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Viewers enjoying August Fuhrmann's stereoscopic Kaiserpanorama in 1880s Berlin. See [Crary 1999]



Geographicae enarrationis

Research

From Circle to Ellipse: Footnotes to a Photographic Essay

Abstract. In linguistics, ellipsis (from the Greek: *élleipsis*, “omission”) or elliptical construction refers to the omission from a clause of one or more words that would otherwise be required by the remaining elements. Photography encapsulates a wide range of experiential possibilities with the rhetoric of visualization and discursivity. The medium constantly reminds us of the basic geometric principles of perspective: perceived rather than measured, brought into consciousness through basic knowledge without need to name the phenomenon. It is the image that fills the gap, pronouncing elliptically what we feel, see and conclude, while the subject recounts the story.

¹ Circular models of urban planning—Paris being oft-quoted, down to the simple traffic island—introduce centers where there are none, developed entirely from a geometrical plan with streets converging to a central point. Punctuating the urban landscape, monuments and fountains designate places to be approached from all sides. As objects and in plan they are typically round, but they are never circular to the eye.

² Similarly, most circular architectural structures are unusual, even curious—simultaneously typical and atypical. For the most part, they can be categorized as containers (water, fuel and spectacles), towers (cylindrical), cages (mostly bird cages, at times with domelike structures) and (of course) churches, reverberating with the phrase “God is a circle whose centre is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere” (pseudo-Hermes Trismegistus, *The Book of the 24 Philosophers*, twelfth century). The spaces are measurable, but the experience is not. This is where architecture and photography meet.

³ Photography tells us about our experience, enabling verification of discrepancies between the real and the perceived. Our desire to expand perception of the real—starting with early experiments in immersive environments (see panoramas)—to more recent technological developments in virtual space, also alludes to the speculative aspects of photography:

For Bergson, the ‘virtual’ served as an ontological distinction between the possible and the actual; aligned with the possible, the virtual was posed over and against the actual and the real. ... Bergson’s use of ‘virtual’ seems to be taken directly from its optical definition, as if he were familiar with the Keplerian distinction between imago and pictura. Bergson turns the optics of light rays into a metaphor for perception: ‘To obtain this conversion from the virtual to the actual,’ he writes, ‘it would be necessary, not to throw more light on the object, ... Then we have total reflection. The luminous point gives rise to a virtual image which symbolizes, so to speak, the fact that the luminous rays cannot pursue their way ... The objects merely abandon something of their real action in order to manifest their virtual influence [...] this is as much to say that there is for images merely a difference of degree, and not of kind, between being and being consciously perceived.’

The difference emphasized by Bergson here—‘between being and being consciously perceived’—becomes the difference between the real and the virtual [Friedberg 2006: 141].

⁴ Theorizing photography extends into its subject matter, and touches as much on philosophical matters of time and space as on the everyday and its paradoxes:

*Several of Duchamp’s cryptic statements on the transition from the space of everyday life to the four-dimensional continuum suggest that the series of overlapping circles super-imposed upon these segments indicate entry into a fourth dimension. For Duchamp, the circle was a figure of dimensional collapse. In a text from *The Green Box* he demonstrated this conviction by describing the rotation of a horizontal dividing line, G that intersects a vertical axis. This vertical line suggests a division into a left plane and a right, which are occupied by points A and B. Duchamp attempted to demonstrate the collapse of such a ‘left’ and ‘right’ by asserting that the dividing line G may rotate in three dimensions either to the left toward A or the right toward B, but in either case the continuous path of circular rotation—in which one end meets the other destroys left and right, displacing them by two isomorphic but directionally opposite continuums [Joselit 1998: 66].*

⁵ Considering the limits that language places on expressing the breadth of human experience, we are indebted to Jorge Luis Borges, whose analogy for the rhetorical geometry of knowledge remains unrivaled:

I declare that the Library is endless. Idealists argue that the hexagonal rooms are the necessary shape of absolute space, or at least of our perception of space. They argue that a triangular or pentagonal chamber is inconceivable. (Mystics claim that their ecstasies reveal to them a circular chamber containing an enormous circular book with a continuous spine that goes completely around the walls. But their testimony is suspect, their words obscure. That cyclical book is God.) Let it suffice for the moment that I repeat the classic dictum: The Library is a sphere whose exact center is any hexagon and whose circumference is unattainable [Borges 1998: 112-113].

⁶ By deliberate omission, by creating a gap, we open up a space—like a parentheses, or the ellipsis in a sentence—and our imagination steps in to fully inhabit the space to be comprehended. Fragments become representative of the whole, while reiteration helps us to dwell on the various aspects:

For the self, exposed to the meaninglessness of existence, the circle is an orientational pattern that can impose coherence on the infinity of being: it transforms the infinite into unity, either through the beacon of a center, with reference to a potentially inclusive whole, or through the comprehensive totality of a circumference, with reference to a center thus potentially defined. ... The self is experienced only through its thoughts and actions, which appear to it as a continual process of expansion toward a circumference that is the fullness it lacks [Von Molnar 1987: 163].

