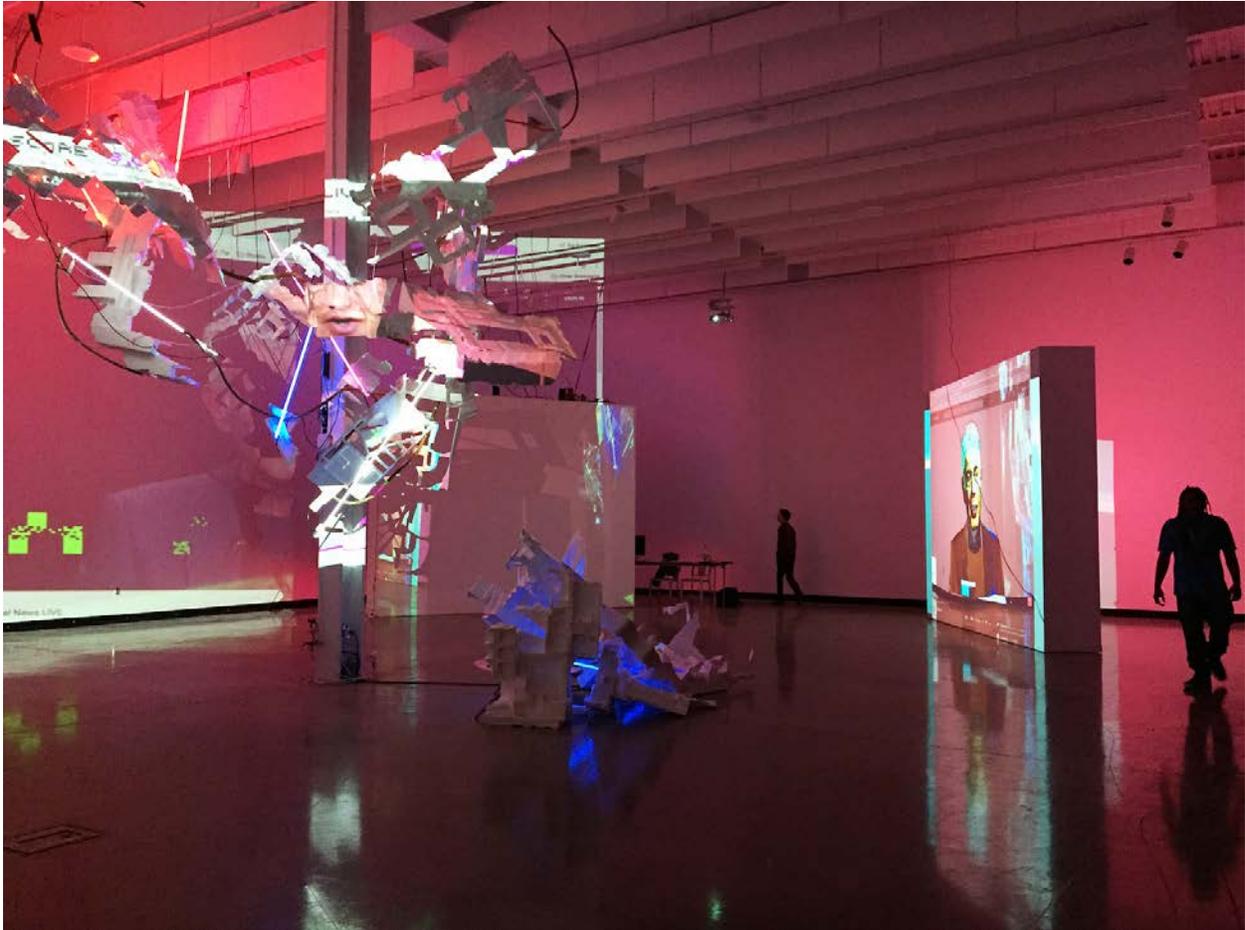


# **Tra Bouscaren: Escaping the Technological Panopticon**

by Eric Stryker, PhD

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Tra Bouscaren, *Cotton Candy Panopticon*, salvage neon, rebar, carved Styrofoam, interactive multi-channel algorithmically-generated projection-mapped video, 64,000 cubic feet, Ilges Gallery, Columbus State University, 2017

