

# L O N G N O W

Jim Campers

How one perceives the world determines ones' understanding of and interaction with it. Along with the senses, the body serves as a medium between nature and thought, embodying knowledges that inform what we make of it, regardless of whether we opt to dominate or co-exist with our surroundings. Throughout his research-based photographic practice, Jim Campers has always had a spontaneous inclination for navigating different geographical regions and historical epochs, exploring how different cultures and movements intersect with the environment. What paths of envisioning the future have guided the shaping of this world and the ways we lead our lives? Photography does not provide definitive conclusions. It is a medium of demonstration, not proclamation.

In *LongNow*, a collection of existing and new pieces is integrated into a scenography taking cues from optical exhibition design tactics and techniques. The works stem from an expanding, interconnected oeuvre that acts as an archive tapping into various domains, such as architecture, ecology, magic, and machine intelligence. Blending documentation and fiction, Campers seeks a different kind of connection bridging knowledge systems across rational and esoteric, scientific and natural, conscious and unconscious realms.

Rooted in continuous research, the works on show explore the scientific origins of optical technologies—from

archaeological optics to lighthouse Fresnel lenses, and from Cartesian to nano-optics—and how these inform and are informed (as in a feedback loop) by the prevailing Western, imperialist, and capitalist knowledge paradigms. Campers creates a diffuse cartography of vision that places the controlling vision of the lighthouse and the photographic processes side by side with the evolutionary path of sight in nature. This paralleling extends to the blurred, mushroom-induced altered perception, the ingenious design of trilobite eyes, as well as the monochromatic vision of bees which are capable of perceiving flowers in their whole ultraviolet brilliance. Taken more generally, another definition of vision encompasses “the ability to imagine how something will develop in the future and to plan accordingly.”

## 1.

The evolution of technology is closely tied to the idea of magic. In his unpublished work *Magic Architecture*, an interdisciplinary exploration spanning paleo-archaeology, anthropology, psychology and natural history, Frederick Kiesler contemplates the way in which the first human shelters changed people's perception of the world around them. Kiesler aspired to connect art, architecture, and human life with nature, believing that to close the divide between “reality” (material) and “dreams” (memory), we had to reconnect with our environment through immersive spaces and displays, employing visual and spatial cinematographic techniques.

Following his main principle “Function follows vision. Vision follows reality”, Kiesler aimed to shape the observer’s perception by immersing their senses, striving to attain a state of “automatic vision”. By making didactic use of three-dimensional space, he encouraged a deeper engagement between the viewers and works on view.

The year Kiesler wrote *Magic Architecture*, Benjamin’s seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* broached the way in which technology was changing art. Benjamin postulated that society’s challenge with technology indicated a necessity to bring together scientific and magical thinking, particularly in architecture where machines had replaced the architect’s role.

In post-war Italy, Carlo Scarpa—sometimes referred to as Il Mago (The Magician) by his peers—emerged as an architect who approached technological challenges through the lens of magic. Scarpa’s projects, including his exhibition design of Palermo’s Palazzo Abatellis, illustrate his practice of uncovering the latent potential inside materials. His ideas were underlined by scenographic methods, such as the strategic placement of curtains, the use of coloured walls, and the manipulation of perspectives. The architect treated the emptiness of a room as a canvas, arranging the pieces on various levels within the open space, in order to obtain a result with a sense of layering and depth.

2.

Picture the iconic image of circling light beams sweeping over large bodies of water. There’s an undeniable magic and mystery to it. The beacon stands as a sentinel, marking the frontier between stormy waters and solid ground. While lighthouses were initially erected to

protect seafarers, they have also drawn the attention of artists, poets, novelists, and filmmakers, including remarkable figures as Virginia Woolf, Edgar Allan Poe, and Derek Walcott. But where did this image of circling light originate?

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the global expansion of Western Europe created a pressing need for powerful lighthouses. Augustin Fresnel revolutionised these structures along the English Channel and Atlantic by inventing a stepped lens that emitted an intensified beam. Made up of numerous individual glass prisms akin to a beehive, the Fresnel lens allowed for a better light concentration. This breakthrough was achieved through a collaboration with an aptly named optical engineer, Jean-Baptiste François Soleil.

Originally designed to efficiently refract and concentrate light for maritime safety, the Fresnel lens possesses the capacity to alter our perception by deflecting light instead of focusing vision. In 1985, this feature appeared in Terry Gilliam’s sci-fi dystopian comedy *Brazil*. In the film, the lens serves as a magnifier for small screens in the Ministry of Information offices. At times, it intervenes between the characters and the camera, reshaping the scene and distorting “reality”. The lens has also become key to the design of the photographic apparatus, allowing for precise focusing of light—a means of illuminating the world by bringing its subjects closer to us.

3.