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OUTSIDE THE ASTRODOME—While it's almost indescribable inside The Astrodome, it is also superb OUTSIDE as this photo shows. Taken during a near capacity baseball game it clearly shows the planning that has gone into customer parking services at Houston's air-conditioned all-purpose stadium.

*M. Kelly's
Oldenwald*
Jay's & Regina

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ASTROCARD

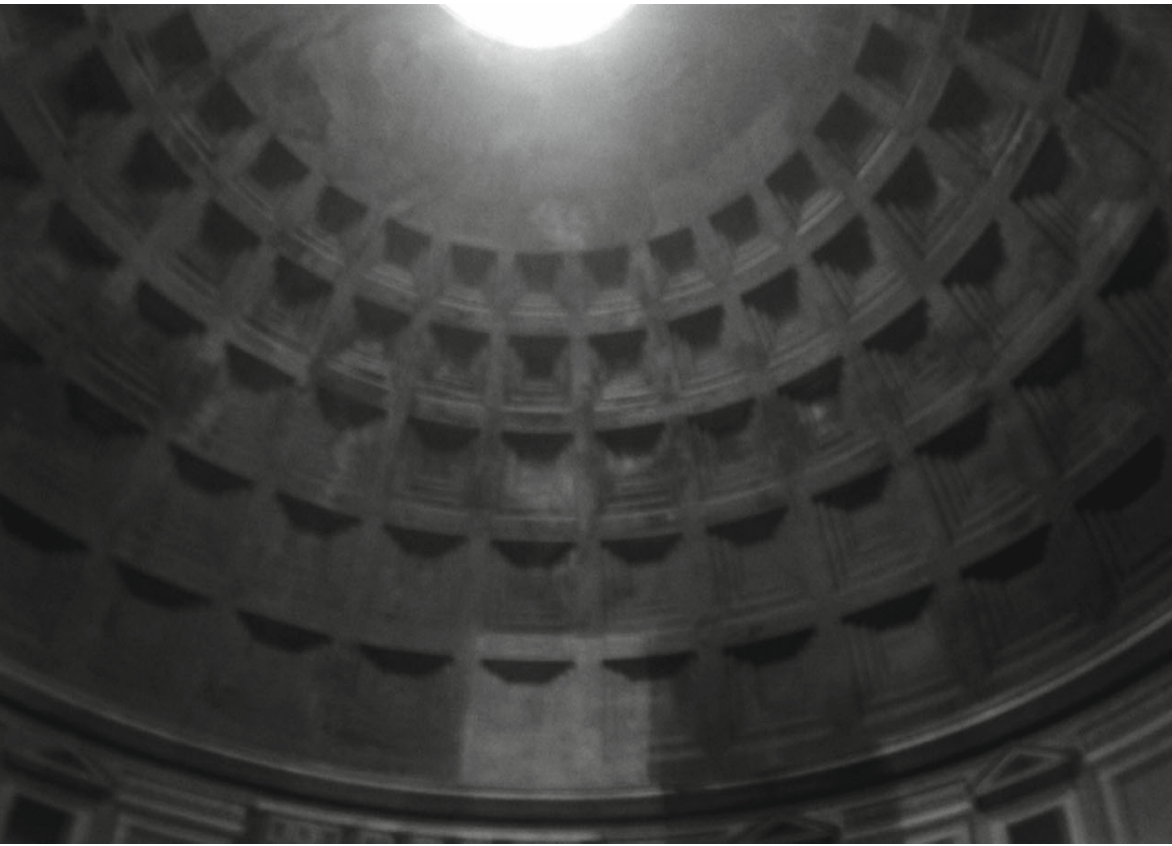
PLACE
STAMP
HERE

Found postcard of the Astrodome in Houston (1965)























Acknowledgments

All photographs in this essay are by Angela Grauerholz unless otherwise credited.

About the author

Artist/photographer, graphic designer, Angela Grauerholz teaches book design and photography at the École de design, Université du Québec in Montréal where she is presently directing the Centre de design at UQAM. Her extensive exhibition record includes participation in major national and international events, such as the Biennale of Sydney, Documenta IX in Kassel, and the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, Fotofest in Stockholm, and the Biennale de Montréal, as well as exhibitions at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, the Power Plant in Toronto, and the Albright-Knox Museum in Buffalo, The Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College, Chicago, the Blaffer Gallery, The Art Museum of the University of Houston, the Vancouver Public Library. She recently completed a work for the web: www.atworkandplay.ca.