

## Metologue on Blurring

**Participants:** a blur, an algorithm, a representative of Google, an unnamed landlord, the American architect Elizabeth Diller, and a fictitious public.

**Location:** Hans Scharoun's first apartment in Berlin-Siemensstadt, a housing project built for Siemens workers in the 1930s. Scharoun lived with his wife Aenne in this apartment until 1960.

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**Google:** Let me begin our conversation with a question ...

**Elizabeth Diller:** Please, go ahead.

**Google:** If you had to choose between *always having to tell the truth from now on* and *only being allowed to tell three more untruths in your life*, which would it be?

**Elizabeth Diller:** Hmm (*thinks for a moment*) it's hard to say. Probably the former.

**Google:** Right. So you understand how difficult it is to choose between two things that are nearly equivalent.

**Elizabeth Diller:** I'm not sure I get what you're driving at.

**Google:** I merely wanted to demonstrate how hard it can be to choose between a categorical imperative and a positive affirmation that includes the word *untruth*.

**Elizabeth Diller:** I see. But what are you driving at?

**Google:** My point is that every situation involves a permanent weighing-up of many potential decisions, each of which may be perceived as arbitrary at any given time.

**Landlord:** Wouldn't you rather just tell us directly what you're *really* driving at?

**Google:** Sure. If you'll give me a moment (*pauses*). First of all, I'd like say thank you for the invitation to this discussion. I hope that we, meaning the company I am representing here, meaning Google, can provide satisfactory answers to all of your questions (*pauses for a moment*). Perhaps I can start by giving you a brief overview on the subject of Google Street View.

**Elizabeth Diller:** Please do.

**Google:** Once Google's search engine had become established in the early 2000s, the company began casting about for a similarly far-reaching project. Our developers in Palo Alto just weren't being kept busy. They needed a new baby (*a fleeting smile crosses his face*). So management gave Research&Development the go-ahead, and for the next few years they launched project after project in quick succession. Most were dropped after a short test phase, but that's normal in R&D. Google Maps was different. For those who don't know, I should mention that Google Maps was the precursor of Google Street View. From the outset, Google was well aware of the revolutionary potential of developing a global map service that could be viewed online by anyone, anywhere. It was also clear that in the long term this would change the way people viewed their surroundings and the earth in general (*pauses for a moment, lowers his voice*). Incidentally, this kind of certainty doesn't surround all of the projects we pursue ...

**Public:** (*interrupts*) Wait a second. The version of the story I know is a bit different. Didn't it all start with a certain Michael T. Jones who laid the foundations for Google Maps with his Los Altos company Keyhole Corp.? And did Google not simply buy out this company? And weren't there even rumors that Keyhole Corp. was one of the many cover firms for the CIA or the NGA, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency?

**Google:** You're right, Michael T. Jones played in an important part in the project's development. Until 2015, Mr. Jones was on our advisory board, as well as working in other leading positions at Google. And of course he's still on friendly terms with the company. But let me get back to what I was saying: having become aware of the likely scale and importance of Google Earth and Google Maps early on, we faced the challenge of taking the ethical dimension properly into account. How to communicate

such a far-reaching and innovative project? How to deal with the many possible reactions? How will people respond when they see their immediate surroundings on the internet for the first time? How to deal with a worst-case scenario where the public rigorously rejects our map service? At the time, we had to ask ourselves many questions. But don't get me wrong: I just wanted to give you a small insight into the complexity of this project and into the attendant uncertainties. And, should this impact on our discussion here, I hope you will bear with me (*again, a fleeting smile*).

**Elizabeth Diller:** Excuse my critical tone, but there's something I don't like about the way you're trying to sell yourself as a savior here. Has your company not always functioned as a data kraken, dissolving anything that can't climb up out of harm's way into one big hyper-accelerated flow of information? And, if you'll permit me to pursue my simple metaphor, even the things one used to be able to climb up onto are now being dissolved into that same flow of data.

**Google:** I'm afraid I don't fully agree with you. Our company is not at all interested in dissolution. More in consolidation. But perhaps I might be allowed to offer a few arguments that could help to shift your viewpoint.