Entering into one of Bouscaren's installations is akin to entering into a filmic representation of cyberspace - a soundstage reminiscent of, at one turn, *Tron*, and at another, the streets and arcades of *Blade Runner*. With ease, these installation environments dazzle the viewer in a manner recalling the turn-of-the-millennium fantasy of the new digital age, a time when the sales-pitch for gadgets was technology as a global panacea. "Better living through circuitry!" they proclaimed. Now ubiquitous, this utopian idea is seen in glowing graphics visualizing life-as-data moving layered streams of pixels, bits, bytes, text and images moving smoothly through screen-spaces. In Bouscaren's recent video-installation works such

as *Cotton Candy Panopticon*, streams of visual data circulate around the room, across all surfaces, yielding a “video bath” as seductive as the lightshows of a techno nightclub and as overwhelming to our senses as the flashing, rolling and shouting screens of Times Square or Piccadilly Circus. These video-installations are a proxy for the predilections of global technophilia.



The works, however, do not endorse that utopian vision of technological society. Instead, the work engages in an astute critique of the way screen culture masks material reality. Indeed, the artist’s materials are drawn from the trash left behind and forgotten by technophilic modernity. It is, after all, a consumerist modernity; it values disposability, designs objects for rapid obsolescence, and cares little for the material origins or destiny of its products. Bouscaren has called his materials “orphaned objects,”<sup>[1]</sup> emphasizing the way in which discarded things are, in fact, dislocated, devalued and forgotten things. Used heavily in *Cotton Candy Panopticon*, and another recent series of collaborative installations with artist John Schlesinger, working collaboratively under the moniker “*Dear Volunteers*”, Styrofoam is a key example of such a material—a product used for transporting commodities in vast quantities in a global trade, but

immediately disposed of after transport. A non-biodegradable petroleum product in a global economy dependent on oil, the material is, quite literally, toxic.



In *Cotton Candy Panopticon*, where styrofoam serves the physical substrate for projection-mapping which visually buries it, it remains a toxic material. For the viewer, it is not initially recognizable as Styrofoam. Instead, the overabundance of this toxic trash is disguised by the seductive glow of colorful digital projections. The metaphor, here, is the way consumers bury the knowledge that toxic trash damages the environment while enjoying the pleasures of tech culture. Styrofoam is cut into stacks with jagged, irregular edges and leveraged high into rising isles around the gallery, Bouscaren makes it resemble a sea of blue-white icebergs drifting across the sea, like slabs of ice broken off shrinking Arctic ice-caps. If the initial impression of the work is akin to a light show, at a second glance, this video-installation begins to resemble a party on the Titanic as it sinks.

Iron rebar pulled from demolition sites is another found material used in Bouscaren's recent works. A construction material for reinforcing concrete, once salvaged by the artist and placed within the gallery, is exposed as a type of waste specific to the modern urban environment of highways, skyscrapers, and

parking garages. In *Cotton Candy Panopticon*, it is strung from the ceiling in an forms the support for a upward-spiraling vortex of rubbish around the central pillar of the gallery – half tornado, half cotton-candy cloud—it is a metaphor for contemporary culture’s climate crisis (increases in extreme weather) and consumerist excesses (junk food spun to resemble an historic cash crop). In another work, *Dear Volunteers*, video from demolition sites was used in the projection. The demolition imagery resonates well with his use of rebar. Inverting a Constructivist trope from a century earlier, where construction imagery anticipated the building of a modern (communist) utopia, Bouscaren’s use of demolished building materials such as rebar unveils the pending catastrophe underlying the contemporary utopian vision of technological society. In a parallel vein, he harkens back to the dysfunctional machines of Kurt Schwitters’ *Merzbild* which collaged the detritus of a Berlin in deep political and economic crisis. (Indeed, a potential influence on Bouscaren, Schwitters’ *Merzbau* deployed collage to fragment and disrupt architectural space.) Bent, rusted and discarded, rebar symbolizes modernity on the verge of self-destruction.



