

CLAUDE CHAMBER: A PRINTMAKING/MOVING IMAGE COLLABORATION INSPIRED BY AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY VIEWFINDER

Salla Myllylä and Laura Vainikka

INTRODUCTION

Proto-photographic and proto-cinematic technologies are an unending source of inspiration for a visual artist. We want to consider the case of an eighteenth-century optical device, the Claude mirror, as a starting point for an artistic collaboration.

The Claude mirror is a small black convex mirror named after the painter Claude Lorrain and used by late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century painters and travellers for viewing landscapes. The dark mirror surface produces an image with a limited tonal range, allowing the viewer to look at the environment as if it were a painting. A famous Thomas Gainsborough drawing shows a man seated on a bank with a sketchbook on his lap and holding an oval mirror propped against a tree branch (Gainsborough, 1750-55).

In spring 2019, in a flash of joint inspiration, we conceived a method of combining aspects of our artistic processes: Salla's moving image and Laura's printmaking practice. For 18 months, we captured photographic time-lapse sequences of everyday views from the backyards of our studios, residencies, and homes as reflections on the surface of copper plates installed in the environment (Myllylä and Vainikka, 2021). In the resulting installation, titled *Claude Chamber*, we projected the video sequences on the gallery space, reflected via the same mirror surfaces, and the



Figure 1

projected images became distorted and spatial. The reflective surfaces were produced by a process of hand polishing, during which the mirrored view gradually revealed itself. The mirror surface was a result of handwork, imperfect and living. When outside, it expanded and contracted with the temperature and became rusty due to humidity.

We were intrigued by this optical device, in which characteristics of photography and printmaking meet. One can think of a Claude glass as a predecessor of the camera viewfinder, an early photographic gesture. It can also be viewed as a printing plate, a matrix reflecting a view. In a traditional printing plate, the image is attached or fastens itself onto the surface of the plate; in our installation, the image is transient and moving.

PREPARING THE MIRROR

The black mirror surface is a defining feature of a Claude glass, providing the tonal reduction and a process of abstraction that makes the reflected image painting-like. Our idea was based on using a copper plate, with and without steel-facing, as a reflecting surface. This was both part of our initial joint moment of 'revelation' and a desire to link our work to the tradition of printmaking.

Copper has been a traditional printmaker's material since the fifteenth century. Copperplate engraving started in the first half of the fifteenth century in the workshops of goldsmiths and was later adopted by printmaker-craftsmen (Metzger, 2020, p.26; Orenstein and Stijnman, 2020, 17). Over time and as technologies evolved, copper became a popular material, replacing iron due to its even quality, softness, and durability in printing (Stijnman, 2012, p. 53, 132).

In traditional printmaking, the artist gains an intimate knowledge of copper as a material. The materiality of copper is not, however, visible to the viewer of the final artwork. Its golden glow, touch on the hand and response to different drawing

Figure titles and information:

Figure 1: *Claude Chamber* (2021) by Salla Myllylä and Laura Vainikka. Installation view, Gallery G, Helsinki, January 2021. Photo: Aukusti Heinonen.

instruments remain a secret of the studio.

One of these hidden tasks is polishing the plate to remove scratches and imperfections on its surface; it is a routine step, for example, in the process of etching. The process aims to clear and prepare the plate for the artist's creation. The specific method depends on the initial condition of the plate, the artist's preferences, and the desired result.

For our installation, we used old copper plates found in Laura's studio as mirrors. We experimented with filming the process of polishing the plate to make it more tangible in our work. Unlike the routine process of polishing likely to take place on a worktable, we wanted to film the process on-site with the mirror surface gradually created in the process, reflecting a selected view of the environment.

The videos start with an oxidized leftover copper plate that had already been worked on the other side. The older and more treated the plate was, the better it appeared to be for our project. The surfaces of the plates contained traces of previous treatment, wear, scratches, and oxidations of various tints. The resemblance of the colour of copper to that of the skin, placed side by side in the video, surprised us. It seemed to create a visual bond between the plate and the hand touching it.