**Landlord:** This should be interesting.

**Google:** Let's take Palmer Luckey's *Oculus Rift* headset as an example. Who would have thought that this unremarkable device would one day revolutionize gaming culture? And in the entertainment sector, there is the obvious commercial success of *Oculus Cinema*. Both are positive examples of the way information architecture is steadily penetrating the physical world. Moreover, most of the really innovative Oculus applications are taking place somewhere else entirely, in the field of research and education. Where people work with immersive environments of the kind increasingly found in hospitals and medical laboratories, but also in architecture, Oculus opens up new possibilities. And all the developments of recent years – ubiquitous computing, virtual reality, the internet of things, tangible interfaces, wearable computers, intelligent architecture – would not have been possible without an augmentation of existing realities.

**Elizabeth Diller:** I would agree with you to an extent. The developments you list do, of course, have a certain value. But, with all due respect to your techno-optimism, I think it's all the more important not to lose sight of the two feedback loops that link

technology to its user. There's the issue of data protection: What happens to the data generated by these new applications? Where do they flow and how much control do I retain over them? And then there's the question raised many years ago by Mychilo Cline: How and to what extent are cognition, perception, and communication affected by these new systems? Not that I'm against new developments per se. I'm just appealing for a conscious, thoughtful approach to these supposed innovations.

**Landlord:** Listening to you, what I see in my mind's eye is the opening scene of *Blade Runner*: everything is flashing and buildings morph into shapeless billboards that flicker with increasingly vague advertising messages.

**Elizabeth Diller:** That's quite a good comparison. And Philip K. Dick can be credited with a certain visionary gift. Of course it's sad that many urban centers now look exactly like what you just described. And Dick's idea of the city dissolving into an image was taken up by Paul Virilio in 1997 in "The Overexposed City." In this wonderful essay, Virilio presents the dystopian scenario of an architecture that consists of nothing but surfaces flowing into one another, generated out of screens and membranes, a scenario that has long since freed itself of architecture's physical quality. In this development, Virilio attributes a driving role to the omnipresence of computer and screen logics that aim to deurbanize and ultimately abolish the city as a social space. According to Virilio, the disappearance of native geography and physical space also means a detachment from local and historical time. Anyone who lives in a city knows this effect well: an environment that is permanently illuminated annuls any sense of biological time.

**Algorithm:** If I might be allowed to add something to this interesting conversation, I'd like to make a historical link to something that's been on my mind a lot lately. May I assume we're all familiar with Le Corbusier?

**Landlord:** Not me, but why don't you tell us ...

**Algorithm:** In the context of Virilio's hypothesis, I'm strongly reminded of the *machine for living*, a concept casually floated by Le Corbusier in the early 1920s. If I remember correctly, he first spoke of the "machine à habiter" in an article in the magazine *L'Esprit Nouveau*. A few years later, the concept became more widespread thanks to one of his most important books, *Towards A New Architecture*. At the time, Le Corbusier was not happy with the way the concept was being used, and in the

course of his subsequent career he distanced himself from it to a greater or lesser degree. But to return to my question: With his concept of the machine for living, might Le Corbusier have anticipated what Virilio observed decades later?

**Elizabeth Diller:** That's a very good question. But without being able to ask Le Corbusier himself, we can only speculate (*a fleeting smile crosses her face*). One way to approach the question, however, would be to take a look at the sociocultural conditions of Le Corbusier's times. To our ears today, the combination of living and machine smacks of *dehumanization*. But in the 1920s, the concept of the machine was still imbued with utopian potential. We remember the Futurists around Luigi Russolo and their fascination with machines. At the same time, the automotive industry and Fordism initially contributed to a positive view of industrialization. After all, the automobile was the great promise of its time, associated with individualization and an overcoming of the old space-time paradigm.

**Blur:** Might it also be possible to draw parallels between the architecture of car interiors and the new ideas of modernist architecture? After all, both center on an expanded understanding of subject and space.

**Algorithm:** What you're saying, then, is that Le Corbusier's concept of a machine for living might reflect the techno-optimism of his times? The expression of a naïve belief in progress? As someone who was excited by the machine-like qualities and the interplay of systems that he identified in architecture, I wouldn't put it past him. As someone who wanted to overcome nature and who took a systems-based approach to the complexities of modern life, it would make sense.

**Landlord:** Definitely. And it was only some year's later that the machine took on a negative connotation, in the form of the all-crushing machinery of war.

