

Mischa Leinkauf*Night on Earth*

Sep 12, 2025 - Oct 18, 2025

Opening: September 11, 6-10pm

The philosopher Susanne Langer once made the provocative claim that representation precedes reality. Say I have a cat – there is no reason to identify it as *my real cat* until I create a sculptural miniature of it. Only *after representation* is the idea of a *real cat* necessary. Langer's cat is an analogy of Plato's cave. Emerging from the hall of shadows, the former cave-dweller encounters a world, the "real" world, experienced as such by virtue of the cave's shadows. In the cave, a captive audience is chained to a wall. They do not see or hear for themselves. Rather, those who hold the audience captive place objects in front of a flame, casting shadows. They call out names they have chosen, which do not necessarily correspond to the object, and even less so to the shadow.

What Langer's cat does not capture, which Plato's cave does, is the role of responsibility in making sense of the world outside the cave. In the cave, whatever the captive audience perceives is chosen and named for them. They do not know that they have no choice. Outside the cave, the historical analogy of light as truth goes only so far: light reveals, but it does not explain. The primacy of vision leads us down strange paths in a world where there is ever more reason to be sceptical of what we see. What does it mean to say we've "seen the light" in a time where vision is commodified as units of "views", and where seeing, as John Berger explained, following Walter Benjamin, is an act untethered from any concept of "the original", dissolving the premise of an origin?

Mischa Leinkauf's new body of work continues a longer trajectory, probing the line between real and representation. In *Night on Earth*, we follow a glowing figure through the tunnels that spread like mycelial roots just beneath the surface of Berlin. Why does the figure glow? We do not know if their glow is the warm light of the world outside the cave, or a reflection of the cave fire. In some ways, it does not matter. In Ted Chiang's *Tower of Babylon*, we follow a character who scales the tower as if exiting the cave. At the summit is a hatch that separates their world from the oceans of the heavens. Water gushes out from the sky as they climb in and swims to the top. They glance upwards upon arrival at the shore, only to see the tower they have just climbed. What appears to be an exit to the heavens, is only a return to the world already inhabited.

Exit signs, in other words, can be misleading. What behaviour do they direct in directing us toward something? Did Plato's cave have exit signs? Exit signs imply the possibility of transition from one space to another. They imply a transition from the falsehood of the cave's flame, to light's revelation. But what light reveals still asks of us some judgement. It is not enough to sense the world, we must also *make sense* of the world. Leinkauf's *Retroreflex* is a series of signs that mimic the aesthetic of exit signs, as well as the material characteristic of light reflection. They are illuminated intermittently, by the soft glow of the screen; a mediated flame. These are exit signs that give no direction. They confront us with a general imperative to exit, but it is up to us to determine both how to exit, and what it would mean to exit. Where would we exit to? The word

“utopia” is derived from the Greek for “non-place.” It is a place that does not exist. How can we learn to exit to a more meaningful nowhere?

The photo series *Parallax* underlines this bifurcated understanding of viewing as both truth and deception. Focus on an object and then take turns alternating between closing your right and then left eye. The object appears to move, but that is an illusion. All that has moved is the place from which you are viewing it. Leinkauf stacks images from inside and above the tunnel. Stacking images from above and inside the tunnel, Leinkauf emphasises the collapse of one space into the other. The world outside the cave is folded into the cave. In collage-like montages, architectures of political power encounter places of subjective exclusion, individual re-coding, and symbolic release. Placing them on the same page reveals their common artifice. World and cave are continuous, resembling a cylinder seal, imprinting separate images onto a clay tablet of time, as a single object, turns.

One could be tempted here to deduce that parallax is not a change in perspective, but a simultaneity of perspective, whereby both viewpoints are valid at the same time. But the difference between real and relative is real, even if the experience of that difference is relative to each of us. It may strike some as a privileged position to claim that the reality is both definite and relative. Tell this to someone who wants to flee the destruction of civilian infrastructure for Fortress Europe. Borders are enforced through violence, even if the line exists only as an abstraction. This is a difference that has *real effects* on people’s lives. Just saying that, though, is not enough. Today we witness almost everything. We know things, as they appear through clips, sound bytes, and other conventional formats of the attention economy. But just knowing does not mean we understand. Perhaps one of the most challenging tasks today is how to *make sense* of what we know. Paradoxically, those conventional formats through which we know the world makes us more ignorant of it. There are newspapers whose silence on *certain* current events is deafening, and whose loudness on others says nothing. There is an urgent need to develop novel formats for translating what is known into what is made sense of in ways that are generative of action.

For Michel Serres, all relationships are constituted by three parties: the sender, the receiver, and the parasite who interrupts or corrupts the original message. Leinkauf’s presence is thick in this series. The show traces a narrative arc, from the glowing shapes of the cave wall, to the path out through the underground tunnels, to what the cave-dweller sees outside in the “real” world. Leinkauf himself treads parasitically along the skin between reality and representation, echoing Serres’s notion of the parasite. Although we are in his exhibition, his role is not so much that of a producer of images (a sender), or a recipient of cave shadows (receiver), but a critical praxis of interrupting the line, the transmission, between the two. Leinkauf’s work demonstrates a method of interruption as creative *abuse*. He features prominently throughout his practice, as if to demonstrate how to do something. His work makes clear the artifice of authority: that borders exist with violent effect, but only as an abstraction. Hence why, when some countries refuse to acknowledge borders, they are criminalised; when others break borders, they do so with the consent and support of the world that historically set those lines. While Leinkauf has never claimed to offer answers, in demonstrating that artifice is the condition of authority, he lends us a method for making that artifice together.

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