FRAMING THE VIEW

The Claude mirror was conceived as a tool for (amateur) painters and tourists to take "views" and see the landscape with the eyes of an artist with modest effort, thus a kind of democratic instrument (Maillet, 2004, p. 152). Its popularity coincided with the rise of the picturesque aesthetic, most influentially formulated by William Gilpin and presented in his illustrated guidebooks of, among others, the Wye Valley. 'Picturesque' meant something that could be converted to a picture; the traveller was therefore searching for views resembling paintings she had seen (Maillet, 2004, pp. 138-139). The outside world was a source for pre-set images; the picture was "projected onto nature" (Baltrušaitis, 1989, cited in Maillet, 2004, p. 140).

The Claude mirror can be construed as a predecessor of a camera viewfinder, a transitional technology. Maillet (2004, pp. 153, p. 178) suggests that when the user moved the mirror with an outstretched arm to find the desired view behind his or her back, the modern concept of the embodied viewer was about to be born. The golden era of the Claude mirror was in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, just before the time when, according to Crary (1990), the vision was "reorganized" and "a new kind of observer" was created. Crary (1990) proposes that the earlier predominant model of vision was exemplified by the camera obscura, where an observer in a dark room sees a (projected, moving) image of the world outside, independent of her position in space. This model of vision collapsed between the 1820s and 1840s with observations and emergent research on the physiology of seeing. The vision became embodied; the subject and object shared the same space.



Figure 2

The first comparison between the Claude mirror and photography dates from 1839, when Sir John Robison compared the first views produced by daguerreotypes to “views taken by reflection from a black mirror” (Maillet, 2004, p. 177; Robison, 1839, cited in Maillet, 2004, p. 177). The first daguerreotypes had a similar format and reflective quality to views in the black mirror. Many historians of photography have seen the Claude mirror as containing “a foundational gesture of photography” framed as an act of composition (Maillet, 2004, p. 177). A contemporary author, Thomas West, gives instructions about turning one’s back to the object of interest and holding the black mirror “a little to the right or left” (West, 1778, cited in Maillet, 2004, p. 178). West does not discuss the spectator’s body blocking the view in the mirror but seems to be on the brink of doing so.

In our project, we wanted to focus on our everyday living and working environments. We selected views from our homes and studios and views to the street from the gallery where our exhibition was to take place. The process of framing a view using a set-up consisting of a mirror and a camera, both on tripods, was cumbersome. The camera had to be placed at an angle so as not to be visible in the reflected image. As we wanted to capture a long time series of images from a fixed point of view, the positions of the mirror and the camera had to be such that they could be left in place or their exact positions could be reproduced for the duration of filming, often for months. Frequently, we had to simply take what was given by the circumstances.

For example, in April 2019, when arriving at a residency studio in Paris with a view of a narrow street, Salla attached the copper plate to the balcony railing with a mini tripod with bending legs. This opened a view across the river Seine that she filmed through the window for the three months she was there. The view was such that she could never see it from the studio except by hanging out of the window. Thus, she never saw the filmed sequence.

To have a site-specific element in our installation, we also captured views from the gallery where we intended to show our work. We positioned a mirror and a camera, both on tripods, to frame a view of a nearby street crossing. We came back about once a month and attempted to find the same framing again. Although armed with a paper stencil indicating the positions of the tripod legs on the floor, a lengthy choreography for two persons took place each time. One of us looked at the view reflected through the camera viewfinder; the other desperately tilted the mirror to rediscover the same framing as before. The task seemed just as difficult at the beginning and the end of the project.

In another sequence filmed in the gallery space, we were intrigued by a semi-circular night-sales hatch, a relic from the time the space had served as a pharmacy. We prepared a copperplate imitating the shape of the hatch, placed it on the counter in front of it and filmed a street view reflected on its surface.