**Elizabeth Diller:** That's right. And until then, the machine was able to maintain its positive associations, as part of a brief historical avant-garde. It was to deconstruct itself soon enough in any case, with no outside help. But to get back to what we were actually talking about, maybe this anecdote is of interest: While Le Corbusier was building one of his machines for living in the Weissenhof Estate in Stuttgart as part of the 1927 Weissenhof Exhibition, he would have had the chance to encounter Hans Scharoun, who was also involved in the exhibition, where his fan-like detached house anticipated his later masterpiece, the Schminke House. I'm not aware of any personal

encounter between the two men, but it could have happened.

**Algorithm:** So now you want to talk about the building we're in today? *(smiles)*

**Elizabeth Diller:** Yes, after all it is one of the reasons for our meeting.

**Landlord:** But is the building we're in now so important? Wouldn't it be more useful to deal with Scharoun in general and his ideas and concepts about living spaces? Finally, he laid the foundations for a democratic understanding of residential architecture.

**Elizabeth Diller:** You're right, of course, Scharoun is important on many levels. I also think we should not underestimate the fact that he himself lived in this house for over thirty years, I believe it was in the apartment under this one. That a well-known architect should have lived for so long in an apartment he himself originally designed for workers from the neighboring Siemens factory is a remarkable fact. It can of course be linked to the rise of National Socialism and the worsening work situation for Scharoun that resulted, but I'm sure other factors also played a part.

**Blur:** But let's get this straight: the reason we're in this apartment is that I blurred the building on the other side of the street in Google Street View, right?

**Landlord:** Exactly, and you did it especially well! Too bad that the *Panzerkreuzer*, as it's known colloquially, is hard to see from this apartment in summertime because of the trees. In winter, we have a fantastic view of it from our balcony.

**Google:** One might say that the building has been blurred by nature *(smiles)*. In which case it doesn't really matter that it's also blurred in Street View, right?

**Elizabeth Diller:** Whether something matters is always a question of one's viewpoint. If I want to have a closer look at the *Panzerkreuzer* on your platform and I find that it's been blurred, then that bothers me.

**Google:** But what bothers you? That someone is obscuring your view? Or that you're deprived of your right to see anything you want, anytime you want?

**Elizabeth Diller:** Of course I'm aware that I have no such right. But the same thing

bothers me in other fields, too. In art for instance: the behavior of a collector who withdraws an iconic work from the public realm is *unsocial* in the same way. And if I transfer this to the blurring of architecture in Google Street View, then the criticism stands in the same way: if someone lives in a building that is of interest to other people – because it was built by a famous architect, or even just because it’s a great building – then that person also has a duty. A moral duty at least.

**Google:** But perhaps this person just wants to protect the building from the public’s overly curious gaze?

**Elizabeth Diller:** You mean they would be acting in the interest of the building because the building might be damaged by a concentration of gazes? That sounds a little esoteric, don’t you think?

**Google:** Whether or not it sounds esoteric is not for me to say. But Lacan tells us that the gaze can endanger the autonomy of the subject. Why shouldn’t the same apply to an object?

**Elizabeth Diller:** Quite simply because the building doesn’t blur itself. It’s blurred by its owner. An interpretation that I could accept, however, is that of a transference on the part of the owner, who over-identifies with the object and projects his own fears onto it.

**Algorithm:** So you’re saying that the blur that inserts itself as an image between the viewer and the building is responding to a purely human need based on the fear of being seen or identified? But that would contradict Virilio’s hypothesis that you cited before, according to which there is a “third” force controlling this process.

**Elizabeth Diller:** In all these things, we can never be quite sure. And in my view, the Lacanian reading and Virilio’s theory do not rule each other out. On the contrary, a process of moving away from the Cartesian space-time paradigm automatically evokes a transitional state of uncertainty, which in turn prompts fear as an instinctive reaction.

**Blur:** So you’re saying I’m a product of fear?

**Elizabeth Diller:** More a product of uncertainty perhaps. But this indeterminacy is

also full of possibilities and potential. It is only out of formlessness and an absence of definition that the new can develop freely, without the burden of predetermination.

