The web has become invisible. It is said that once a technology becomes commonplace, it is ripe for theorization and, subsequently, for artistic intervention. People were too busy playing Super Mario Brothers when it came out in the mid-1980s to détourne it. Fifteen years later, in an act of nostalgic deconstruction, Cory Arcangel took an old Super Mario Brothers Nintendo cartridge and erased everything but the clouds, creating a profoundly simple and effective meditation on the intersection of nature and technology. It is a move similar to the way Andy Warhol, in the early 1960s, employed silkscreen—another technology on its last legs—to weird ends. Warhol said, “I wanted to do a ‘bad book,’ just the way I’d done ‘bad movies’ and ‘bad art,’ because when you do something exactly wrong, you always turn up something.” By misusing the silkscreen—printing sloppily and off-register—he rendered a transparent medium opaque. Similarly in the mid-1960s, Nam June Paik took a television—a medium that up until that moment was known to seamlessly deliver entertainment—and slapped a giant horseshoe magnet on the top of it, scrambling the once legible picture into cosmic abstract patterns. Nobody had ever thought to do that to a TV set before.

Twenty years after the invention of the Internet, we’re finally ready not to think about it—or to think differently about it. We’re ready to return to meatspace. But something has changed; this isn’t the same terra firma we left back in the mid-1990s. Through the Internet, our sense of physical space has become reconfigured. A few years ago, the British theoretician James Bridle coined a term, “The New Aesthetic,” to describe the merging of these two realms. He claimed that images and ideas born online are materializing in our terrestrial space: just think of memes that appear on T-shirts or the very concept of 3-D printing.

Twenty years ago, as we rushed to embrace the newness of the web, it seemed like meatspace was dead. Virtual reality pioneers claimed that we’d soon be living entirely online, looking at the world through clunky headsets, “touching” computer images with oversized VR gloves. Instead Google Glass entwines our physical bodies with online technology. Reflecting these changes, Post-Internet art reconciles the virtual and the meat by materializing natively born digital material IRL (in real life). Images that once existed exclusively online are now invading galleries, materializing as full-bodied art objects.

But there’s another way to think about it. After years of financial bubbles and collapses, with the environment
we’re seeing the emergence of art forms that celebrate with open-eyed awe the simple fact of our very existence—something hard to imagine even five years ago. From Paul Kingsnorth’s Dark Mountain movement to the hyper-sincere positivity of the Alt Lit writers, folks are embracing this terrestrial existence, which is dripping away from us every time a polar cap shrinks. The young Alt Lit writer Kenji Khozoei sums up our moment when he says, “Wow, what a wonderful day to continue to approach my inevitable death.”

Call it the revenge of the real.

At the intersection of these currents lies the work of Dustin Yellin, who’s been doing what he’s been doing for so long that the world’s finally caught up with him—or maybe he’s in sync with a moment. But that was never his intention. Instead, Yellin plays long ball. He’s fond of saying things like, “I think of one hundred years like a week,” or “I work on five-billion-year time scales.” You might count— “But what about climate change?” “Nah,” he’d retort. “You’re being shortsighted.” When the East River came pouring neck-high into Pioneer Works, his newly renovated arts space, Yellin sat on a rooftop across the street in awe of nature’s power during Hurricane Sandy. “It was amazing,” he says with a big grin on his face. The waters receded, and indeed, life went on. Yellin says, “If you want to know what time frame I’m dealing with, look at the Chinese terra-cotta army or the stone cities of Angkor Wat, Petra, or Machu Picchu”—all places that Yellin visited during his formative years as an artist.

A restless kid growing up in Colorado, Yellin found himself in his early teens working in a shop that sold geological artifacts: crystals, fossils, and petrified wood. Too young to be on the payroll, Yellin was happy to be compensated in minerals and meteorites. Concurrently, he became fascinated with cast-off exotic artifacts from visits to local flea markets with his dad. A restless social outcast with an insatiable curiosity, he dropped out of high school and hitchhiked across New Zealand, Asia, and Thailand. Returning to Colorado, he fell in with a renegade physicist named Adam Trombly, who claimed to be able to harvest free energy from the power of UFOs. Trombly exposed Yellin to a panoply of alternative thinkers like Buckminster Fuller, Nikola Tesla, John Lilly, Aldous Huxley, and Timothy Leary. A child of the 1960s, Trombly was a believer in mind-altering drugs, experiments that Yellin was only too happy to partake in.
This series of experiments took place in a dark room where Trombly sunk Yellin into a bed of saline solution, blindfolded him, strapped a pair of headphones on him blasting whale sounds, threw crystals on his chest, and repeatedly hit him with muscular injections of liquid ketamine. As Yellin started to feel the effects of the drug, Trombly said to him, “You’re going to think I killed you, you’re going to think you died, but don’t worry—it’ll pass.” For the next forty-five minutes, Yellin felt his body dissolving. His description of what happened sounds like something out of the film The Fantastic Voyage with Raquel Welch: “I felt like I was one cell coursing through a body, moving through the entire history of consciousness. Everything was unified. The universe appeared as a series of interlocking fractals.” He even recalls communicating with extraterrestrial beings. On those trips, certain prophetic truths were revealed to him: “I saw the rest of my life—the path I was to take—unfold before my eyes.” He emerged from those sessions with a clear vision for his art and the way it could intersect with humanity. “I realized that art could bring people together to create real social change,” he says. “Art makes things possible, whereas politics binds up and stops social change.”

