

NOME

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FAILING TO DISTINGUISH  
BETWEEN A TRACTOR TRAILER  
AND THE BRIGHT WHITE SKY

JAMES BRIDLE

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GLOGAUERSTR. 17

10999 BERLIN

N O M E G A L L E R Y . C O M

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The title of this exhibition, *Failing to Distinguish Between a Tractor Trailer and the Bright White Sky*, is taken from an accident report into a fatal crash involving an automobile whose self-driving system failed to alert its human driver to an oncoming hazard. The autonomous car and the issues it raises stand in for many of the questions facing us today: from our relationship with technology and artificial intelligence, to the automation of labour and the political opacity of complex systems. We are in need of new, networked mythologies to make sense of our present and our future.

For this exhibition, I worked with software and geography to create the components for my own self-driving car: an autonomous vehicle which learns to get lost. Using freely available tools and research papers, through a process of engineering and self-education, I seek to understand both how to appropriate contemporary technologies for divergent purposes, and, when necessary, how to resist them.

## GRADIENT ASCENT

For a mountain to play the role of Mount Analogue, its summit must be inaccessible but its base accessible to human beings as nature has made them. It must be unique and it must exist geographically. The door to the invisible must be visible

— René Daumal, *Mount Analogue: A Novel of Symbolically Authentic Non-Euclidean Adventures in Mountain Climbing*

In Greek mythology, Mount Parnassus was sacred to Apollo and Dionysus, and was home to the Muses, the inspirational goddesses of literature, science, and the arts. To ascend Parnassus is thus to be elevated to the peak of knowledge. In the seventeenth century, Parnassus was explicitly associated with the quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, and its classical adherents gave form to Parnassism, which named Moniparnasse.

In Jonathan Swift's *Battle of the Books*, published as part of the prolegomena to his "A Tale of a Tub" in 1704, two camps occupy the twin peaks, one higher than the other, of Mount Parnassus. The greatest of the two is, since time immemorial, the possession of the Ancients; the other is held by the Moderns, who grow restless. They send ambassadors to their neighbours, complaining that their view is spoiled, and in order to avert a war suggest either that the two camps exchange positions, or that the Moderns, using various tools of their invention, level the Ancients' hill to a more convenient height. This ultimatum is rejected by the Ancients, who suggest the shade they afford is more than recompense for the restricted prospect, and furthermore, if the Moderns are so affronted then they should seek, by their own efforts, to raise their position. The result, needless to say, was not a harmonious accommodation, but a long and obstinate war, which continues, in one form or another, to the present day.

Such has always been the condition of mountains: as much metaphor as mound of rock. In the twentieth century, René Daumal, a student of George Gurdjieff, described Mount Analogue, a symbolic peak located somewhere on the surface of the Earth, but impenetrable to the ordinary traveller. Mount Analogue must be thought before it can be seen: its base rests on the Earth, but its summit forever escapes our gaze. In Daumal's novel, a party of mountaineers led by a Father Sogol set out on an expedition to conquer Mount Analogue, which they have calculated must appear somewhere in the latitudes of the South Pacific. By careful sailing, they approach the mountain at sunset from the west; as Sogol has explained, this vector is symbolically predictable: "Civilizations in their natural movement of degeneration move from east to west. To return to the sources, one should go in the opposite direction."

Upon their sudden arrival on the rocky coast of Mount Analogue, which falls directly to the sea, the travellers are introduced to the unit of local currency, the *peradam*, an object that is revealed only to those who seek it.

One finds here, very rarely in the low lying areas, more frequently as one goes farther up, a clear and extremely hard stone that is spherical and varies in size — a kind of crystal, but a curved crystal, something extraordinary and unknown on the rest of the planet. The clarity of this stone is so great and its index of refraction so close to that of air that, despite the crystal's great density, the unaccustomed eye hardly perceives it. But to anyone who seeks it with sincere desire and true need, it reveals itself by its sudden sparkle, like that of dewdrops.

Daumal died before completing his account of the ascent of Mount Analogue — his narrative ends mid-sentence, the last words of which are "shifting earth". Today the peak of Mount Analogue is still shrouded in Cloud, the metaphor which has come to replace the high mountain peak as the place of knowledge.

On the graph of progress, and of technological determinism, everything goes up and to the right. But this shape is a visual illusion caused by the direction of the light, just as Mount Analogue is hidden by certain perturbations in the atmosphere. We may observe a similar effect in relation to what are termed 'Gravity Hills', places on the Earth's surface where the usual direction of gravity is apparently reversed. A car, placed in neutral gear and with the handbrake released, will seem to roll uphill. The illusion is supposed to be produced by a combination of factors: the local topography, including hills and trees when sited in unusual configurations, and the mind's tendency to assume perspective; that is, to attempt to order the world by a preceding set of expectations. Through the machine, we disprove the world.