**Blur:** So I'm a kind of primal state?

**Elizabeth Diller:** Yes, maybe that too. But perhaps you're also a primal fog whose mysterious appearance only seems mysterious to us because we haven't yet seen through the essence behind it. If there is indeed any essence. It's also possible that you're a para-phenomenon, beyond any explanation in terms of natural science.

**Blur:** An animistic principle?

**Elizabeth Diller:** Yes, maybe even animistic. You probably know that the great architect Louis Kahn told his students that whenever they didn't know what to do and needed advice, they should ask their building material, the stones.

**Blur:** No, I didn't know that. Did it help?

**Elizabeth Diller:** We don't know. What we do know is that Kahn drew his inspiration from the following: DNA, light, and ruins. He saw DNA as a carrier of information, light as the basic condition for any built space, and ruins as the guarantor of the aura of what has been built.

**Algorithm:** Yes, which makes Kahn guilty of magical thinking.

**Blur:** How so?

**Algorithm:** Simple. Because the concept of aura is as undefined as the concept of the blur. Which puts us firmly in the realm of speculative metaphysics. And this in spite of Walter Benjamin's efforts to rehabilitate the concept and anchor it in the art-historical canon (*sounds almost annoyed*).

**Elizabeth Diller:** Precisely. Which is why my reference to Kahn was meant to bring us not to the aura but to ruins (*pauses for a moment*). In recent years, ruins have received more attention than ever before. This may be due to the interdisciplinary involvement of previously neglected fields of academic research such as archaeology, but on a more banal level it could also be due to a phenomenon like Islamic State, whose



deliberate deconstruction of cultural heritage reminded the West of the fragility of its management of memory.

**Google:** Which is an unbeatable argument in favor of Google Street View. If Google were able to do its work in the Middle East with the same diligence, we would still have at least virtual access to these important sites that have now vanished.

**Landlord:** That's as may be. But I somehow doubt whether the responsibility for such a far-reaching task should be in the hands of a company like Google.

**Public:** That's another discussion that should be conducted elsewhere. And it is conducted at regular intervals, whenever Google unilaterally annexes new fields of activity. One need only think of Google Library and the controversial digitization of entire stocks of books.

**Elizabeth Diller:** Google's power-grabbing strategies is something we really should discuss some other time. My reason for introducing the theme of the ruin was as follows: whereas it was never important for architects in the pre-Modernist age to think about what their buildings would look like afterwards – because architecture usually outlived those who built it – since Modernism it has become the norm for architects to occasionally experience the deconstruction of their work. Today, people don't built for eternity, just until the next aesthetic watershed. Those lucky architects whose work proves to be lasting and timeless, and who come to prominence in the course of their careers, have their work treated with more care – everything else is torn down again at the first signs of displeasure (*appears dejected*).

**Blur:** So modern architects suffer a humiliation that is without precedent in the history of architecture?

**Elizabeth Diller:** Yes, in psychoanalytical terms you could put it that way. And this is precisely where ruins have taken on a new importance. Because the ruin is no longer just something unfamiliar that was built many centuries ago and has since been levelled by nature. All of a sudden, the ruin is something whose inauguration was merrily celebrated not so many years hence, something familiar that one has become fond of, and which now, for no apparent good reason, has been reduced to piles of rubble, sorted by material if you're lucky (*needs to catch her breath*).

**Blur:** That must be hard to bear.

**Elizabeth Diller:** Indeed. But the trickiest thing is that this whole issue of ruins was anticipated by someone whose name I would have preferred to keep out of this discussion: Albert Speer (*pauses for a moment*). Although Speer became known for many unpleasant things, I think his most important contribution to architectural history is a footnote that has been discussed relatively little to date, namely his theory of *ruin value*. Speer first mentioned this term retrospectively in 1969, in his best-known publication *Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs*. In this book, he describes ruin value theory as a method that served as the conceptual basis for most of the monumental architecture he designed for the Nazis: How will this building be perceived at the end of the “thousand-year Reich” and after its possible collapse? How can architecture still be impressive even in a ruinous state?