These experiences became origin myths for Yellin, ones that foretold an ambitious path that would unfold over the course of the next two decades in New York City.

Yellin’s early New York years were deliberate and steadfast; he’d come to the city to fulfill a mission and it was just a matter of time and perseverance to make it happen. Knowing no one, he arrived in 1994. “I went to New York to change the world,” he says. “I was alone. Everyone who knew me before was worried that I’d end up homeless on the streets.” Happily, he stayed his course. In many ways, his formative years in New York were typical of many young artists: he banged around the city, setting up studios in various lofts, going to parties, where he befriended young artists and musicians like Ernesto Caivano and Evan Dando. He took a few classes at New York University and The New School, got married, got divorced. But his main focus was to change the world,” he says. “Art makes things possible, whereas politics binds up and stops social change.”

In 1435 Leon Battista Alberti wrote a treatise about perspective and painting called De pictura. In it, he positioned the human figure as the basis for the division of the canvas into proportional parts. He was among the first to imagine the canvas as being a transparent window onto the world—like a plate of glass—upon which an image could be literally traced, resulting in accurate representations of reality. In doing so, he theorized the idea of perspective: if the canvas was indeed a transparent glass or window, we could look into it toward a vanishing point far into the distance. For Alberti, the canvas/window was a twofold surface that was both opaque (canvas) and transparent (illusionistic), similar to Yellin’s Psychogeographies, which, while constructed of clear glass and with perspectival depth, are not transparent. The surfaces of Yellin’s work are so physically thick (over a foot of glass) and so dense with imagery and paint that they’re hard to see through—yet we see deeply into them.

Equally important in terms of Yellin’s figurative work is the fact that Alberti tied the shape of the canvas to the proportion of the standing human form—after him, the vertically oriented canvas (from head down to toe) became the default shape for paintings. When we stand before Yellin’s works, we are reminded of Alberti’s mandate that the viewer and figure depicted should be nearly the same height, so that the viewer can actually “enter” the space of the canvas and be able to relate—proportionally—to the figure and spaces depicted therein.

Alberti’s ideas percolated throughout all areas of culture over the centuries. In the 16th century, for instance, when Versailles was built, the vertical casement window—which still reflected Alberti’s human proportion as a standard—was extensively employed, resulting in a national idiom called the “French window.” This type of window remained the standard in classical French architecture for the next two
Duchamp was among the first artists to employ glass as the basis—materially and metaphysically—in his works. Around the same time that the Corbusier controversy was brewing, Duchamp responded by creating Fresh Widow (1920), which was a classical “French window” covered in black leather. Both kinky and somber, it closes the book on French classicism by announcing the death of illusion and the birth of modernism. Its ambiguous pathos of repression and desire is expressed in the fact that, while in the afterlife of the First World War many “fresh widows” were minted, the sexuality of all these new widows needed to be expressed in the near future (eros/thanatos).

Duchamp’s transparent The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass) (1915–23) re-inscribed the Albertian figure by incorporating the room and the people in it into its drama. A freestanding glass sculpture shaped like a double-paned vertical window, a human body is proportionate to its scale. Writing about The Large Glass in the Green Box (1934), Duchamp claimed, “The image is not a thing. It is an act which must be completed by the spectator.” Upon viewing the work displayed at the Brooklyn Museum, the art dealer Julien Levy wrote, “When I first saw the large glass […] I was fascinated, not merely by the work itself, but by the numerous transformations which were lent the composition by its accidental background, by the spectators who passed through the museum behind the glass I was regarding.” Anyone visiting The Large Glass in the room in which it is permanently displayed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art can corroborate Levy’s observations; one can’t help but notice the way the late afternoon sunlight rakes through the piece, or how the passing of a gallery guard behind the work becomes a part of the work.

The one-to-one ratio of the human to the art recalls the hundred and fifty years until the early 1920s when Le Corbusier introduced the horizontal window, a concept that was widely attacked as being unpatriotic. A horizontal window transforms a perspectival view into a flattened panorama. As a result, the landscape is rendered into an image; a house, in essence, becomes a camera. Yellin’s horizontally oriented works—the Landscapes, Caves, and The Triptych—tip Alberti on their side, creating panoramic landscapes, which we enter mentally, as opposed to the one-to-one physical relationship we have with the Psychogeographies. By comparison, standing before his horizontal works, we are transformed, as Marcel Duchamp suggests, from viewers to voyeurs.