The map is not two-dimensional either; rather, what we face is a multidimensional terrain, composed of many local maxima and minima, a scattered massif of diverse facets, different temperatures, and variable inclines. In order to evaluate the terrain, we train certain functions, which perform a graduated ascent of the topography — what is called an optimization algorithm. By careful step on step, the algorithm evaluates its situation, and takes the increase in any variable as evidence of its improved position. On reaching a point from which no further step is possible, a problem arises: How do we know that we have reached the highest peak, when we might only be trapped in some local maximum, a spur or lesser summit, ignorant of yet higher ground?

One solution, in terms of computer science, is the random walk: a stochastic resampling of the terrain which incorporates random changes in position, flights of fancy, and leaps of the imagination. While true randomness is impossible, it may be approximated by the movement of gas molecules, or the erosion of mountain ranges. In this way, we create an abstract symbol of a mathematical topology: an abstract thing which symbolizes a concrete thing, contrary to custom.

Technology is a form of active storytelling, or reified myth. By encoding our ideas and intentions into machines, we make them literal constructors of the world. The stories we choose to tell with our technologies shape our environment, and its future. We do not have to heedlessly accept the myths we are offered, because they can be retold and revived in every generation. We can construct test cases, compose oppositional and adversarial examples, and catch exceptions. The myths are alive in our time.

Daumal again: "Keep your eyes fixed on the way to the top, but don't forget to look at your feet. The last step depends on the first. Don't think you have arrived just because you see the peak. Watch your feet, be certain of your next step, but don't let this distract you from the highest goal. The first step depends on the last." Or, as Aldous Huxley had it, means determine ends.

There are many routes to the summit of Mount Parnassus, and many mountaineers. *Deye mon, gen mon*, as the Haitians say. Beyond the mountains, there are mountains.

James Bridle

## BURMA-SHAVE

"I guess you'd say I'm on my way to Burma-Shave", sings Tom Waits in the 1977 song *Burma-Shave*. But where is he going with his female friend? Somewhere, but nowhere in particular. They are just going, getting away from trouble with the law, and from a town that doesn't have the distinction of being a dead end; "it's just a wide spot in the road". Burma-Shave isn't a destination, and it isn't even a journey, which implies some kind of specificity. Burma-Shave is the anonymous, insignificant, American ubiquity, the inland ocean in which a person could lose themselves. It is the road; or rather, it is the road-side.

Before that, Burma-Shave was a brand of shaving cream for men, manufactured by the Burma-Vita company, and sold in jars and tubs. It was a chemical step between the earliest shaving soaps, which had to be lathered and applied to the face with a brush, and aerosol shaving foam. Burma-Shave's unique quality was the way that it was advertised, with a kind of roadside poetry. A Burma-Shave advertisement consisted of six roadside signs, each bearing a few words of text, which cumulatively built into a rhyming jingle. The sixth sign, or line, was almost always "Burma-Shave". Many of the lyrics played it relatively straight:

Tube / Immense / 35 cents / Easy shaving  
Low expense / Burma-Shave

But the advertisements became famous for a characteristic sly wit:

Dewhiskered / Kisses / Defrost / The / Misses  
Burma-Shave

As the signs are seen one by one in sequence, and the driver doesn't necessarily know what's coming next, the Burma-Shave format lent itself to the set-up and punchline structure of a joke:

Shaving brushes / You'll soon see 'em / On the shelf  
In some / Museum / Burma-Shave

This is a kind of “Dad joke”, in which the humour rests almost entirely in the corny nature of the rhyme, which the viewer knows is coming from the contortions of the second line. And that is fundamentally the whole basis of the Burma-Shave gag, the play between the expected and the unexpected. There is an element of suspense, aided by the tum-ti-tum rhythm of doggerel verse, but the limitations are kept in sight. It’s only an advertising slogan, only a jingle, only a five-line rhyme, there’s only so much it can achieve. If they raise a smile, it’s made all the sweeter by the knowledge that it was the best we could expect.

