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Into the Glitch

Natalie Birinyi
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Into the Glitch

by

Natalie Birinyi

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Introduction: The Road Home

For years now, whenever I can’t sleep, I’ve wandered the world on Google Earth. It began when I lived in Guatemala, far from friends and family. I would look at my parents’ house, the forest behind it where I take my dog, the road I walked to my best friend’s house. It wasn’t the fact of the places that I found comforting, and it wasn’t as though it transported me in some way emotionally back home. The eye of Google Earth is almost entirely unpopulated by humanity, and the view on the places I knew well was distant and unfamiliar. It also made me complicit in our collective panopticon, spying on the people I love most. And yet it soothed me, and I drifted off to sleep every night in blue light.

It took me a while to realize it was not the fact of the places that I found so enthralling, but the distortions in their rendering. The forest whose smells I knew in my bones, where I could trace the seasons in buds and mushrooms, became on zooming in an abstracted blackish blob bounded by sharp blue lines that delineated roadways. On the map, the place I felt so acutely became pure abstraction. And that made me feel like it was safe. Surveillance hadn’t caught up to it. Google hadn’t eaten it. It had slipped through the cracks of our technological overlords and could still be mine, at least for a while.

Eventually I found ways to manipulate the machine to break on my command. I then photographed the results through screenshots. On some level, I think of this as a joke: Google is one of the most powerful entities in the world, controlling the flow of information and our brains on such minute levels that we are largely unaware of it; but I tricked the program. I coerced it from its stated goal of showing its impression of reality, into making me something I found beautiful, that I could use for my purposes. On another level it’s tragic: I feel stuck in the machine, and my method of fighting back is utterly flaccid. It doesn’t stop the machine from
churning\(^1\). It does, however, preserve what I think of as ephemeral moments: the glitches in the machine, the faults in surveillance, the fractures in which there is freedom and potentiality. Upon returning to New York, I made my first work using this imagery, *GLITCH (the road home)*, which was installed at my old university, outside my old office - another old home. The distortions of the program I captured and blew up worked with the architecture of the space to create a fractured representation of the road to my parents’ house, as I returned to a home that couldn’t be the same as when I left it. It is only upon reflection that I see how much this seemingly intuitive work mirrored my psyche at the time. I learned from this piece how found imagery could be made so intensely personal. Though my subject matter has changed, Google Earth has become central to my practice, and these found images continue to proliferate and deepen in their meanings.

![GLITCH (the road home)](image)

Figure 1: Natalie Birinyi, *GLITCH (the road home)*, 2015, installed at the LeRoy Neiman Gallery

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\(^1\) Dave Eggers’s *The Circle* is a great fictional but plausible trajectory of how social media and surveillance could become (even more) universal and fascistic. And it was written in 2013, when the idea of Trump as president was still unfathomable.
I. Cyborgs and Skyscrapers

When I returned to New York in 2015, with its attendant winter weather and walk ups, a long dormant knee injury exploded in pain. I continued using Google Earth to make photos of glitches, but the meaning had transformed. Now I felt trapped in my body, and the program allowed me to float through my world as I couldn’t do physically, unencumbered, disembodied, a ghost. I thought about Donna Haraway and imagined myself as her cyborg: “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.”² Her 1985 text *A Cyborg Manifesto* is a thought experiment, as she says, “in the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe a world without end. The cyborg incarnation is outside salvation history.”³ I began to think of myself as part of the machine and imagined the world that would grow from this hybridity: bodiless, genderless, free of waste, material, and gravity. It became a kind of future projection. Whenever I found a glitch in the program, it felt like an entrance to an alternate dimension of reality, where corporations didn’t hold all the power, where cyborg me had the ability to birth a new world.

The biggest turning point in my work came when I found a way to infiltrate skyscrapers on Google Earth. Stairs were the hardest thing for my knee, so I became obsessed with height, and trying to figure out ways to talk about tall buildings. I photographed all around them, but nothing quite captured what I was after. The glitches first happened accidentally. I was zoomed all the way in to a slice of sidewalk, watching as texture dissolved into triangles of code, and an errant swipe took me through the walls of a skyscraper. The program didn’t have time to register what had happened, and I found myself inside the building, in the unrendered innards. Looking down through the camera eye, the phallic tower became a vaginal tunnel, the walls melted away

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³ Haraway, 457.
into abstract lines delineating basic structure, and guts were filled with luminous, colorful shapes that often had no visible basis in reality. I was hooked. I knew immediately this imagery would sustain me as an artist for years, and I catalogued in furiously, across New York and the Western Hemisphere\(^4\), to the tune of easily 20,000 screenshots.

