discourse that takes place with the screen. The book *Reportage Illustration, Visual Journalism*, states 'A key difference between the camera lens and the eye is that artists directly interpret what they see through drawing; drawing is both a thinking and a physical process.' (Embury, 2018:10). The drawer is not an absent-minded examiner. Where the Google lens is documenting the world, artists continually and rightly respond to this version of reality, offering up newfound perspectives.

I agree with Morozov's observation that the 'tempo' of the web today is different, and some online platforms make cyberflâneur-ing 'less likely' (2012). However, I submit the cyberflâneur is not dead, and there is still hope for romantic notions of adventure and magic to be found online. I have discovered Google Maps to be an exciting platform to observe and draw from the world. The anonymity of being an artist-cyberflâneur encourages observation, reflection, and moments of clarity, not always felt or achievable when drawing on location. Drawing from Google Maps is not a substitute for drawing in situ, it offers something else, a new lens for artists to explore.

Google Street View is significantly promoted as a service which requires 'collective efforts' (Google, no date). There is implied co-ownership with an invitation to contribute to the platform, and be inspired by it, beyond its functions of navigation. I have found drawing from this virtual world with others creates a motivating, engaged, live experience to workshop ways of making work. There is also the potential for us to directly compare our virtual adventures with our in-person ones, examining the way virtual landscapes integrate with our understanding of real spaces and how this affects the way we draw.

I virtually-wander digital planes, pausing to draw when a scene captures my imagination and curiosity. This process reveals something about my own lens as an artist, what draws me in and takes hold. The Google lens provides a distanced form of travel which reveals new ways of seeing and exploring landscape. Technology can come with dangers of reliance and ignorance, and can be subject to limited experiences and controlled, curated spaces. Yet, I believe that by creating images inspired by these technologies we can continually question the virtual world as part of our reality and offer another perspective to the phenomenon of virtual travel. There is magic to be found in this vast library of picture making possibilities.

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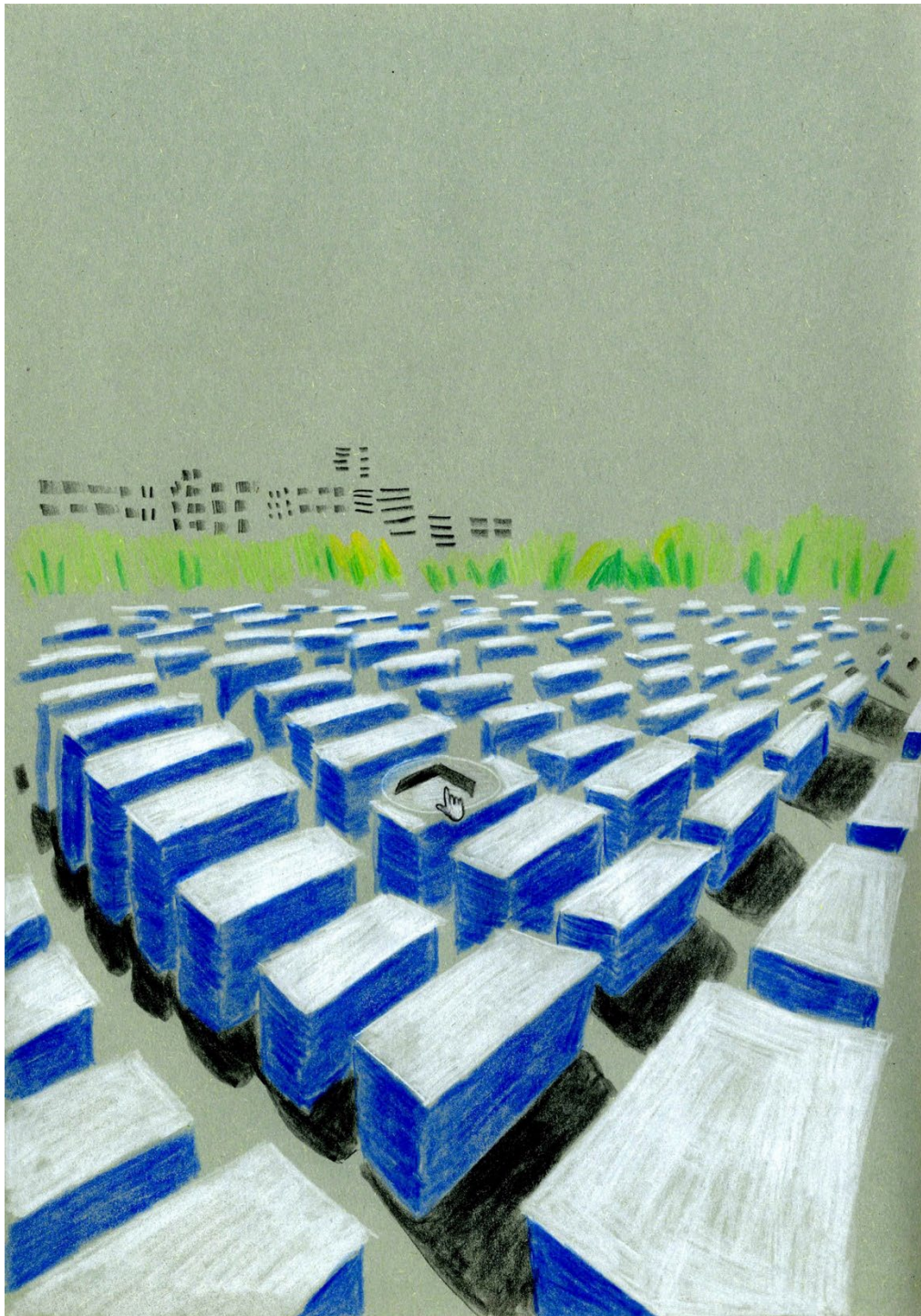