**Public:** You’re not planning to rehabilitate Albert Speer now, are you?

**Elizabeth Diller:** No, of course not. Nonetheless, Speer’s ideas are interesting as they so fittingly address the problems of time and decay inherent in architecture in general (*pauses for a moment*). Also, Speer shared a source of inspiration with Louis Kahn, namely the ruined landscapes of the Roman Empire and the way they are perceived today. In his late work, Kahn focused systematically on these issues, talking about “ruins in reverse” and subjecting his architecture to a hypothetical gaze from the future. How will this building be perceived in a thousand years’ time? And will the eyes that see it be human eyes?

**Google:** This farsightedness is interesting, at least in the context of art. As a representative of Google, I can at least guarantee that our company plans in much shorter timespans (*brief smile*). But of course, the way time is perceived also plays an important part in all of our projects. You only need to look at Google Street View: when we launched the service internationally in 2008, it wasn’t clear to us that the image material would have to be completely updated within just a few years. Every street, every area is constantly changing. And no one who looks at Street View to get their bearings having moved to a new neighborhood, for instance, will be happy to be presented with historical image material. Which is why, at least in more heavily frequented zones, Google now tries to make sure the street views are updated at halfway regular intervals.

**Landlord:** But that doesn't really apply to Germany, does it? Whenever I use Google Street View, I always see the old images with a copyright stamp from 2008.

**Google:** You're right, Germany is an exception.

**Public:** But why is that? Does Google not like Germany?

**Google:** Google does like Germany, but the sentiment is not reciprocated (*smiles*). If you remember, when we presented Google Street View in Germany in 2008, the immediate response was a wave of outrage across the country. The Germans saw their personal rights at risk, their privacy under threat. Over a period of two years, there were continual legal disputes with class actions and appeals for the service to be banned, quickly pushing Google's team in Germany to its limits. Around late 2010, an agreement was finally reached, stating that landlords would have the right to have their house or apartment made unrecognizable in Google Street View. Or, as we call it, blurred (*smiles*). This option was available in Google Street View internationally from the outset, but outside of Germany it was rarely used.

**Landlord:** Ah yes, I remember. I immediately had our house blurred, too, of course (*smiles*). I'd totally forgotten.

**Google:** But for Google, the real work had only just begun. Because media feedback led us to be inundated with applications. Before the service went live, we received 250,000 requests, and then many more after the launch. Although our system is largely automated, the blurring always had to be done by hand. No one at Google had anticipated this added workload. Not to mention the added costs (*smiles*).

**Public:** Yes, but luckily your company has reserves. And as we see, it's still operating in the market today.

**Google:** That's true. Following these endeavors, however, the mood inside the company concerning Street View in Germany was not good. So it was decided that in Germany, all of the developments systematically pursued by Google in other countries would be frozen for the time being (*pauses for a moment*). Which, to answer your question, is why Google Street View in Germany has largely not been updated since 2008.

**Landlord:** I see.

**Google:** I say largely because in 2017 we started updating the map data for Germany and since then we have been regularly sending our vehicles out onto the streets. But you can imagine that within the processing and updating of the old image material, the manual blurring of the 3D environment constitutes the lion's share of the work.

**Elizabeth Diller:** But can't the new image material just be overlaid over the existing blur?

**Google:** That would be great, and it would certainly make things a lot easier. But the blur is not a separate layer within the 3D environment of Google Street View, it is rendered directly into the image. We were legally required to do this at the time. Google had to guarantee that the original image material would no longer exist.

**Landlord:** So if I were to contact Google now and ask for the original pictures of my house prior to blurring, you could not retrieve them?

**Google:** That is correct. And, believe it or not, our forums are full of people making just such requests (*smiles*). Today, many people no longer think their house needs to be blurred, or they've moved and their new house was blurred by the previous owner. There are many possible reasons. But unfortunately there's nothing we can do. The data simply no longer exist.

**Elizabeth Diller:** Would it not be a good idea, then, to develop a non-destructive and interactive interface for Street View 2.0 in which users can blur and unblur their houses at will? Maybe this could even be used to express moods: I'm not feeling good today, my house is blurred, etc. (*smiles*).

**Google:** That's certainly a good idea. If you'd like to propose it to Google, I'd be happy to pass it on (*smiles*). Joking apart, however, of course usability and interaction are the key criteria in the interface design for Google Street View. But in the development phase, user behavior was expected to be more dynamic.

