

ROVING PICTURES:
snapshots

edited by Mehrdad Hadighi

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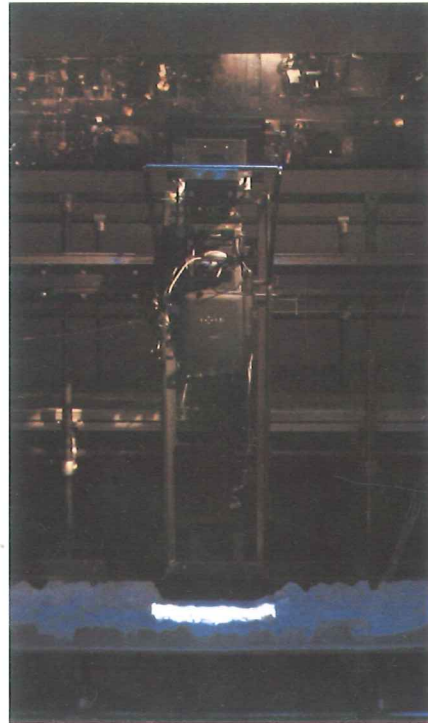
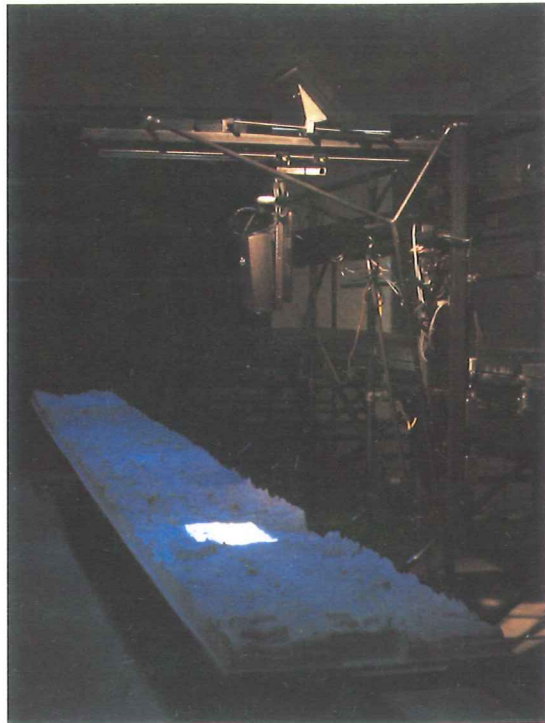
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Introduction

At first glance Roving Pictures is nothing more than a precise documentation of the Tanaka Kikai metalworks factory in Osaka, Japan. Extending the work-floor of the factory into the Burchfield Penney Art Center, Torben Berns' and John Zissovici's installation has multiplied the possible readings of the factory and its plan. In the precision of its execution, the installation engages numerous fields of inquiry: architecture, computer code programming, photography, robotics, theory, urban planning, and videography. Here in this monograph, the collection of essays, the snapshots, are meant to extend the possible readings of the Roving Pictures installation. The essays, each grounded within the intellectual particularities of a distinct discipline are intended to open new contexts for the work.

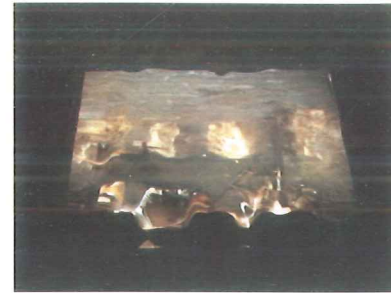
Mehrdad Hadighi

ROVING PICTURES, snapshots is inspired by *Roving Pictures*, an installation by Torben Berns and John Zissovici at the Burchfield Penney Art Center, Buffalo, New York, January-March 2003.



The Labour of Lifting, the Work of Describing and the Enactment of Surfaces: documentation of the memory and invention of the topic

Torben Berns



ROVING PICTURES is first and foremost a project of documentation of Tanaka Kikai, a metal works factory in Osaka, Japan. The factory occupies a substantial site along the Shiinashi River. Made up of 5 large sheds and a number of auxiliary buildings and spaces, the factory is entirely described by a series of cranes and tracks. In the early formulation of the project we coined the following description of the project's ambition: the project would literally follow the logic of the factory in constructing a topology, as well as, a topography of the site. The topology would be constructed through the objective mapping of the site offered by the original cranes themselves. In addition, we knew the effect which results from filming the floor while moving, then playing back the footage of the floor on a camera monitor while moving the camera to correspond with the original filming-something easily demonstrated with any video camera. What we were doing was nothing more than an elaborate attempt to recreate (1) a scaled version of the factory, (2) a mannered version of the factory floor as regularly experienced by the crane operator, and (3) a combination of the first 2 objectives-the scaled factory and the view from up high looking down-modified by the effect of delay and re-presentation: the effect of the instant of the camera against the backdrop of its subject, problematized by both its obvious alignment and obvious misalignment in time and space.

