Spheres of Glass

Re-Imagining Aesthetics of Nature and the Social

Edited by Katrin Pesch, Tim Ridlen, Melinda Guillen, Elizabeth D. Miller, and Mariana Botey

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I N S E R T
Paul Thek
Untitled (Earth Drawing I) ca. 1974

INTRODUCTION

Katrin Pesch and Tim Ridlen

Placid fields of bright blue swim on yellowed ground. Small dabs and busy strokes of white layer the surface and enliven the perfect circle that has been spared from the translucent expanse of black covering more than half of the picture plane. Where the black ends, the lettered terrain of printed news becomes visible and literally dates the image ground: INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE, Wednesday January 2, 1974; Thursday, January 3, 1974; and Saturday/ Sunday, January 5-6, 1974. Scantly escaping the reach of the crude black lapping against its margin, *Ashland Oil reports record fiscal year results*. The heading is offset by familiar images of offshore drilling platforms, gigantic pipelines, and workers fastening valves. *Sales rise* and *all-time highs* are followed by promising numbers, but even short of the rhetoric of *progress*, *growth*, or *gains* the bare newsprint generously framing the copy reveals the buying power of the newspaper display ad. Rows of numbers log *New York Stock Exchange Trading, U.S. Commodity Prices* and *Eurodollars*. In other news, *$600-Million Loan Said to Be Sought by Shell Group*. Upside down cartoons emerge from the morass under the brilliant terrestrial sphere in the center, where graphic panels stuffed with everyman's sentiments rub against a cluster of job postings for *International Executive Opportunities*. Most tentatively stated—in *Figures Hard to Pin Down—U.S. Conservation Measures Produce some Power Savings*.

The earth's image is rendered solely in blues and whites, evoking NASA's iconic photograph from 1972, the first one to depict the fully illuminated earth in its entirety. An image famously turned on its head to meet cartographic conventions and viewer expectations, *The Blue Marble* went on to become the sign post of

the environmentalist movement and still ranks high among the most reproduced photographs in human history. Paul Thek's *Untitled (Earth Drawing 1)*, ca. 1974, painted with acrylic on four sheets of newsprint, casts the seemingly timeless image of the whole earth onto blacked-out newspaper pages. *Untitled (Earth Drawing 1)* thus sets the scene for thinking about collisions of nature and culture as they are embroiled in capitalist schemes and social struggle.

This issue of Unweave and the accompanying exhibition are both rather modest proposals for how to think about the relationship between nature and the social. The context for such a proposal is undoubtedly the academic setting we find ourselves in at the University of California San Diego, a setting in which scientists and engineers, predominantly, discover and invent the world. Conventional wisdom has it that the individuals who discover and invent the world are not separate from, but a part of that world. A few suggestions follow: the objective observer has been dethroned, the subject has been decentered, the human (and humanism) has been superseded. While some of these suggestions intuitively feel correct, the collision of ideas captured by the term "posthumanism" leaves the world in a state of ruin. As editors and curators, we sought to describe a condition where nature and the social threaten to collapse, but ruination remains only a promise. The threat of collapse, or "reconciliation" as the aesthetic philosopher Theodor Adorno would call it, appears like an apparition in the work of art. He writes, "Art holds fast to the promise of reconciliation in the midst of the unreconciled: This is the true consciousness of an age in which the real possibility of utopia—that given the level of productive forces the earth could here and now be paradise—converges with the possibility of total catastrophe."[1] The artwork deceitfully holds out for the possibility of reconciling nature and culture, subject and object, the concept of a thing and its material form. While the artwork can imagine and describe this reconciliation, it does so knowing that reconciliation has not come to pass. The proposal in *Spheres of Glass* is a simple reminder of this strange scenario, that utopia or catastrophe is yet to come.

Although engaging different textual strategies, many of the articles in this issue formulate their own proposals. Beginning with the rhetoric of vitality in the postwar period, a rhetoric stoked by the detonation of the atomic bomb, Drew Snyder's text suggests that the economic, political, and cultural spheres were appropriated under a redefined concept of "life." The atom bomb, with its power to destroy or unify a nation, serves as perhaps the best example of how "the seeming elevation of life in fact came often at its own expense," as Snyder writes. Also within the postwar period and under the shadow of the bomb, Tim Ridlen's text in this issue revisits the filmmaker Maya Deren's unfinished film project in Haiti about ritual dance with Walter Benjamin's concept of the mimetic faculty. Reading Deren's cinematic idiom through the mimetic faculty allows Ridlen to understand the successes and limitations of her project as those of the cinematic medium itself and of the disciplinary boundaries of art and anthropology. Deren's writing on film in 1946 may have framed the technology of cinema optimistically as a medium capable of equaling the power of the bomb, but her quasi-ethnographic film in Haiti offers, again, only a promise of reconciliation, with no assurances that the disciplines of art and science can speak to one another.