Many a wolf / Is never let in / Because of the hair  
On his / Chinny-chin-chin / Burma-Shave

Overall, hundreds of slogans were written, and appeared on American roads between 1927 to 1963. They are sometimes called billboard art, but strictly speaking the signs were not billboards, or large hoardings designed to be seen from a distance: they were smaller, on the scale of street names or distance markers. They were also mostly red, and could be taken for warning signs. The company began to play on that possible confusion, developing slogans involving road safety:

At intersections / Look each way / A harp sounds nice  
But it’s hard to play / Burma-Shave

Sometimes, these safety-based slogans played on the sign’s visibility, along the lines of “If you can read this, you’re too close”:

If these / Signs blur / And bounce around  
You’d better park / And walk to town / Burma-Shave

Others put a cynical inflection on the safety message, implying that the company is only interested in preserving life because it serves their broader interests:

Past / Schoolhouses / Take it slow / Let the little  
Shavers grow / Burma-Shave

But overall, the tone is collusive, on the side of the reader, concerned for him. The signs had a human scale lacking from billboards, making them more intimate, one-on-one with the driver and passengers. They were very popular, and their multiplicity and ubiquity made them suitable for eye-spy collection. The company traded on this fondness, and compiled small anthologies of the best slogans as promotional freebies. Later slogans were increasingly self-referential, playing with and subverting the expectations built up over decades of fame, to the extent of breaking the sacred format:

Just this once / And just for fun / We’ll let you  
Finish / What we’ve begun / ? ? ?

If you / Don’t know / Whose signs / These are  
You can’t have / Driven very far

This is not / A clever verse / I tried / And tried  
But just / Got Worse

Worse indeed — the end was in sight. Both products and advertising were under technological pressure. The advertisements were expensive to maintain and were being bypassed by faster, more focused freeway driving. In 1963 the company was sold and the ad discontinued, with some sent to the Smithsonian. That same year, Frank Rowsome Jr. published *The Verse by the Side of the Road*, a compilation of all six hundred of the Burma-Shave slogans, and it’s from there that these examples have been taken.

The Burma-Shave signs, products of the earliest era of American driving when the automobile was capable of actually delivering on its promise of liberation, similarly suggest a genial, helpful capitalism that was on the side of the clean-shaven regular Joe. They have become emblems of innocence, of a purer, prelapsarian world. This is a myth, of course, part of the sentimental stew of American culture. And that’s precisely the quality that made Burma-Shave ideal for melancholy reinvention in the hands of Tom Waits: a tawdry swindle ending in tragedy, the pursuit of something that does not exist: “They say that dreams are growing

wild / Just this side / Of Burma-Shave". This is the rediscovery of the Burma-Shave format as tragedy, the payoff forever deferred, Lucy always snatching away the ball before Charlie Brown can kick it. You might expect that the road and the verse are headed somewhere better, but they always end in

/ Burma-Shave

But what if the hypnotic unfolding of the road could achieve more? As roads became wider, and straighter and smoother, they developed a hypnotic quality; the experience changes as one drives faster. The wide screen of the windshield invites the comparison to film. "The landscape appears in cinematic terms," writes Iain Borden in his essay *Driving*, "notably those of framing, sequencing, editing, unusual juxtapositions and montage, changing pace, unexplained events and sights and so on, all of which is induced by the speeding, kinematic nature of driving."<sup>1</sup> Drivers, Borden notes, feel a combination of being in control and out of it; their body is no longer their own, they feel they merge with their car, which in turn becomes somehow alive.

For the passenger, entirely passive, the experience is different. Evelyn Waugh was able to capture the distinct experience of being driven at the early date of 1910 in his novel *Howard's End*. His well-heeled characters have a chauffeur, and an inexperienced passenger who is worried that the car might strike something is told to look not at the road but at the scenery:

She looked at the scenery. It heaved and merged like porridge. Presently it congealed. They had arrived.

Freeway and motorway driving, which almost eliminates the immediate surroundings and prioritizes the horizon and more distant landscape, is the purest form of this experience. So could it be tuned to deliver a message, in the manner of Burma-Shave? Borden mentions Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch, and John R. Myer's extraordinary *The View from the Road*, a series of proposals for highway design that imagine structuring the road as a form of narrative.<sup>2</sup> Though a superhighway should not be distracting, if it is overly dull it may induce "sleep, torpor

or excessive speed". There are ways to design in interest. For instance, distant focal points can form destinations, and these can be hidden and revealed in appealing ways. But a road cannot be regarded as a full "story" — the designer cannot choose when the driver enters or leaves the highway, so the narrative must be "interruptible". It is a novel medium of expression that invites us to see the whole technology of the automobile and the road anew. Following Lynch's seminal *The Image of the City* (1960), *The View from the Road* even proposes a form of visual language to express this new narrative medium.

Now the technology and experience of driving is set to be transformed, again, by autonomous vehicles. As driver concentration diminishes as a concern, we could begin to regard roads as potential for distraction, or even entertainment. An increasing portion of the roads budget should be placed in roadside aesthetics, perhaps unified with the interventions that make roads more legible to autonomous cars. There may be sound social and safety reasons for keeping a portion of passengers' attention directed at their surroundings, rather than wrapped up in whatever glowing screen they have brought with them.