Let us take these topics and reconstruct the process for ourselves. Gantry cranes describe the perimeter of the sheds and are linked by a system of tracks. The cranes themselves are the first constructions of the factory and establish the origins as well as the means of the factory. This is the topos of the factory. It is the cranes which first clear the site and then through their Herculean actions, make and remake the configuration of objects which litter the site. That configuration at any moment contains the history of the site as much as it reveals its own topology. The topology then is the history of the site seen from the perspective of its future possibilities, both as a principle of that history and as a demonstration of that history. At the moment when the factory ceases to function and things are ceased to be moved around, the final configuration of objects is recorded. This is the last task or "work" of the cranes. The hoist is replaced by a camera, and the third dimension of the cranes' axis of effect is silenced (as much as it becomes invisible). The movement of the hoist is replaced by the spontaneous movement of light and captured by the recording device. The camera is a video camera, which means that what is captured are moments, or instances, arranged in a sequence at a constant rate. The crane, now limited to movement in two dimensions, is further restricted in that its natural movement is now differentiated into sequential movements along the axis of effect: lengthwise, then crosswise with respect to the site. The captured images, when played back at the same rate in the same sequence, are what we call "the video" and form the first document of the factory. In fact, it is the next "topos" for the work of the factory.

"The video", painfully narrow and idiosyncratic, is used to construct a spatial montage which we are calling "the photograph". The photograph, which itself is wonderfully recognizeable in both its intent and subject, is for us only a means to produce the literal landscape. We of literal mind and means, are interested in it purely for its light value. What is at one moment the "topos" (and topic) for a conversation about what the factory "looks like", becomes the fodder for creating the topic of the third dimension. Light values from the preceding topos (the photograph) are used to produce the new topos: what we see here as the topography of the factory floor.

Light, the spontaneously moving record of the hoist which originally littered and configured the objects strewn over the factory floor, is now coded and assigned a value. The topography only alluded to (but easily imagined) in the photograph is now rendered a topology through a simple scale of light values and imagining that bright is down and dark is up. A configuration identical to the original crane intercedes here and a robotic router, moving in 3 axis begins to carve a block of foam into a site. The spontaneous movement of light is materialized briefly as the visible movement of the router only to become light again in the next configuration. The product of this last hinging operation is a topography no longer imagined but written by the router. And once again the topology has moved elsewhere awaiting the return of light, be it shadow (the most promiscuous inciter of meaning) or a return of the original light which produced the topos in the first place. The first situation, that of static shadow, is "the site" as it is revealed to our eyes as they roam and wander over the site. Depth, and its reassuring physicality reveals itself more or less recognizeably and we are drawn to this new landscape as to a site of possibility. This strange landscape sponsors and seeds imagination if only to incite us to seek the principle of its existence, if not its history. And in fact it is crucial that our eye roam over it and our point of view be anything but 90 degrees above it; further, the light can be any configuration except that which would remove its depth. Imagine a configuration of lighting which removes all shadow and hence all depth, and one has in fact the light originally captured by the video camera. Hence the marriage of the depth of the world to the promiscuity of thought in shadows.

Consider the second situation which is the return of the same light which produced the topos in the first place. Enter the projection of the original light, or the replacement of the router/hoist by the spontaneous movement of light. We should recall at this point that the video is nothing but a plurality of instances shot at a particular rate in a particular sequence. If the viewpoint from which each instance was shot, is changing, then to reunite the light value with its physical manifestation and to project the image from the same viewpoint as the original, one would have to move from one viewpoint to the next in the same sequence and at the same speed as the original. The projection of images then requires an apparatus to reproduce the crane on which the original video camera was mounted. As the apparatus scans over the landscape, light seems to pour like liquid into waiting receptacles. This phenomenon is of course an attribute of the bright spots-the presence of light coded to produce depressions partially intersecting with that light itself. The phenomenon is neither a function of a robot out of sync or of the conflation of corresponding shapes due to two different systems of representation. When the apparatus is perfectly in-sync with the video, the objects which are moving relative to the camera, appear to remain perfectly still. But the surface on which they are being projected is not partly to the same fantasy as the video. The object when it first appears in the video does not lie in exactly the same spatial configuration as it does in the site, but at some moment it will! And when it does the other objects will not. This is not a function of inaccuracy on the part of the robot or the puppeteer. This is a function of the gap between the video and its multiplicity of perspectives (30 perspectives per second), the model (approximately 180 perspectives), and the singularity of our roving eyes. The point here is the manifest location of the object of inquiry-the real topic or topos. Clearly it has something to do with memory. Clearly there is a relation between "the site", "the photograph", "the video", and "the factory". But each term consistently reveals itself as a topic only by grace of a preceding construction. Moreover, each term reveals itself as a fecund site only by virtue of a highly specific operation as well as an entirely fantastic leap of translation. The invention (or for us, the reprogramming) lies in the demonstration of both.

One might put this speculation in the context of the factory's own history. Ironically the factory folded itself through labour/management struggles as much as a shifting economy. The workers, sponsored by brotherhoods in Poland and Italy, took as the general principle of its situation, the ideas of class struggle and material historicism and under that banner sought to take care of its own and its future. Yet the re-programming which results is neither generated from, nor accounted for by the espoused conceptual framework. The factory did indeed seek some sort of documentation of its existence and its history. What you see here is that documentation. The topology of the site, if that word can be borrowed from the theoretical ingenuities of material historicism, is indeed played out here as a principle of history as well as its demonstration. But the result is as unsettling as light being poured into a vessel. The site exists in memory and indeed can only be actualized through work. There is a specific commitment and labour required to understand the factory, and in the end one is undoubtedly required to keep the crane moving so to speak and construct the new "topos": its reprogramming.