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 6

Figure 3: Filming a view reflected in a copper plate installed on a balcony railing in Paris, April 2019. Photo: Salla Myllylä.
 Figure 4: Positioning a copper plate for filming in Gallery G, Helsinki, September 2020. Photo: Salla Myllylä.
 Figure 5: Filming set-up in Gallery G, Helsinki, March 2020. Photo: Salla Myllylä.

Thus, our bodies, to be sure, were engaged in the process of framing, but in a mediated way and with actions whose effect on the framed image was difficult to anticipate. We were composing for a monocular camera eye using opportunities and supports provided by the environment. The technique of time-lapse photography made our framing speculative; we fixed a point of view where we expected something to happen: the change of seasons, the passing of traffic.

An interesting comparison can be made with Gary Beydler's artist film *Hand Held Day* (1975). In the film, the artist held a pocket mirror facing west for 14 hours in the Arizona desert and filmed a time-lapse sequence from the same position. In the film frame, the position of the mirror in his hand is reminiscent of a Claude glass. As in our case, the mirror is pointed towards the camera eye; the artist could not have seen a mirrored view while holding it. Beydler's project tested the limits of physical endurance, although the mirror was supported by a steel rod hidden behind his hand (Beydler, 1977, cited in Lord, 2017), whereas ours tested the limits of patience, repeatedly positioning the mirror or bearing up with the intrusive presence of tripods in our living rooms or studios.

During the project, we filmed seven time-lapse sequences and two videos of the polishing process. Editing the final videos out of thousands of captured images was a laborious animation-like process. In time-lapse photography, the act of selection is deferred and happens on the editing table. This constitutes the second framing in our project.

PROJECTING THE IMAGE

In the installation, we projected the videos via the same or similar-sized polished copper plates onto the walls of the exhibition space. The plates were either propped in a slightly tilted position on the floor or attached to small tripods. We embedded them in handmade black leather cases inspired by the carrying cases of historical Claude glasses, which were after all portable devices. The plates and the projectors were painstakingly positioned to place the projections in the desired locations on the wall or the ceiling.

When first experimenting with projected images, we discovered the materiality of copper from a new angle. With several projections side by side, the golden colour pervaded the gallery space in a way a viewer later described as reminiscent of Inca gold treasures. When a projection was accidentally placed slightly over the edges of the copper plate, unanticipated distortions appeared at the sides of the projected image. These became part of the installation.

In our installation, the video image, first filmed from the surface of a copper plate, is re-reflected via the same or a similar plate to produce the final image. This double-mirroring was not part of the concept of an original Claude glass. In the process of making it, we did not attach specific meanings to it, but these were later suggested by the viewers of our work.

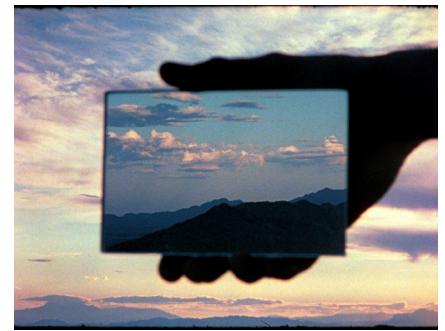


Figure 6



Figure 7

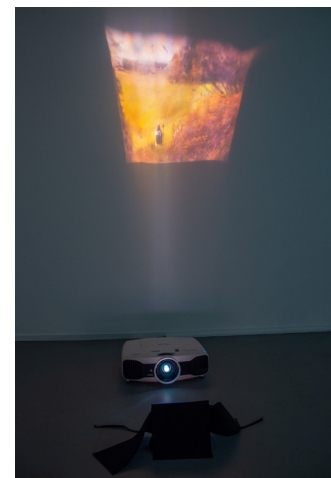


Figure 8



Figure 9

Figure 6: Still image from *Hand Held Day* (1975) by Gary Beydler. © Image courtesy of the Gary Beydler family.
 Figure 7: *Claude Chamber* (2021) by Salla Myllylä and Laura Vainikka. Installation view, copper plate reflecting a video, Gallery G, Helsinki, January 2021. Photo: Salla Myllylä.
 Figure 8: *Claude Chamber / Sauvo August-December* (2021) by Salla Myllylä and Laura Vainikka. Installation view, Gallery G, Helsinki, January 2021. Photo: Salla Myllylä.
 Figure 9: *Claude Chamber / Kaartinkaupunki 16.3.2020* (2021) by Salla Myllylä and Laura Vainikka. Installation view, Gallery G, Helsinki, January 2021. Photo: Aukusti Heinonen.