**Landlord:** You mean Google would have liked Street View to be used in a more participatory manner?

**Google:** Yes.

**Landlord:** Like Sim City with real architecture?

**Google:** Not necessarily that, but many ideas were discussed in the development phase.

**Elizabeth Diller:** Of course one can imagine many things. One would only have to remove the geographical, copyright-related and proprietary aspects of Google Street View: prosthetic extension of representative classicist buildings; a brokering group trading only with modernist architecture; entire neighborhoods consisting entirely of blur buildings – there are no limits to the immersive possibilities. But my favorite project would be an *invisible house*.

**Google:** And how would such a house be captured by our Street View car?

**Elizabeth Diller:** You'd have to invent a Google Street View car *without* a camera.

**Landlord:** Or a *camera* without a camera.

**Google:** Ah, I see what you're driving at. You mean that something that cannot be seen can also not be captured in a picture.

**Elizabeth Diller:** Precisely.

**Google:** But that violates the first rule of the law of illusions.

**Elizabeth Diller:** Which is?

**Google:** Something that needs hiding is always best concealed in public.

**Elizabeth Diller:** Ah, you mean hidden in plain sight. But that doesn't always work.

**Google:** Under which conditions does it not work?

**Elizabeth Diller:** It doesn't work when the public gaze suddenly drifts and loses its focus. Then, what was hidden becomes visible again, at least for a split-second.

**Google:** You mean that simple defocusing makes the invisible visible?

**Elizabeth Diller:** Yes. When we defocus our gaze, the range of frequencies in the incoming light spectrum shifts, allowing us to see things that were not previously visible to our eyes. By such a simple shifting of frequency range, things can be seen that exist on a different frequency range.

**Google:** Interesting, I must try it sometime. And what kind of things does one see?

**Elizabeth Diller:** It varies, depending on the test person's state of consciousness.

**Algorithm:** That sounds like something I've heard of before, but without ever understanding how it actually works: a phenomenon called *remote viewing*.

**Public:** Ah, it's interesting you should mention that. I happen to know something about it. But not many people are familiar with remote viewing. A test person concentrates on a target to the point where a picture of it appears in their mind. In the confusion and upheaval of the 1960s, remote viewing was one of the phenomena of extrasensory consciousness that were studied more or less publicly at Stanford University. With funding from the CIA, many of these programs were kept alive into the 1990s. The military always hoped that remote viewing could be developed for the purposes of espionage, but eventually the program was shut down due to a lack of results. At least that was the official version. But Ingo Swann, the director of Project Stargate, had always been more interested in the poetological dimension of this paratechnology, delivering increasingly precise descriptions of the rings of Jupiter and similarly crazy stuff that was worthless for the CIA.

**Algorithm:** Many thanks for the detailed description. So remote viewing is exactly the kind of camera without a camera someone mentioned just now. Although if I imagine remote viewing as a flying eye, I find it rather creepy.

**Public:** Rather creepy, yes. I'm immediately reminded of a quote from Sartre: "I understand that I'm in hell. All those eyes intent on me. Devouring me."

**Elizabeth Diller:** Yes, that's Sartre's introduction to his story of the keyhole: Someone watches other people through a keyhole, but it is only when he's caught doing so that he feels ashamed.

**Public:** Exactly. But what Sartre describes here is a principle of *interpersonal* communication. And the focus is on the formation and development of a basic *human* emotion. Learning to deal with shame is at least as important as learning to accept one's own nakedness.

**Algorithm:** Does this mean that if someone has their house blurred, they might not have learned to compensate for their sense of shame in a positive way?

**Elizabeth Diller:** It could mean that. But I think there's a crucial difference between being observed by a drone or by a human being (*smiles*).

**Algorithm:** That's true. There would be a difference. But what is it exactly?

**Elizabeth Diller:** Good question. But the answer may actually be quite simple: If we are being watched by a human being, we can assess the situation because we can understand the person and their patterns of behavior. With a drone, things are slightly different. Even if we know that the drone is being controlled by a human being, we can't be totally sure. And if the drone were being controlled by an algorithm or by some completely unknown form of intelligence, anything would be possible.

**Algorithm:** Does that mean that our *instinctus naturae*, developed over millennia, has come to an end?

Elizabeth Diller: Possibly so. For the time being. But my intuition tells me that we shouldn't care too much.