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The Large Glass as being psychophysiological, echoing Yellin’s Psychogeographies, a term derived from situationist Guy Debord. Psychogeography was a technique used by the situationists to destabilize the rationality of the urban environment by tempering the grid of the city with the organic unruliness of the body and its desires. Similarly, in his sculptures, the purity of Yellin’s clean minimalist glass stacks is gleefully sullied by improvisatory bodily detritus, shards of popular imagery, and clouds of poured paint.

A window is an embodiment of inside and outside. Straddling two separate ecologies, one cannot claim a window to be either/or; it is both. At Documenta 5 in 1972, curator Harald Szeemann broke down the binaries of inside and outside. While he included works that were easily identified as art-world-based painting and sculpture, alongside them he showed the work of outsider artists such as Adolf Wölfli and Armand Schulthess. He also included many non-art objects in the show, which he labeled as works of “science fiction,” “advertising,” “play and reality,” “political propaganda,” “trivial realism,” “painting of the mentally ill,” “new technology,” and “utopia.” Like Jean Dubuffet’s infatuation with art brut a quarter of a century earlier, Szeemann made being outside cool again.

As much as Yellin connects with insiders like Alberti, Corbusier, Duchamp, and Krauss, his work is in dialogue with the rich tradition of maverick, outsider artists. His obsessive accumulations and decoupage of magazine elements into three-dimensional collages invoke the visionary works of Henry Darger, Martín Ramírez, Howard Finster, and, in particular, Alfred Jensen, whose handcrafted impasto renderings of complex mathematical notation were laid atop flat fields of geometric abstraction. Vernacular pop practices also figure into Yellin’s set of influences, which include Mouse Studios and Rick Griffin’s psychedelic graphics, Peter Blake’s collaged cover for Sgt. Pepper’s, H. R. Giger’s phantasmagorical sci-fi constructions, Roger Dean’s fantasy landscapes, and M. C. Escher’s trippy illusionistic spaces. Artists working on the edges of inside and out come into play: Jess’s collages, Harry Smith’s split-screen films, and the New Age paintings of Alex Grey, whose meticulous renditions of the cosmological human body find a close parallel in Yellin’s work. Walter Benjamin’s account of the surrealistic nature of shop windows and display apparatuses in The Arcades Project and artists who employ those modes bear noting as well: Kurt Schwitters’s Merzbau,
Damien Hirst’s glass tanks and pharmaceutical cases, and Jeff Koons’s floating basketball tanks. The tradition of the wunderkammer and its museological manifestations, such as the dioramas at New York’s American Museum of Natural History and Los Angeles’s Museum of Jurassic Technology also resonate with Yellin’s sensibility.

There’s a little-known black-and-white film by Cindy Sherman from 1975 called Doll Clothes, which is a stop-motion animation of a nude female figure trying on different outfits. Everything is tucked into a photo album with soft transparent plastic pages that are manipulated by a pair of human hands that dodge in and out of the frame. The photo album is like a soft version of Duchamp’s The Large Glass, as if it were constructed by Claes Oldenburg. The figures themselves are flattened representations, like the bride or bachelors in the Glass. Sherman’s film is a tribute to the delicate surrealist films made by Joseph Cornell, who, along with Hieronymus Bosch, is the single most important precedent for Yellin’s work.

In 1999, Yellin made a short film called The Crack-Up, which is a documentation of a psychotic episode that he experienced and documented as the drama unfolded in Manhattan over the course of a proverbial lost weekend, ending with Yellin’s incarceration in a prison and, later, a mental hospital. As if to literally enact the cliché “I’ll take Manhattan,” Yellin’s mental state allows him to appropriate private ownership of public and semipublic spaces so seamlessly and convincingly that the keepers of these landmarks—performers of what Michel Foucault calls micropower—are befuddled by this confident stranger’s appeal, and unbelievably begin to yield to his will. A literal test of mind over matter, Yellin triumphs by equal parts charisma and chutzpah, proposing and succeeding at creating a pop-up utopia. But like most utopias, victory is short-lived and illusory as power is wrested from him in the cold light of day. Yet the sheer glee of a small window into the ideal is victory enough; utopia, Yellin asserts, is in fact, possible. Utopia, then, becomes the subject of Yellin’s studio practice, which is possible within the safe and controlled confines of the studio, where the Duchampian infrathin—the small slip between the real and the ideal—is experienced in daily practice, positing the sites of studio and the artwork as our only realizable and sustainable utopias.

Hollywood, the dream factory, expressed itself in the same screen proportion as Corbusier’s horizontal window, a flat panoramic surface that mirrors modernist tenets of flatness while displaying illusionistic depth. Today, cinema has been displaced by the Internet, yet the computer screen still assumes the dimensions of horizontality; it’s no coincidence that Microsoft called its product Windows. On the computer screen windows are stacked one atop another, in the same way that Yellin’s panes are stacked IRL, melding the ethos of the virtual and with the materiality of the real, landing his work squarely within the discourse of Post-Internet art. In this way, Yellin’s works enact William Blake’s famous ecstatic cosmology “to see a world in a grain of sand” in every sense, giving us a window, literally, into a panoply of spaces all at once: the cosmic, the historical, the virtual, the real—and, ultimately, the infinite.


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