Figure 1: Georgie Bennett, *Memorial, Berlin - A Virtual Travel Sketchbook*, 2020. Coloured pencil on sugar paper. 210 mm x 297 mm. Private collection: Georgie Bennett. © Georgie Bennett.

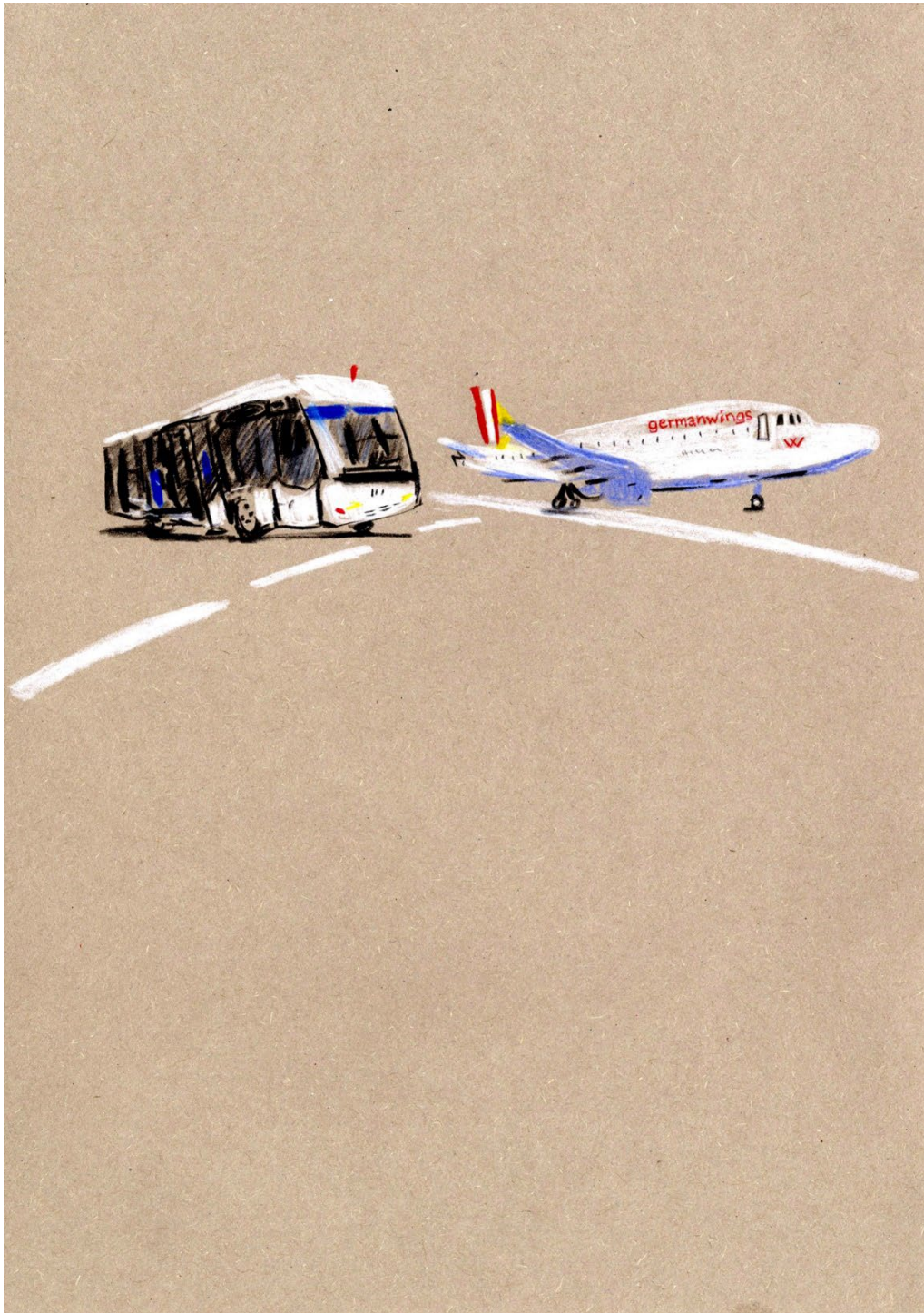


Figure 2: Georgie Bennett, *Airport, Berlin - A Virtual Travel Sketchbook*, 2020. Coloured pencil on sugar paper. 210 mm x 297 mm. Private collection: Georgie Bennett. © Georgie Bennett.