I make these images by slipping inside buildings and exploring them thoroughly. I zoom in and out, slide back and forth through walls, try to creep between lines. If I stray too far from the core of the building, the program recalibrates and kicks me out to the street. It can feel like a video game - I see a color or image I want to capture, but can only get to it through a series of specific moves through the building, and often I have to try over and over, perfecting my movements, to get the angle I want. Sometimes I photograph a building and return to find the imagery I loved gone. Sometimes I go through the photographs I have already taken and zoom in and out of them, finding new ideas and watching the imagery break down further. I never adjust

\(^4\) For this project that could encompass the globe, it felt important to define some rules, the largest of which is I only photograph places I have been. Technology also imposed limitations on me - the renderings of Asia on Google Earth are not nearly as sophisticated as they are in the West, so I can’t access Singapore or Bangkok, for example, in the same way. I can only speculate, but I imagine this is due to some sort of invisible corporate / political border.
the colors on the photographs, I let the program determine them, and I always try to keep my camera oriented on the grid. It would be easy to find dramatic angles by twisting the camera around, but somehow keeping the integrity of the orientation is crucial to me. The drama, then, is created by the program, and only captured by me. I find this process hypnotizing. I try not to do it too often because I get sucked in for hours, wandering the machine wilderness. It is dangerously seductive.

Though I was driven to skyscrapers for emotional reasons and committed for the pure aesthetic pleasure the imagery gave, as I began investigating this new way of working many possible meanings began unraveling. The skyscraper has been a contentious culture force for millennia, and famously makes an appearance in the Bible\(^5\). In the story of Babel, the people of Shinar endeavored to build a tower: “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”\(^6\) “The Lord” sees this tower and is essentially threatened, saying, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.”\(^7\) Here, already we see the tower as a symbol of human ambition, ego, and folly, and results in the builders being scattered “over the face of the whole earth”\(^8\). The skyscraper brought them together, and then drives them apart. In a strange parallel, economist Andrew Lawrence identified a “Skyscraper Effect” wherein the completion of a new tallest building in the world will inaugurate an economic recession in its country. He theorizes that the building of these record-breaking structures indicates that:

\(^5\) I feel a little funny using the Bible here as a non-Christian but am just going to sidestep religious and political implications and address it the foundational piece of literature of Western thought, which I don’t think can be denied.
\(^6\) Genesis 11:4 New International Version.
\(^7\) Genesis 11:5 New International Version.
\(^8\) Genesis 11:8 New International Version.
...the country’s economy can be viewed as one that has expanded so much that the likelihood of a bust in the near future is high. Hence, the building of a gigantic skyscraper indicates that the expansionary economy has peaked and needs to correct itself by going through a recessionary phase in the near future.9

Like Icarus, humans can’t resist reaching for the sky, and can’t escape getting burnt.

When I began looking for skyscrapers on Google Earth, I filtered largely by height, as a building needs to be sufficiently tall to trigger the effect I am interested in. Through this unscientific method of filtering, I found that the tallest skyscrapers in Manhattan are almost exclusively financial institutions, government buildings, high end real estate, and media conglomerates10 - the vast power structures that seem to rule the world. Now, when the program glitched, I felt I had cheekily infiltrated a bank, denied the tower its power, and turned the phallic palace of capitalism into a tunnel through which I could make my escape.

II. Bird’s Eye

Throughout the wandering / zooming / glitching / photographing process I employ to make my source imagery, the true constant is the bird’s eye view. This is the drone, satellite, surveillance eye that tracks and catches; that is increasingly, inevitably, unavoidable. Hito Steyerl’s “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective” has been enormously helpful in unpacking what that view means, and how it elicits the feeling I couldn’t quite name but was looking for in my work. She describes the defining condition of the present as “groundlessness,” which drone perspective literalizes by causing people to lose sight of the horizon.11 She goes on to contrast this with Renaissance linear perspective, in which the eye was led to a stable horizon line. The Renaissance was a period marked by the rise of rationality,

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10 Trump Tower might illicitly be all of the above!
order, and reason, and the stable horizon line was a representation of those values\textsuperscript{12}. When instrumentalized in navigation, the horizon led to the spread of Capitalism and colonialism around the world, expanding Western hierarchical views and creating the capitalist global market\textsuperscript{13}. Drone perspective, however, puts you in a constant state of free fall, which actualizes the dislocation I feel in everyday life but couldn’t quite seem to put my finger on:

Paradoxically, while you are falling, you will probably feel as if you are floating - or not even moving at all. Falling is relational - if there is nothing to move toward, you may not even be aware that you’re falling. If there is no ground, gravity might be low and you’ll feel weightless. Objects will stay suspended if you let go of them. Whole societies around you may be falling just as you are. And it may actually feel like perfect stasis- as if history and time have ended and you can’t even remember that time ever moved forward… Traditional modes of seeing and feeling are shattered. Any sense of balance is disrupted. Perspectives are twisted and multiplied. New types of visuality arise.\textsuperscript{14}

We are always falling, but with no horizon sometimes you can’t tell, or it just feels like floating. We are groundless, disoriented, awash in a sea of information and media and capital that you can never really see all at once.

Steyerl goes on to say that without a stable horizon, “comes the departure of a stable paradigm of orientation, which has situated concepts of subject and object, of time and space, throughout modernity.”\textsuperscript{15} While the visual arts have long searched for and created different types of space and ways of seeing, culturally, the dominant mode of visuality is undergoing a transition phase from the first person, i.e., the view from one’s eyes, to received perspective, the view though the augmented eye of technology. We traverse the world now looking down, staring at our phones to make sense of what is before us. Information passed down by satellites becomes

\textsuperscript{13} Steyerl, 14.
\textsuperscript{14} Steyerl, 13.
\textsuperscript{15} Steyerl, 14.
an extension of our eyes. Sometimes, such as when trying to traverse a foreign city with unfamiliar text, this can be a blessing. Other times, I have found myself lost, trying to decode a map on my phone, and when I look up, I find the street sign I am seeking is right in front my face.

For better or for worse, looking at the world at a 90 degree angle opens up possibilities otherwise invisible. It changes your body physically, whether it is just a crick in your neck from looking at your phone or an all over sensation of immunity to gravity. I am reminded of two art works, Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Bronx Floors: Threshole* and Trisha Brown’s *Man Walking down the Side of a Building*, both of which use familiar actions that become strange through their vertical orientation.

Figure 3: Gordon Matta-Clark, *Bronx Floors: Threshole*, 1972

Figure 4: Trisha Brown, *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building*, 1970
In his series of *Thresholds*, Matta-Clark cut holes in the floor underneath a doorway, using the door’s proportion as his template, and repeating the action on several floors. The effect, I imagine, was that it seemed the door opened to a vertical dimension. As you folded your body to look down and saw through several layers of floor, it would seem almost possible to step in. As someone who has an extreme involuntary reaction to heights – even thinking about this piece gives me sweaty palms, a racing heart, and general nausea – I imagine I would have felt a tension between invitation and bodily revulsion. I could visually float, and metaphorically project myself into this new world, but my body would have kept my firmly grounded. His term “threshole” echoes this idea: it is both hole and threshold, the former an abyss, the latter an opportunity. The viewer oscillates between these two poles, and between trusting the sensations of eyes versus body, able to truly believe neither.

Brown’s piece is a literal step into a new orientation, as a harnessed performer simply walks, facing and parallel to the ground, down the side of a building. In this work, it is impossible to be swept up by artifice as the mechanism of support is so visible, and the performer’s actions are so unsure and deliberate, it looks like they are trying to find their footing on a foreign planet. Whereas Matta-Clark’s work is more about the physical effect on the body, I read Brown’s work as a kind of proposal. She opens up a new way of looking, thinking, and moving, and it is up to the viewer to invest it with meaning. Though these ideas might be in opposition, I aim to make space for both in my work - the physical specter of falling and the bodily reaction it engenders, as well as an intellectual proposal of opening new pathways through which we can move into new spaces, thoughts, and ways of being. As I have developed my project, I have found it is crucial to have something visible in the photograph that is identifiably “real” – cars, street signs, a building – that place it for the viewer and does not allow the image to reduce itself to pure abstraction. That way, the viewer must oscillate between the physical
perspective of looking down and the wondrousness of color and unidentifiable form that create a new, fluid, reality with all its attendant metaphorical possibilities.

III. Observational Abstraction

As of yet, I have spoken mostly of photography, as that is what this project was for at least five years. It is only in the past several months that I have stepped into painting, reluctantly, then furiously. I had collected these images for years, I worshipped them in a strange way, but didn’t quite know how to use them. I found if I tried to print them as photographs, they felt vapid and dead. Trying to fix them through photography resulted in mere copies, with all the dynamism and mutability that they had as images made of light flattened and fixed. And so I decided to bring them into the world, it had to be through a separate medium, which would allow me to make them as they feel to me.