*Dear Volunteers*, neon, rebar, styrofoam, painted photos cast in epoxy, lab clamps, security cameras, projectors, computer, algorithmically generated interactive projection-mapped video. Collaborative

installation with John Schlesinger, Fort Mason Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 3,200 square feet, 2016. <https://dearvolunteers.blogspot.com/>



*Dear Volunteers*, AC Institute, 1,200 square feet, 2016.



*Dear Volunteers*, AC Institute.

Interestingly, the artist considers the video-images to be just as much “found material” as those in his sculptural assemblages. At the same time, they might best be understood as spectacular visual pollution. The video-stream combines multiple video sources, both clips and closed-circuit video from within the gallery. The imagery is run through an image processor that algorithmically alters the imagery in a manner reminiscent of the analog image-processors championed by early video artists such as Nam June Paik and Peter Campus. Audio-visual values are selectively changed (by color-key for example), and the source-imagery is spliced and mixed together, making the video stream replete with disruption and visual noise. There is no cohesive, naturalistic presentation of the audio-visual data. Nor is there any unitary screen to view; projections scatter across diverse, irregular and differentially-angled surfaces throughout the installation. The primary effect is a “trash heap” of imagery that dazes, dazzles and distracts. A patient and analytically-minded viewer, however, may learn to see beyond the initial sensory overload.

Bouscaren’s mashed-up video streams result from algorithms that are selectively activated in real-time as

different video-paradigms, shifted at the prompt of sounds made within the gallery. This potential viewing process parallels the timely process a viewer might engage in to see the physical work underneath the spectacle – to focus on materiality more than retinal impact. *Cotton Candy Panopticon*, as with the artist's other works, demands the viewer “work” at looking. Discerning and identifying each object becomes a litany of small discoveries –as if picking through modernity's garbage bin, piece by piece, to witness what we are collectively doing with and to our world.

More than asking for a critical engagement with the work's visual and spatial complexity, however, Bouscaren wants the viewer to be “implicated in the work.”[2] He has argued for an integrative, not autonomous artwork, refusing the implicit distance between perceiving subject and art object which more discreet artworks rely on, especially modernist paintings or sculptures. He suggests that this subject/object separation invites disinterested aesthetic judgment of an object to which we feel no connection, and has connected this, in turn, to an ethical imperative to recognize the ways in which individuals have a responsibility for the generation of a toxic environment and culture. He wants his viewers to “reflect on their own role ... in the big house in which we are living, which is this Earth.”[3]

In *Cotton Candy Panopticon*, this implication of the individual in their environment is achieved with the incorporation of closed-circuit video in an interactive visual programming environment. This live footage is projected (mixed and distorted) back into the room, transforming the passive viewer into active participant. While this inclusion of closed-circuit televisual imagery has its origins in earlier eras of performance and installation art (notably, Bruce Nauman's *Live-Taped Video Corridor*, 1970), Bouscaren deploys it in such a manner that it relates both to “surveillance” footage and spectacular digital displays. On one hand, the viewer is observed and recorded, but is not necessarily aware they are being watched. (Thus the work's titular reference to Michel Foucault's writings on surveillance in the Panopticon prisons first designed by Jeremy Bentham.) On the other hand, the viewer's recorded image is commodified, modified and mixed into a video stream that includes webpages, news feeds, and fashion photography. In this sense, they are implicated in the digital age's version of the “spectacle” once defined by Guy Debord.

Spectacular culture is, in Debord's writings, the result of consumerism – a cultural and media environment so pervasive and immersive that each and every of our actions and interactions are increasingly mediated through commodities and their representations. “All that was once directly lived becomes commodified.”[4] The same could be said of the viewer's closed-circuit image in Bouscaren's works. They are captured, processed and uploaded to a distracting and captivating spectacular projection – not unlike the avatars and selfies we upload as commodified versions of ourselves in countless social media and gaming apps.

