
**S I X T E E N
G O O G L E
S T R E E T V I E W S**

INTRODUCTION

The images in this book, captured by the roving Google vehicle, depict solitary individuals in a variety of contemporary landscapes. Despite Walter Benjamin's argument that photography's ability to reproduce strips even the unique of its uniqueness, I chose these images precisely because they assert their uniqueness and resist categorization. I invite you to consider with me, through these words and the images themselves, how the artist and photography itself can point a way out of this paradox.

Street View photography presents a different perspective on the individual's relation to his external world than the art of previous historical periods. For example, when the Romantics portrayed solitary figures within landscapes, the framework was often an encounter with the sublime. In these landscapes, man felt both in awe of nature but also transcendent over it. The encounter with the sublime, however, also pointed towards the individual's inner powers and towards his freedom.

In Street View photography, Google cars, mounted with nine cameras, roam the earth recording automatically whatever comes within their purview. The detached gaze of their cameras witness but do not act in history. Street View photography, artless and indifferent, without human intention, ascribes no particular significance to any event or person. Bereft of context, history or meaning, the only glue holding the Street View images together is geospatial contiguity. Such a perspective does not easily contain the sublime.

Unlike the landscapes of the Romantics, the landscapes of this Street View collection are neither raw nor savage. They are often vast or suggest interminable progression. Empty roadsides, urban projects, and government institutions, social and economic contexts that constrain inner powers and freedom, are the settings in which our subjects are thrust.

And yet the very instruments that alienate us can also inform us about the nature of our alienation. Does not Google's mode of recording the world make manifest how we already structure our perception? Our own experience often parallels this detached, indifferent mode of recording with consequent questions about our own significance. By becoming aware of Street View's way of conceptualizing our experience, however, alternative perceptions become possible.

The artist, in the act of framing the images, undoes familiar conventions and alters our vision of the world. Despite the often-impersonal nature of these settings, the subjects in these images resist becoming purely objects of the robotic gaze of an automated camera. For in the act of framing, the artist reasserts the importance of the individual. This altering of our vision challenges the loss of autonomy and in the transformation of our perceptions, a new possibility for freedom is created.

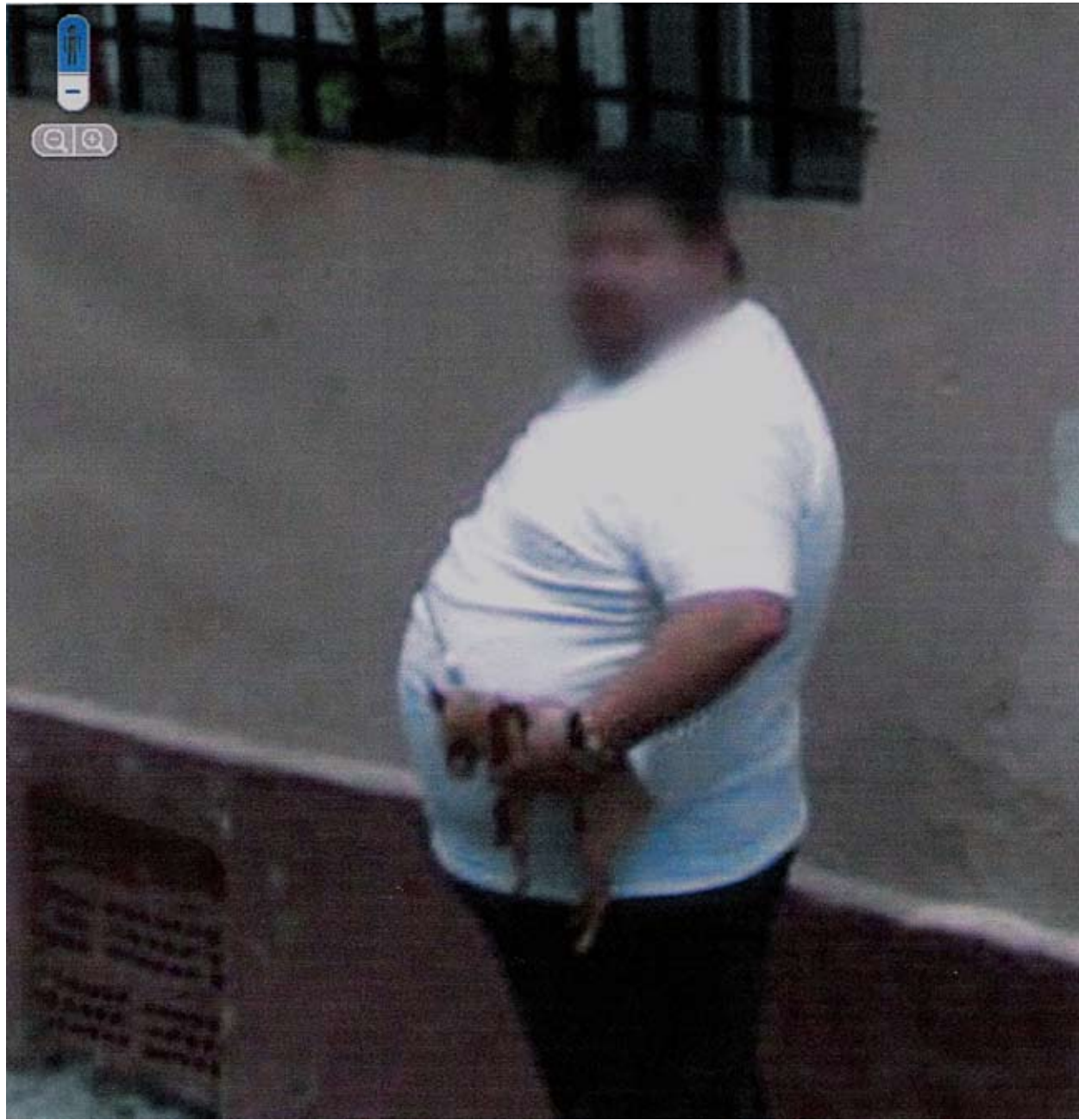


















INDEX

Sixteen Google Street Views
Jon Rafman

In order of appearance:

1. D680 Lavigerie, Cantal, France
2. Rue du Plan d'Agde / Place Saint-Roch, Montpellier, France
3. 97 Canongate, Edinburgh, Scotland
4. Rue des Poissonniers, Paris, France
5. Via Colombo, Mediglia, Lombardy, Italy
6. 58 Lungomare 9 Maggio, Bari, Puglia, Italy
7. Scenic Highway, Northwest Comanche, Oklahoma, United States
8. Barkly Highway, Ranken, Australia
9. 204 W 35th St, New York, New York, United States
10. 308 SW Rose Garden Way, Portland, Oregon, United States
11. 10 Carrer de Calatrava, Barcelona, Spain
12. Av de Villaviciosa, Alcorcon, Madrid, Spain
13. 5 Via di Santa Chiara, Rome, Lazio, Italy
14. Rue de la Fontaine, Guemene-sur-Scorff, Morbihan, France
15. 4 Carrer de Ferlandina, Barcelona, Spain
16. Unknown

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