The heavy landscaping talked about by Appleyard, Lynch, and Myers might be useful when building new roads, or making major improvements to the ones we have — but that will only ever amount to a small percentage of the total. We have the roads we have, some good, some bad, and it's not practical to rebuild all of them as spectator experiences. But there is more potential than might be supposed. Advanced navigation equipment and geolocation systems mean that more can be made of existing landmarks — at a simple level, for instance, an in-car aural landscape could be created, changing and shifting with a pre-programmed journey to contain appropriate lulls, moments of drama and, ultimately, a crescendo of approach and arrival more moving than the congealing of porridge-y hills. Brian Eno's *A13 Atmospheres and Soundtracks*.

More still could be done with physical surroundings. Roadside interventions, along the lines of the Burma-Shave signs, can be imagined — not advertising, but perhaps an encoding of landscape, Christo-like flags or banners relaying decorative information about location and terrain. And we might not need fixed landscapes at all. Drivers and other passengers have other points of interest, other frames for measuring progress, provided by the ever-shifting population of the road. The car slowly gains upon a distant Norbert Dentressangle lorry, eventually reaching and overtaking it; the traffic thickens and thins; coaches operated by the same company flash lights at each other as they pass in different directions on the motorway. A dozen back-seat games can be played on the models and colours of cars. When autonomous vehicles are communicating to optimize drive conditions, could they also tune the general flow of traffic to create interest? Could they be choreographers?

*The View from the Road* was published in 1964, the year after the discontinuation of the Burma-Shave signs, a succession that is immensely satisfying. In the age of the autonomous vehicle we will no longer have an “experience of driving”, rather we are entering a new era of universal passengerhood. It is time to consider what uses might be made of that experience.

Will Wiles

Will Wiles is a design journalist and the author of two novels: *Care of Wooden Floors* (2012) and *The Way Inn* (2014). Both are available in German translation from Carl's Books.

**Notes:**

1. In *Restless Cities*, edited by Matthew Beaumont and Geoffrey Dart, Verso, 2010.

2. This wonderful document was, for years, incredibly hard to find. It is now available online: <http://tinyurl.com/view-from-the-road>