THE MIRROR AND THE MATRIX

Our installation, titled *Claude Chamber*, was presented in January 2021 as a solo show of the same title in The Finnish Printmaker's Gallery in Helsinki. Our work was thus presented in the context of and for an audience tuned to printed art, and was, we felt, accepted under the umbrella of printmaking without reservations.

Except for the copper plate, our installation does not use the traditional materials of printmaking, and the miracle of transmission, usually hidden from the viewer, takes place in the gallery space without the mystery provided by a black box. The creation of the video image itself is hidden, but the monocular projector reminds the viewer of the camera eye involved in its production. In the exhibition text, we proposed an analogy with printing. In this paper, we want to take a closer look at this analogy.

The artist-printmaker Päivikki Kallio (2017b, p.18) has proposed a concept of apparatus of printed art that comprises the whole chain of actions required for a printed work of art to be produced. In a thought inspired by Latour, all the parts of this collective process are considered equal: presses, corrosives, plates, printing inks, tarlatans, stones, and rolls, depending on the process, and the people involved. Kallio (2017a, p. 87) writes: "The final print, or edition of prints, is only one of the equal parts of this collective, which forms a network of mobile relationships." The chain of transitions in the production of traditional printed art is concluded when a print and an edition are

produced. In the extended concept of printmaking, the chain of actions itself is the result. This way of thinking makes it possible to see the connection between our work and printmaking. As we proposed in our exhibition text, "images coming from the projector transferred via the copper mirror and printed 24 times per second on the gallery wall." Our work makes the act of transmission visible.

It also becomes evident that the existence of a matrix is one of the defining characteristics of printed art. Kallio (2017b, p. 18) proposes that printed art always contains a *disruption*, which is a spatial event. A tension is formed between the matrix and the print (or imprint, or projection) when they are no longer in contact. Kallio (2017a, p. 94) writes, "We feel a longing for the unknown that we can only see as an imprint. This gives rise to melancholy, a longing for the matrix." The print is not simply a product of the process, but an event requiring a different mode of reception than works such as paintings produced by more direct methods.

Artist-printmaker Annu Vertanen (2021, p. 70-75) describes the matrix as an entity containing all the information that the artist wants to transfer to the printing surface. "The matrix guides and controls the formation of the printed image. It is a recipe, script, code, framework, description, or plan enabling the production of the artwork." It is

interesting to ask which part of our installation takes the role of the matrix.

In light of Kallio's extended concept of printmaking, the video image, a digital code, could be seen as the matrix in our work. On the other hand, the most concrete visible element resembling a matrix in our installation is the polished copper plate. However, when considered against the description of Vertanen, we see that its role is exactly the opposite of that of a matrix. The plate is empty, and the acts of polishing performed on it are about taking away, removing the artist's intention.

When projecting the video onto the space via the copper mirror, we quickly discovered how the characteristics of the surface of the plate, the structures embedded in its material, formed an independent code strongly affecting the transferred, projected image. The material qualities of copper became part of our installation in unexpected ways. This phenomenon could be considered an element of disruption in our installation. The plate interfered in the process of transfer, transforming the lens-based image and adding elements of ambiguity, spatiality, and dream-likeness. The plate itself seemed to take the role of the matrix, press and ink in the process.

The copper plate brought an element of sensory power to our installation and made visible the relationship between printing and corporeality in a way we did not anticipate. The copper plate could be seen as a dreamer, reflecting memories and visions accidentally. Paradoxically, it displayed the moment of disruption of transfer, normally hidden in the printing process.