Presciently, Debord also correlated the rise of spectacular culture and the rising environmental crisis. He wrote, “Pollution is in fashion today, ... it dominates the whole life of society, and it is represented in illusory form in the spectacle.”<sup>[5]</sup> Both are products of the capitalist mode of production, where consumption is seen as an economic good in-and-of itself, accelerating production into overdrive and producing a veritable flood of commodities and, thereby, an exponential increase of pollution in excess production and waste from excess consumption. *Cotton Candy Panopticon* certainly echoes Debord’s connection and comparison of consumerism’s “illusory” spectacle and the real, material crisis of waste, excess and pollution it is generating around us. Enveloped in the work, the participant-viewer is prompted to separate the spectacular from the material in the work, and thereby uncouple their projected, commodified self-image from their tangible, corporeal, embodied self.

One might wonder, what agency do I have in controlling my image’s incorporation into this work? To what degree can I control that image, even as it is processed into a larger video stream? In fact, any perception of total creative control over one’s self-image is quickly discovered to be illusory. Bouscaren has stated that the viewer’s agency in his works is not authoritative, but limited. “Nobody chooses where they are born, [at] what time, under what circumstances, to what parents,” he says.<sup>[6]</sup> In this, he borrows from Martin Heidegger’s writings on Being (*dasein*), where human existence is fundamentally one in which we are “thrown” into the world (*geworfener Entwurf*), then move through life finding the world continually unfolding or “thrown before us;” there is little if any control over our destiny.<sup>[7]</sup> The artist elaborates, “The video projections that I deploy [are] stand-ins for this idea, mashups from live local surveillance feeds that, in the case of *Cotton Candy Panopticon*, I programmed to be mashed up with live internet news feeds from Al Jazeera and Fox News.”<sup>[8]</sup>



*Dear Volunteers* (detail), Lola 38, Philadelphia, 2017



*Dear Volunteers, AC Institute, New York, NY, 2017*



*Dear Volunteers*, Lola 38, Philadelphia, 2017

The subject-position created in his works is also related to that encouraged in new materialist thought, which refuses anthropocentrism in favor of a recognition that human subjectivity is not autonomous, but shot through with external, non-human forces. Human agency, by this view, is not contained within and does not emanate uniquely from an individual. It also is generated within collective human actions and within non-human (natural) systems in which we are inextricably embedded.[9] It is interesting, then, that Bouscaren has stated his interest in resisting both autonomous authorship and the autonomous art object. The discourse on the autonomous art object (described by art critics Roger Fry, Clive Bell and Clement Greenberg) is predicated on a total disconnection between the object and its perceiving subject (the viewer) – a modernist idea that unraveled with the advent of performance, installation and participatory modes of art. The viewer-participant in *Cotton Candy Panopticon* is surrounded by, projected into, and critically engaged in the artwork – cut through the work and cut by it. Similarly, there is no autonomous authorship in his practice. Bouscaren collaborates often with other artists as equal authors and given the viewer/participant a modicum of interactive control over the flow of the projection[10], he has extended this interest in multi-party authorship to his materials. He has declared, “Even when I’m working alone, I

feel like I am collaborating with these found materials and the forces that produce them.”[11] From his vantage, there is no autonomous individual. Rather, we are all embedded in collective creative (or destructive) actions. Individual beings, agency and actions are interactive and coextensive with that of other beings, our material world and the systems that govern them (whether natural or man-made, human or non-human).

In *Cotton Candy Panopticon*, this idea to create a work which has a complex set of dependent interactions is also apparent in the relationships between neon lights distributed throughout the work, found (“orphaned”) objects, and the projections. He uses neon bulbs for their ability to take shape as three-dimensional drawings rendered in light - bent, twisted, and sometimes gestural. At the same time, the twisted neon shapes intermingle with and mimic similarly contorted rebar. One posits lines as dark shadows; the other inverts this line into bright, colored light. Furthermore, neon’s intense narrow-wavelength light offers resistance to the projected light saturating the installation; they can be seen even when projected light falls on them, but blend with it when colors synchronize at greater distance from the bulb. The result is a neon aura which is both coextensive and interactive with the varying colors of the video bath. In this way, the material and light contents of such installations echo the idea that everything (and everyone) exists in a state of interpolation, not autonomy.