A R T W O R K S



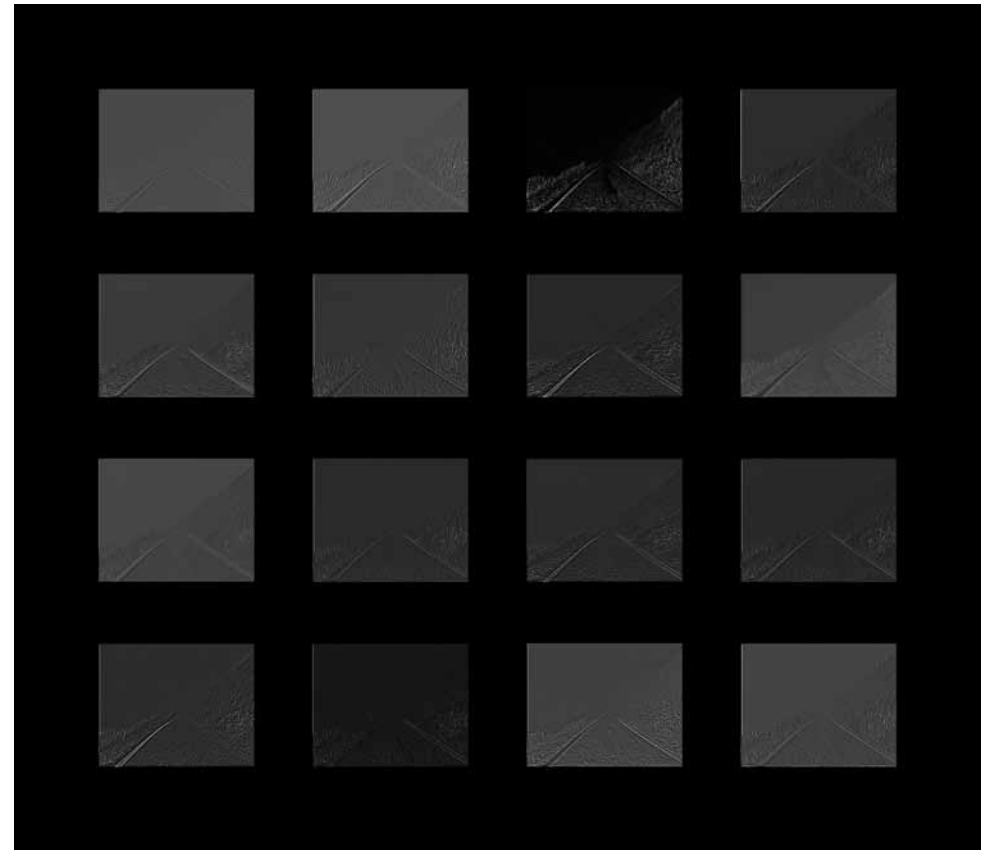
*UNTITLED (ACTIVATION 001), 2017*

James Bridle  
Ditone Archival Pigment Print  
100 x 46.6 cm  
Edition of 3



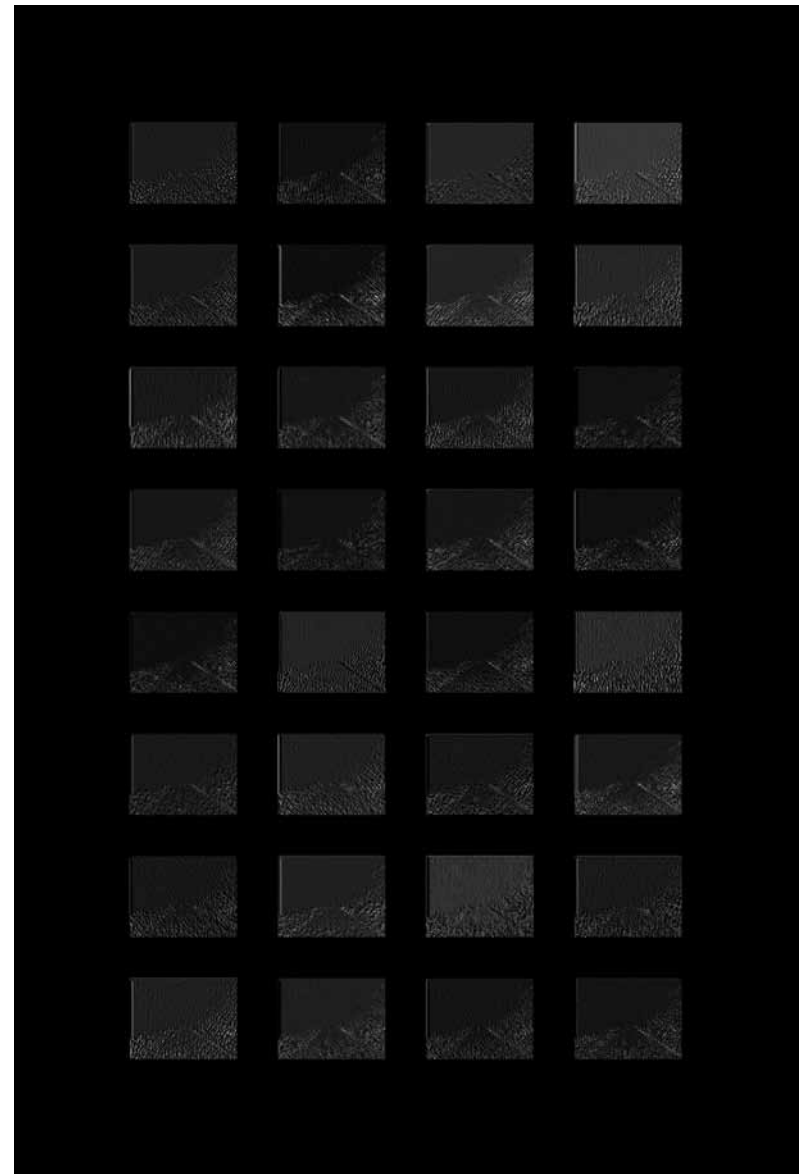
*UNTITLED (ACTIVATION 002), 2017*

James Bridle  
Ditone Archival Pigment Print  
100 x 114.26 cm  
Edition of 3



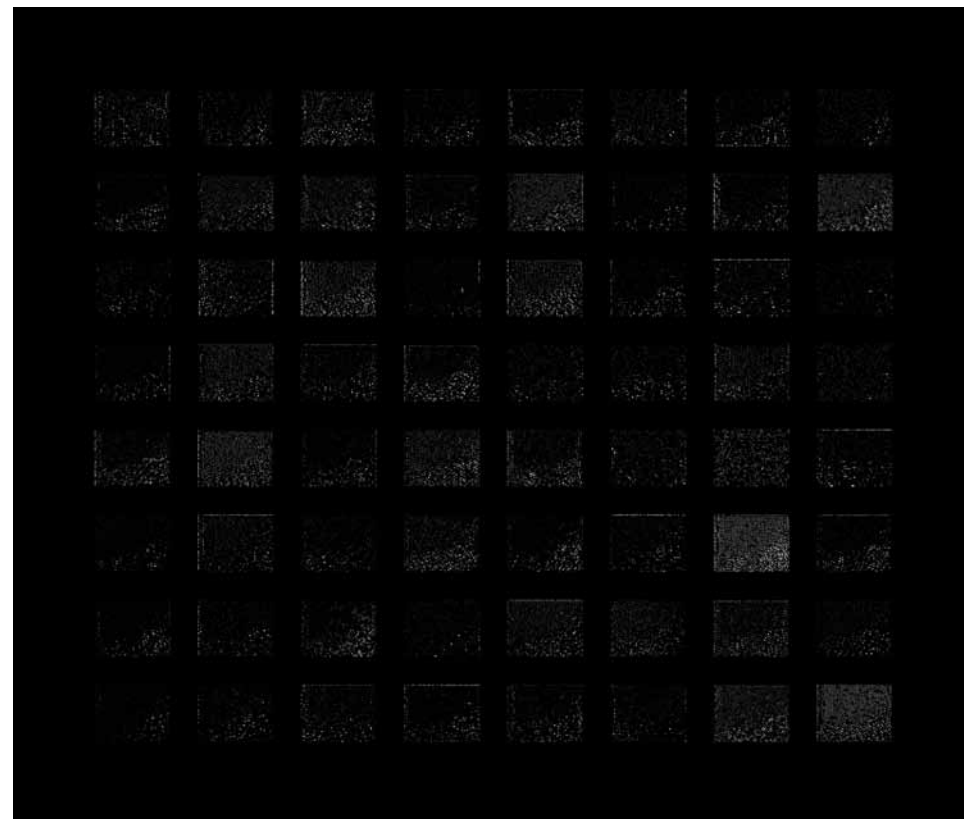
*UNTITLED (ACTIVATION 003), 2017*

James Bridle  
Ditone Archival Pigment Print  
100 x 67.13 cm  
Edition of 3



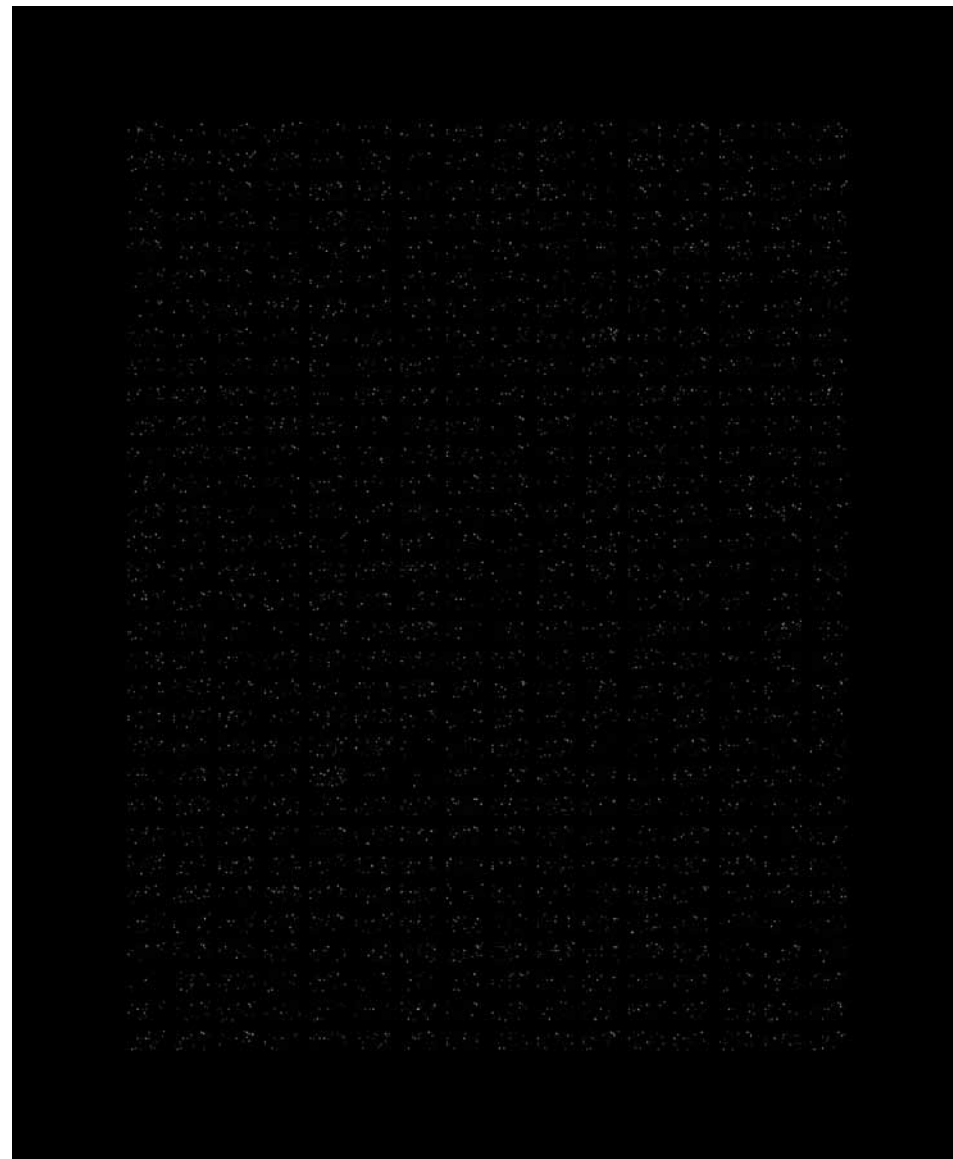
*UNTITLED (ACTIVATION 004), 2017*

James Bridle  
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Edition of 3