Roving Pictures: A BUILT SITUATION

John Zissovici



-n. **situation** location: place: position: momentary state: condition: a set of circumstances, a juncture: a critical point. -*Chambers Concise Dictionary*

ROVING PICTURES is the built condition of a juncture, the critical point of the joining of a gantry crane and a video camera above a factory floor in Osaka, a momentary state endlessly re-built moment by moment.

Originally conceived in answer to the question 'how does the factory see itself?', the video recorded by a video camera mounted on a scanning crane reveals little about the factory when replayed on the camera's LCD screen. Not until the screen itself is set in motion by the viewer, attempting to 'keep up' with the image, that its real value becomes evident. As the moving screen recreates the motion of the crane, wheel time becomes reel-to-reel time, and transforms the videotape into a tape-measure of the crane's displacement in real time. For the time being the video registers only the crane, its sounds, motion, distance traveled, all in tape length and 'out of frame'.

The video frame becomes the scaling unit of measure for the construction of an image. The raw material for this 'view' of the factory is the 'captured frame', one every sixty-five frames, the number of frames needed to produce a complete and exact catalog of everything visible to the crane operator. As successive stills crane views are linked to assemble the frame-mosaic of the work surface, an unanticipated pyramid of 45 degree cone of vision rises with each successive still, its apex, a precise, impossible point, some 512 feet above the factory floor, the height needed to take in the 425 foot wide shed floor in one glance, and more than 494 feet above the original video-crane travel plane.

The irreconcilable absence of roofs from this view anticipates the demolition of the factory, and the subsequent degradation of its work surface into mere 'real estate'. The unexplained flight of the cranes from these images is the wish-dream denial of their ultimate fate: to be yanked out from one end of the shed, and sent crashing to the ground. Only their aura remains as horizontally blurred pixelation, the medium's registration of its own stilling of the now absent camera-crane.

To escape the dead-end seduction of the 32 foot long photograph, the image is digitally induced to mutate, along the inverse lines of its own light values, into a three dimensional virtual model, embedded as pure information in the memory banks of a digital router. The router, set against the clean slate of a rectangular block of high density foam, like the gantry crane, faced with the empty sheds in the first days of the factory, traces into the foam, line by line, the shape of a new surface where another kind of work will take place.

Hundreds of hours and nearly 10,000 feet of router travel later, with more than two third of the foam turned to fine dust, a world emerges where light on a whim has been relegated to the lowest depths, its crater like impressions marking those rare moments when light finds its way into the shed. For the most part shadows rule as cliffs and peaks, and the line between light and dark cuts sharp ridges into the landscape. A blue light permeates every pore, casting shadows that obliterate all known sense of scale. "Here in an evil state of erosion and desolation the heritage of the ruining of life that in the end will consume even the stones has been depicted" (W.G. Sebald).

In order to reassemble the parallel lines of factory manifestations, a robot-mounted video projector retraces the path-time of the camera-crane and finally unscrolls the line of moments collected by the video camera at the Osaka factory, back onto this light excavated surface. Under it's bright projective gaze the model is reduced to pure undulating screen shaped by the image it receives. The tracking projected image illuminates the links between landscape and the stilled motion of the crane. While the eye attempts to establish a hold on this shifting spectacle, the passing video continuously reels in the peripheral landscape, only to abandon it moments later, forever contaminated by its own after-image.

As the scanning video light displaces the blue shadows, pouring onto the corresponding landscape features, shimmering views of ruined foundations and access pits filled with black water, bright blue, orange and green tarps whose classical folds reveal almost nothing, rusted oil drums, barrel bases, smelting cauldrons and wire coils, with their distinct circular clarity, along with wheel-barrows, wood palettes, piping piles and empty boxes, interspersed with countless unrecognizable remnants of industrial activity, some no larger than a coin or as vast as the luminous nebulae of pigeon droppings that unexpectedly fill hundreds of frames in a row, the endless cycle of silent mutations that precede the moment finally opens into the fluid shape of a BUILT SITUATION.

"The process then would not determine the central configuration of the work, but would only be its threshold, to be crossed the moment it is drawn - more a rite of purification than an architectural structure." -Michel Foucault - *Death and the Labyrinth*

Contributors



Torben Berns, Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Architecture at Cornell University, is the author of various articles on Japanese 20thC. architecture, and a contributor to *Kenchiku Bunka's* Retrospective on Japanese Modern Architecture.

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John Zissovici, Associate Professor in the Department of Architecture at Cornell University, is the co-author of *The World Outside*, and author of site-specific installations at Phoenix Museum of Art, Johnson Museum of Art (Ithaca, NY) and Hartell Gallery on the Cornell campus, which he also renovated. His interests concern the folds between architecture's varied manifestations.

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