Figure 5: Natalie Birinyi, *New York Times Building (Skyscraper in New York, New York)*, 2018
I paint these works directly from my phone and think of them as observational abstraction. I make my paintings in the same proportion as my phone screen, and begin the drawing by scaling up mathematically. Once the shape is defined, I paint from observation, visually exploring the landscape to understand it better, just as I would in nature. I watch my subject change with light throughout day, and sometimes will have to revisit sections after the color shift of sunset.

When I paint I am constantly zooming in and out, getting information about details and then seeing the image as a whole, trying to construct it as faithfully as possible. I feel like I am a denizen of the world I am creating, that I am at once creating and becoming what I paint. The plein air painter Josephine Halvorson describes observational painting as a kind of communing with your subject:

The best case scenario is when I’m painting, it feels as if I’m feeling that object through the brushstroke, or I’m reimagining what it means to be that object, in paint, so a lot of what I’m after is this correspondence between the object and the paint mediated through me.16

Figure 6: Josephine Halvorson, Road Drain, 2017

16 Phong Bui, “JOSEPHINE HALVORSON with Phong Bui” (The Brooklyn Rail, 2011)
With the very first painting I made, I felt like finally I understood how to communicate with these images, that I could understand them or somehow become part of them in paint. Thus my hand paradoxically pulled me closer to the cyborg world.

Reconstructing digital spaces is a way of trying to physicalize them in a tangible way. Though the paintings are often bound by sharp lines which I make using tape, within each section the paint is lovingly touched and smoothed until it is pure direction and speed. This contrast between the sharp lines made by tape and the smoothness of the bounded sections is at the emotional core of this work. I often think of the softness of my gradients and open spaces as “sky” or “sunset”, though they are literally neither. But clouds, sunsets, and gradients hold a very particular place in my mind – they are so earnest as to be banal; they are natural but feel like advertising language. Seemingly every app uses a gradient now, so this natural effect of the sky has been thoroughly coopted as computer language. In my paintings these spaces represent (not evoke) both natural, sublime wonder and digital design. By taking these radiant spaces and cutting them off abruptly with sharp edges, I hope to introduce a bit of menace to the work. Straight lines (especially in parallel) are not found in our nature and render these works otherworldly.

At a distance, these works might seem mechanical, but up close, the hand is evident. The hand, to me, is the warmth that allows them to escape the fate of the printed copies. It is analogous to an idea by the artist Do Ho Suh, who made a colored pencil rubbing of every inch of his apartment before he moved out.

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17 From a cursory inventory of my phone this includes Instagram, Hulu, the App store, Lyft, Files, Safari, Audible, Messages, Podcasts, Weather, Tide, Calm, Find iPhone, and Tips.
Suh explains that in his native Korean, the words rubbing and loving could be mistaken, and he sees this linguistic slip as indicative of their proximity. He says, “I think the gesture of rubbing is a very loving gesture.” By rubbing every inch of his longtime home with a colored pencil, he both honors it and comes to know every detail in the space. He also takes a place that is physically impermanent - the apartment was going to be renovated after he moved out - and extends its life by making it into a work of art. With my paintings, I hope to take spaces that never really were, and even digitally are ephemeral, and invest them with enough observation and care that they become so real you can fall in.

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18 “Do Ho Suh: ‘Rubbing / Loving’” (Art21, Extended Play, December 9, 2016)
IV. Intoxication

The resulting paintings are full of sharp lines, smooth strokes, grids and nets. The perspective is unstable, the compositions are off-kilter, and at their best I hope they make you feel like you are falling, groundless, floating. I hope that their colors seduce, but once the viewer is sucked in they feel caught in a spiderweb. The colors are like candy, often stereotypically feminine, and double back to the idea of stripping the patriarchal associations from a skyscraper. David Batchelor speaks eloquently of our cultural obsession with whiteness and devaluing of color, which he calls Chromophobia, saying color has become coded as, “some ‘foreign’ body - usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological.” My paintings are nothing if not colorful, and I hope they bring some feminine, vulgar, queer, energy to the annals of power which are anything but.

Batchelor goes on to describe the association between intoxication and color, “Colour is dangerous. It is a drug, a loss of consciousness, a kind of blindness - at least for a moment.