In today’s domains of communication, science, and art, light stands as a crucial element for guidance and clarity. It is essential in both photography and our visual perception of the world. While the Fresnel Lens was designed to facilitate imperial maritime navigation, Vikings

relied on navigation crystals, referred to as sunstones. Polarising crystals were employed to determine the position of the sun, facilitating sea navigation on overcast days. Similar to the ways in which this crystal technology was used to capture sunlight, Henry Fox Talbot's salted paper technique bears a similar connection to it. Light played a crucial role in shaping the initial latent image and, subsequently, in the development of the ultimate positive print through exposure. Talbot's images can be generated exclusively using light without any artistic intervention. As Talbot emphasised in *The Pencil of Nature*, the prints are not mere copies of reality, they are "sun-pictures" *per se*.

The ephemerality of sun-pictures capturing transient moments starkly contrasts with the enormity of deep time, which has also been tackled through technology. The prototype of *The Clock of the Long Now*, a monumental testament to long-term thinking conceived by Danny Hillis in 1986, currently resides in London's Science Museum. This clock was engineered to maintain precise timekeeping for the next ten millennia, serving as a modest reminder of human relativity. No civilisation has endured for such a long time, and a human life only spans one percent of this clock's lifespan. Interestingly, the clock's construction was funded by Stewart Brand, a technoutopian and the visionary behind the counterculture cornerstone Whole Earth Catalogue (1968-1972) along with Jeffrey Bezos. This collaboration highlights the co-optation or assimilation of countercultural ideals into the capitalist system, repackaged and commodified for profit or power.

The design of the clock conveys a yearning for a connection to deep time, providing a profound understanding of temporal perspectives. In contrast, the fleetingness of sun-pictures emphasises

the passage of time and the limited scope of human pursuits. The concept of longevity and deep time also opposes entropic disintegration, as defined by Robert Smithson as ruins in reverse: the "memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures."

4.

Altered visions and experiences shed another light on the world, as exemplified in the writings of Terence McKenna, a dubious American writer, philosopher, and anthropologist known for his trippy views on evolution. McKenna suggested that human consciousness and self-reflection might draw their origins from the consumption of a psychedelic mushroom, the *Psilocybin cubensis*. One image in McKenna's 1992 book *Food of the Gods* is a depiction of the bee-faced mushroom shaman of Tassili n'Ajjer. This rock painting, discovered on the Tassili Plateau in Algeria, an expanse of rugged stone formations, portrays a figure with a bee's head and mushrooms sprouting from its body, which is a blend of human and insect parts. This painting hints at an ancient correlation between bees, their monochromatic vision, and altered states of consciousness induced by mushroom consumption. The magic mushroom offers experiences of becoming alien transcending the confines of rationality or empirical comprehension.

McKenna's work evokes a similar perspective on the experience of fungi as Anna Tsing, who dives into the world of *Tricholoma matsutake* mushrooms to the extent of adopting the viewpoint of a spore while writing her academic essays, "infecting" anthropology and reshaping it into a discipline that encompasses more than just humans. Tsing urges us to envision the soil as liquid and translucent, prompting us to imagine

ourselves sinking into the earth to discover a network of fungal hyphae all around us.

5.

How do current technologies harness the interplay between our senses and the sensual environment? There is a wealth of insight to gain from the vision of invertebrates. Trilobites, ancient creatures that once roamed the earth, possessed distinctive calcite eyes that exhibit a remarkable structural resemblance to the eyes of present-day bees. Known as schizochroal eyes, these used a doublet lens to correct spherical aberrations found in rigid lenses. Interestingly, these eyes shared similarities with the lenses developed by 17<sup>th</sup> century physicists Descartes and Huygens, who grappled with similar optical challenges.

Aristotle's idea that art and technology imitate or enhance what nature has already accomplished faces a challenge in Karen Barad's exploration of the complexities of biomimicry. In her reflection on brittle stars, which share similarities with trilobites, she writes: "Brittle stars are trans / materialities. They transgress the sacrosanct divides between organic and inorganic, machine and animal, episteme and techne, matter and intelligibility, macro and micro." Barad recounts the astonishment of a Bell Labs scientist at learning from brittle stars. Indeed, engineers had only imagined such flawlessness precision in micro lenses, which are indispensable in optical networking and microchip production. However, Barad emphasises that brittle stars do not possess eyes from which we can learn. They are themselves eyes; their visual system is inseparable from their embodiment. Despite the convergence of natural evolution and human discovery, it is evident that science cannot replicate, uncover, or exploit what

nature has already accomplished. Nature transcends being a mere reservoir for human progress. If we recognise that our creative impulses, inspired by nature—whether it be mimicry or breeding back technologies—have unintentionally resulted in a wide range of adverse human-induced impacts on a linked network of both living and non-living entities, we may very well be compelled to reconsider and redefine our role in the world.

Clearly, we can turn to our world's wizards and prophets and ask: What threads tie prehistoric embodied knowledge, scientific progress, conservative approaches to ecological restoration, and the concept of resurrection through animism and magical thinking? And we can turn to ourselves and ask: Which parts – or parts of the story – do we want to embrace, and to what end?

– Laura Herman

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