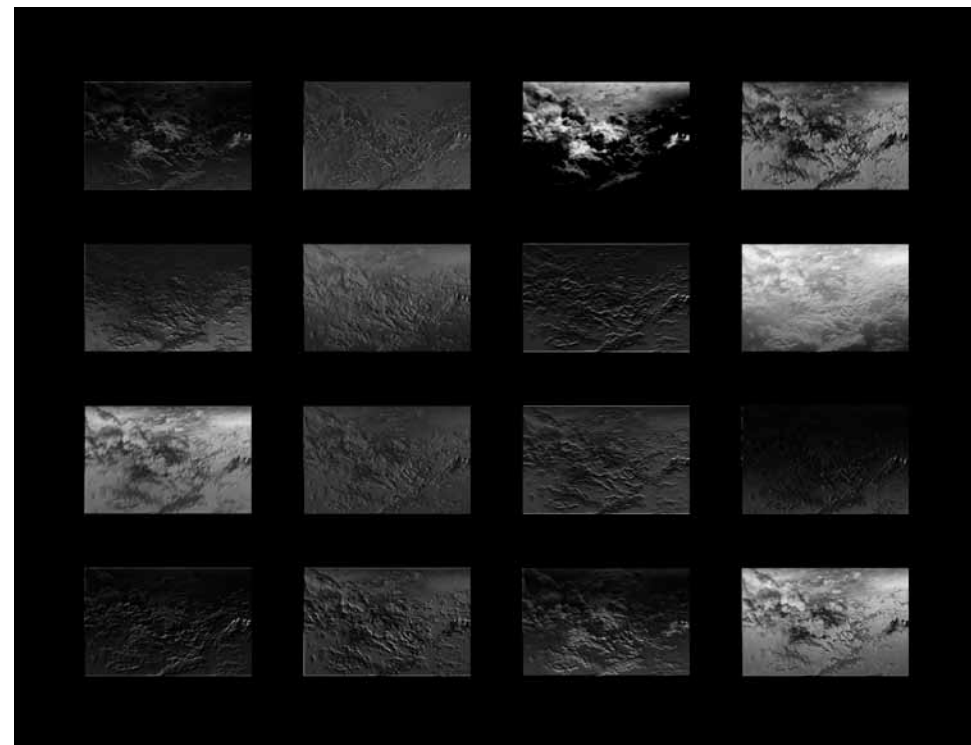
*UNTITLED (ACTIVATION 005), 2017*

James Bridle  
Ditone Archival Pigment Print  
100 x 81.96 cm  
Edition of 3



*UNTITLED (ACTIVATED CLOUD), 2017*

James Bridle  
Ditone Archival Pigment Print  
100 x 130.9 cm  
Edition of 3



*UNTITLED (AUTONOMOUS TRAP 001), 2017*

James Bridle  
Ditone Archival Pigment Print  
150 x 200 cm  
Edition of 3



*GRADIENT ASCENT, 2016*

James Bridle  
Single channel digital video  
12:00  
Edition of 3



*The door to the invisible must be visible.*



R E S E A R C H



Research and testing a self-driving car, Attica, 2017  
James Bridle

## JAMES BRIDLE

James Bridle is a British artist, writer and theorist based in Athens.

With a long-standing investigative interest in modern network infrastructure, government transparency, and technological surveillance, Bridle's practice positions itself at the intersection of technology, culture, and society. In particular, he explores how the acceleration of technological advancement creates new ways to represent our physical world and affects our perception of the future, increasingly blurring the lines between the virtual and the real. His work incorporates software programming, social media, photography, video, public space installations, virtual environments, and text.