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19 David Batchelor, Chromophobia (Reaktion Books, 2000) 22-23.
Colour requires, or results in, or perhaps just is, a loss of focus, of identity, of self. A loss of mind, a kind of delirium, a kind of madness perhaps. That is how I feel when I slip through a wall of slate and gray, glass and steel, to find rapturous, riotous color beneath. The phone is close to my face in a dark room, and the color washes over my face, lighting up a bubble around me. I feel swallowed by it and one with it. The forms I find are organic and unrecognizable and seem to cut through and over digital space like clouds of pure color. When I zoom in, they distort more, becoming abstractions, their referents irrelevant. When I make the paintings, I begin by making a detailed drawing on canvas with tape so each section is clearly delineated and I only need to think about color. I spend hours studying them, and it certainly induces delirium. I had to buy special glasses for looking at screens because it gave me a headache, which reminds me that all I’m looking at is light. My job is to translate it into pigment. Ultimately, I hope to transmit the feeling I get from making them, entranced and entrapped, swept away and nauseous.

Figure 11: Natalie Birinyi, Trump Tower (Skyscraper in New York City, New York), 2019

Figure 12: Natalie Birinyi, 40 45'11''N 73 58'34''W 404 ft, 2018

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20 Batchelor, 51.
Conclusion: The Future

As I look at the finished paintings, they float away from their means of making and become discrete architectural spaces. The theoretical architect Lebbeus Wood described architecture as, “fundamentally a means of facilitating and altering our perception, use, and experience of space… these perceptual opportunities are presented extend beyond built form, and their success lies in their ability to stimulate, or aggravate, our imagination.”21 That is, architecture can move and shape our experience without having to be physically built. Woods takes elements of our world and extrapolates from them, looking for answers to problems such as earthquake damage not realistically and pragmatically, but with full imaginative facility. His goal is not to literally suggest answers, but create new ways of thinking about problems. This methodology is analogous to the project of science fiction, the genre dearest to my heart, whose job is more than anything is to “dream the culture forward.”22

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22 The radical drag queen Taylor Mac describes this as the general project of art and performance, but it especially true of science fiction.
The theorist Darko Suvin described science fiction as defined by “the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.” Estrangement, here, is what separates science fiction from mainstream fiction – it is purposefully distanced from the real world, usually through imagined technological advancements. Cognition is what separates it from myth, folk tale, and fantasy – it must be grounded in reality, and have functional rules. Thus science fiction imagines a future world, but also reflects back on the present. It can often inspire new technology or the discourse around it, and at the very least acts as a pilot program for possible futures.

I think of my painting project as a kind of ready-made science fiction. I take an available piece of technology which aims to capture our world, and use it as it is not intended. From the cognition of the map comes the estrangement of the glitches. These two elements coexist to create a third thing, which doesn’t rest easily in either the real or imaginary, but positions itself as a portal between them. I hope the paintings can gesture toward a new cyborg architecture, which is not bound by gravity or hierarchy or binaries (though it is born of binary). It’s hard not to look at the world and feel like we’re fucked, and the greatest act of faith I can muster is to imagine a future.

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24 Freedman, 16.
25 In *Neuromancer*, William Gibson coined the term “cyberspace” and created many cultural touchstones around virtual space that were picked up by *The Matrix* and persist today.
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Figure 1. *New York Times Building* (Skyscraper in New York City, New York)

Figure 2. 40°45'19"N 74°00'07"W 104 ft I
Figure 3. 40°46'06"N 73°58'59"W 600 ft
Figure 4. Empire State Building (Skyscraper in New York City, New York)
Figure 5. $40^\circ 45' 11'' N \ 73^\circ 58' 34'' W \ 404 \text{ ft}$
Figure 6. Trump Tower (Skyscraper in New York City, New York) 1
Figure 7. *Trump Tower (Skyscraper in New York City, New York) II*
Figure 8. *One World Trade Center (Supertall building in New York City, New York)*
Figure 9. Times Square (Commercial Neighborhood in New York City, New York)
Figure 10. 40°45'19"N 74°00'07"W 104 ft II
Figure 11. $40^\circ45'08''N$  $73^\circ58'43''W$  169 ft
Figure 12. 40°45'04"N 73°59'33"W 286 ft
Figure 13. 40°42'53"N 73°59'44"W 348 ft
Figure 14. 40°44'48"N 73°59'01"W 211 ft
Figure 15. One World Trade Center (Supertall building in New York City, New York) II
Natalie Birinyi, MAYDAY! May 9 – 25, 2019, Installation View
Natalie Birinyi, MAYDAY! May 9 – 25, 2019, Installation View