Ultimately, works such as *Cotton Candy Panopticon* rest on a singular ethical principle: cognizant seeing. It asks that immersed viewers see themselves not only as responsible individuals whose actions impact the global environmental crisis, but as socially and culturally interpolated by human and global ecologies. Vision is proffered as something more than instinctual biological responses to sensory stimuli such as light. Sight, these works insist, can be directed beyond knee-jerk acquisitive and pleasure-seeking impulses encouraged by our technological consumerist culture. Our eyes can open to a mode of conscious insight into the web of relations in which we find ourselves enmeshed in this modern world. In Bouscaren’s works, there is an invitation to see beyond.



*Dear Volunteers* (detail), Lola 38, Philadelphia.

Indeed, circulating through his assemblages are various objects that allude to different modes of vision. In *Dear Volunteers*, for instance, photographs are hung on suspended wire armatures, jutting out into the gallery space. Coated in epoxy like a shiny jewel-like encasing, they allude to amber fossils capturing the last moment of a prehistoric organism's life for an eternity. The epoxy doubles over the death of a past moment in time, which every still photograph contains (as famously described by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*). These photographic objects are, in no small part, mockeries of the stand-alone art object. However, they also draw attention to the mode of vision that photographs often invite – namely, a hermetically-sealed window into a place or person that is remote in space or time, often taken as a “natural” or “realistic” embodiment of that which is lost. The photographic encapsulation of “the real” is, of course, illusory. Their surfaces are places where we project the meanings we wish to perceive. As in the psychoanalytic concept of projection, we are liable to see in them what we wish to see; this image, in turn, is merely a reflection of ourselves. In the end, we are invited not to view the epoxied photographs as singular objects, but rather as part of a wider system of relations and interactions. Bouscaren's video-

installations, however, invite a different way of seeing: one not of projection, but a self-reflection aimed both inwards and outwards at recognizing how we affect and are affected by our environment.

This invitation to cognizant seeing is further evident in found objects the artist has used in other works. These include discarded radiographic images (from dental and veterinary schools) and astronomical observatory equipment, evidencing an interest in visual technologies that permit seeing beyond natural vision. Radiographic imaging allows us to see into the human (or animal) body. Astronomical lenses focus and filter light from the cosmos, allowing us to see things both at great distance and in wavelengths beyond the visible light spectrum. They are technologies of seeing beyond what is most immediately present to the naked eye – to move beyond our automatic sensory responses to achieve a more penetrating vision and understanding. In the artist's hands, they tie directly into the ethics of cognizant seeing, inviting viewers to engage in conscious discernment of the world to which we are connected, rather than allowing our senses be enthralled and our minds absorbed in spectacular culture's superficialities.

Interestingly, Bouscaren finds not only wonder, but horror in this enhanced mode of seeing. This horror emerges from a terrible prospect: the human species' capacities for self-recognition as agents within human and natural ecology may be, in fact, painfully limited. To arrive at this conclusion at a juncture in human history when we are confronting the possibility of a global climatological cataclysm is indeed terrifying. "As a species as we continue to search for answers," he has said. "We used technology to extend our senses. But at the end of the day, I think we are doomed." [12] The horror of technological man is his perilous inability to witness himself imbricated within cultural and natural ecosystems. It is our collective failure to see.

## ARTIST PROFILE

[1] Interview with Tra Bouscaren, August 2017.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Debord, Guy. *La Societe Du Spectacle*. Paris: Gallimard Education, 2015. pp. 3-30.

[5] Debord, Guy *A Sick Planet*. Kolkata, India: Seagull Books, pp.77.

[6] Correspondence with Tra Bouscaren, January 2018.

[7] Heidegger, Martin *Being and Time*, New York: Harper and Row, 1962, pp.219-224.

[8] Correspondence with Tra Bouscaren, January 2018.

[9] For various new materialist approaches to interpolated human/non-human agency, see Grusin, Richard (ed.) *The Nonhuman Turn*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

[10] Interview with Tra Bouscaren, August 2017. He has stated, “The spectator completes the work.”

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

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