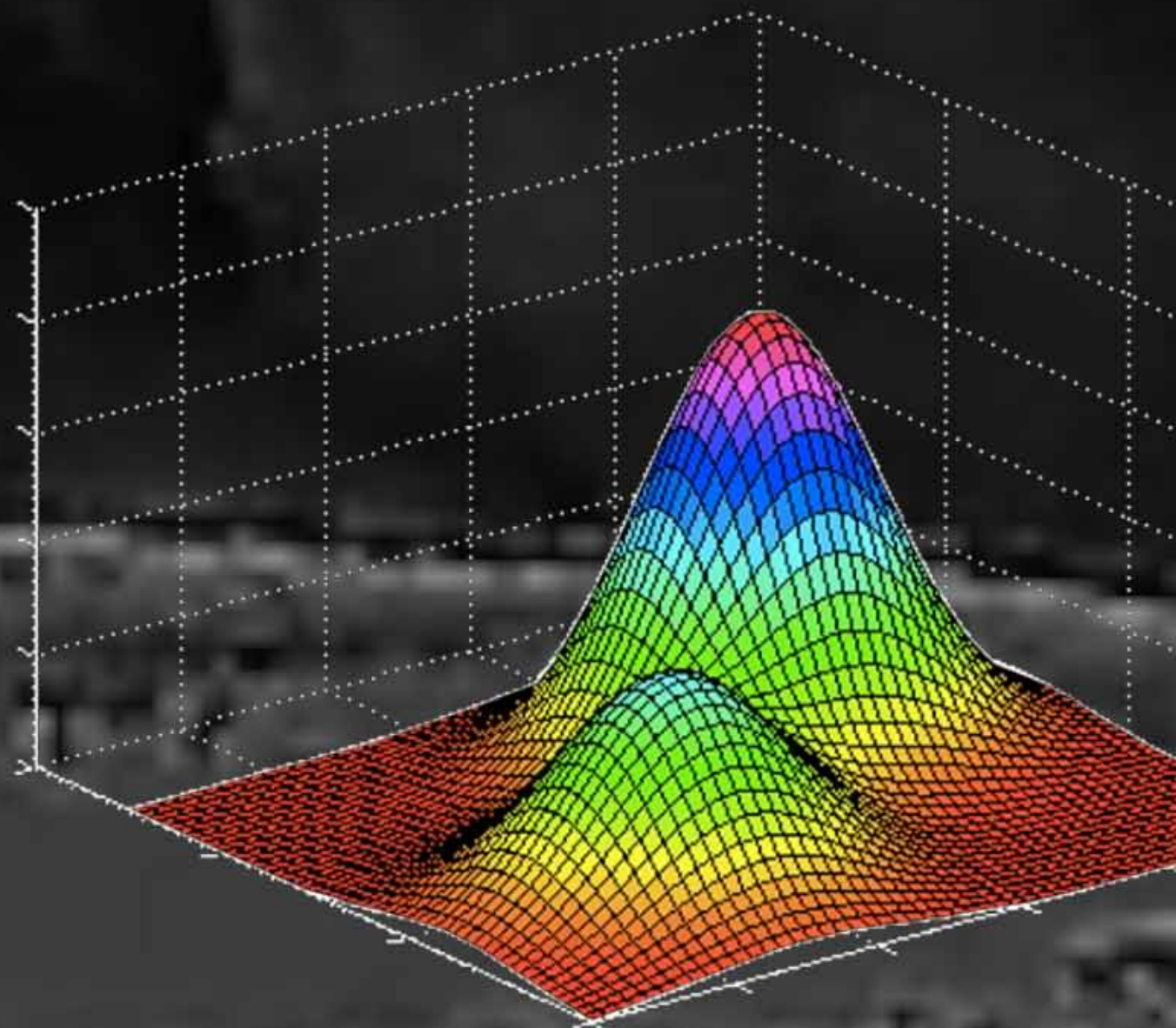
Bridle's installations and works have been commissioned by the Serpentine Galleries, the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Hayward Gallery, and The Photographers' Gallery, London; FACT, Liverpool; the Istanbul Design Biennale and the Oslo Architecture Triennale. Bridle's artworks have been shown at major international institutions including the Barbican and the Whitechapel Galleries, London; Baltic, Gateshead; KW, Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin; Museum Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt; ZKM Karlsruhe; MOMA, New York; National Arts Center, Tokyo.

Bridle's work has been featured in *The Guardian*, *Artforum*, *Rhizome*, *The New York Times*, *Die Zeit*, and *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, among others. His writings appear in publications including *Frieze*, *The Atlantic*, *Wired*, *ICON*, *Vice*, *Domus*, and *The Observer*. He is a regular speaker at conferences and institutions worldwide, including SXSW, Austin; Republica and Transmediale, Berlin; Elevate, Graz; and CCC, Hamburg.

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Speed: 0

Angle: 0.19











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