CONCLUSION

Our two-year collaboration, inspired by the Claude glass, combined interests, materials, and skills from our separate artistic practices. The result is a hybrid creation touching upon seemingly incongruous elements such as the pre-history of the camera viewfinder, time-lapse photography, material study of copper and extended concepts of printmaking.

There are several differences between our approach and the original device. Our version of the Claude mirror is neither convex nor black. It does not even out the tonal range; nor does it compress the view. Compression of time is performed in ways that eighteenth-century users of tinted colour glasses, as a simulation of various times of day for the busy traveller, could only dream of. The idea of focused selection compressing aspects of reality is the same.

The printing plate distorts the video image with its material, largely accidental, characteristics. In the installation, this distortion takes place twice, first in filming the image and then in projecting it. The idea of double reflection has no direct equivalent in the original Claude mirror. Several viewers of our installation proposed interpretations involving comparisons with the structure of the human perceptual system or dreaming. Interestingly, the first movie camera by the Lumière brothers

was used both for filming and projecting.

The concept of reflecting light from a print matrix has been previously explored by many contemporary printmaking artists like Päivikki Kallio and Inma Herrera¹. Our interest was in contemplating the possibilities of combining a hand-manipulated copper plate with lens-based images. The aspects of materiality, hapticity and sensuality came strongly to the fore in our installation. The joint historical inspiration provided the impetus and cohesion for our collaboration.

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Figure 10

¹ For example, in Päivikki Kallio's *Kierkegaardin kuutamo / Kierkegaard's Moonlight* (1990) and Inma Herrera's *Between the Waters* (2021), light is reflected via an etched printing plate onto the wall or ceiling of the exhibition space. In both artworks, light transfers the pictorial motif from the surface of the plate to the structures of the exhibition space. The image source therefore resides on the printing plate (Kallio 2017b, p.52; Herrera 2021).

Figure 10: Still image from *Claude Chamber / Sauvo August-December 2019* (2021) by Salla Myllylä and Laura Vainikka.

AUTHORS

Salla Myllylä is a Helsinki-based visual artist. Her work is somewhere between drawing, painting, and moving images and is always connected to a specific place. Time-lapse photography and a gesture of drawing in the environment are essential tools in her practice.

Myllylä graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts (Uniarts Helsinki) in 2014 and is currently a doctoral student in the same university. Her works have been presented in exhibitions at e.g. Finnish Printmakers Gallery, Helsinki (2021), Gallery Huuto, Helsinki (2015, 2013), Frankfurter Kunstverein (2014), Charlottenborg Kunsthal, Copenhagen (2017, 2012) and in festivals such as Tampere Film Festival (2016), Japan Media Arts Festival, Tokyo (2016) and Minimalen Short Film Festival, Trondheim (2016).

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Laura Vainikka is a multidisciplinary artist who employs different printmaking techniques, investigating their material and conceptual implications. Her works often address questions from the point of view of perception and the image: how an image is generated, how it assumes authority and how it relates to visual perception.

Vainikka graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts (Uniarts Helsinki) in 2013. Her works have been exhibited, at Helsinki Arthall (2011), Trelleborgs Museum, Sweden (2021), and the Finnish Printmakers Gallery, Helsinki (2010 and 2021). They are represented in several collections in Finland, among them the Finnish State Art Collection and art museums in Jyväskylä and Pori. She was a nominee for the Kjell Nuppen Memorial Grant in 2017. Since 2014 she has also taught on a part-time basis in the printmaking department at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, with intaglio methods as her main area.

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IMAGE GALLERY

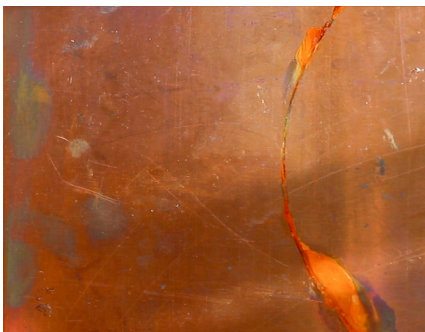


Figure titles and information

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