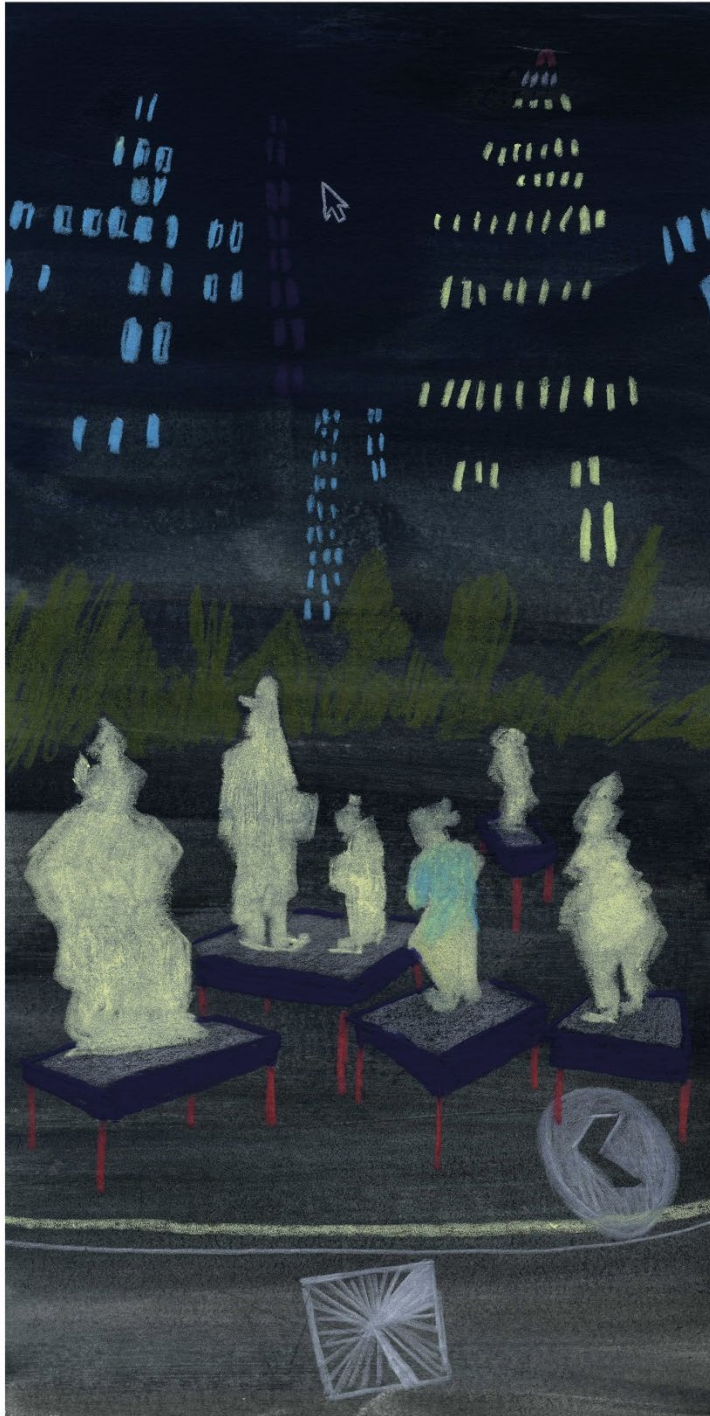
**Figure 3:** Georgie Bennett, *Chefs at Night, Berlin - A Virtual Travel Sketchbook*, 2020. Coloured pencil on sugar paper. 210 mm x 297 mm. Private collection: Georgie Bennett. © Georgie Bennett.



Figure 4: Georgie Bennett, *Exeter Cathedral in sketchbook*, 2022. Pencil and watercolour on paper. 210 mm x 297 mm. Private collection: Georgie Bennett. © Georgie Bennett.



**Figure 5:** Georgie Bennett, *Salisbury Cathedral in 3D mode*, 2022. Charcoal pencil on paper. 297 mm x 420 mm. Private collection: Georgie Bennett. © Georgie Bennett.



**Figure 6:** Georgie Bennett, *In Seoul*, work from *Almost Reality: A Virtual Travel series*, 2023. Pencil, pastel, gouache, and watercolour on paper. 210 mm x 297 mm. Private collection: Georgie Bennett. © Georgie Bennett.