The lessons of "failure" require careful consideration. In her text on the Pruitt-Igoe public housing project, Sabine Horlitz asks what conflicts are actually elided in the image of its failure and subsequent destruction. Celebrated as the death of modern architecture and social planning, the "failure" of Pruitt-Igoe was constructed in the interest of changing political winds, but it also foreclosed more radical considerations about the way we cohabitate in the world. The explosion of Pruitt-Igoe was the public image of a failed humanism, and it remains to this day 33 acres of overgrown foliage, a reminder that the legacy of mid-century catastrophe and failure is the foundation of the twenty-first century nature/culture dichotomy.[2]

In putting together the exhibition for *Spheres of Glass*, there were many pieces that we regrettably could not include. Edward Kihn's *Damage Report*, an installation of four 16-mm films, has instead been included here as a project log. Each film tracks

a simulation of environmental elements (earth, fire, wind, and water) that attempts to measure risk in the hopes of averting disaster. The project log conveys only part of the research behind Kihn's films, but nonetheless presents the local San Diego environment as part of a contemporary risk culture.

Also approaching disaster from a cinematic perspective, Katrin Pesch's text connecting the European heatwave of 2003 with a serial killer in the film *I Can't Sleep* (1994) by French filmmaker Claire Denis redefines environmental catastrophes and the narratives that they engender. In writing about a serial killer and a heatwave on equal terms, elements of fact and fiction carry the same weight, so long as they figure new narratives about the entities produced by anthropogenic climate change. Pesch's text asks the reader to consider the environment from the position of the decentered subject, where things can be described but never explained or revealed.

A decentered subject might be called an "animated spectator" by Tom Sparrow. Depending on how an artwork orients us, its potential for emancipation works through the principle of animation, the way the aesthetic animates our bodies, our perceptions, and our identities. As Sparrow writes in his text for this issue, emancipation through animation "requires a double affirmation" that "democratizes the aesthetic" at the same time that it "calls for giving oneself over to the contingency of aesthetics." The animated spectator or the decentered subject is not entirely mute, but rather adjusts to the environment around her, living, breathing, and dying by experimentation with new aesthetic forms.

Experimental engagement with—sometimes unexpected—aesthetic forms brings us to our final text. We close this issue with a text by Lesley Stern that shares the title of this publication and exhibition. Wanting to be seduced by the glasswork of the artist Dale Chihuly in Seattle, Stern found herself, instead, in a surprising encounter with spectral chickens. In reading her account of this aesthetic apparition and her safe return to San Diego, we wonder with Stern, just what is the cognitive dissonance we suffer from here?

NOTES

1. Theodore W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 45.

2. A proposal by Juan William Chávez to re-purpose a small part of Pruitt-Igoe as a community space for education and urban agriculture was included in the exhibition for *Spheres of Glass*. More info can be found at http://pruitt-igoebeesanctuary.com.

The Vitality of the Postwar, Questioned

Drew Snyder

In the first years after World War II, a new rhetoric of vitality emerged. More than just a marker of importance, the word "vital" and its derivatives came to support evolving economic, political and aesthetic appeals to life endorsed in different ways by allied governments, private enterprise, and artists of the early postwar period. The force of this rhetoric marked a break from earlier tendencies of vitalist discourse, which in the first half of the 20th century had reached more for essentialist explanations of the sources and currents of biological life.[1] The postwar vitalist discourse moved, on the other hand, toward economic and political arenas.

This research probes three examples of this movement that all came to prominence around 1949. One is Arthur Schlesinger's popular book *The Vital Center* (1949) and its influence on the rhetoric of President Harry Truman. The second is a notion of *Vitalpolitik*—"vital policy"—espoused by the German economist and grandfather of neoliberalism Alexander Rüstow as a new organizing logic for postwar labor and enterprise. Lastly, the essay turns briefly to the arts, where a rhetoric of vitality was leveraged to describe the new Abstract Expressionist aesthetics of the immediate postwar avant-garde, an aesthetics dubbed by some later art historical discourses as "Vital Forms."[2]

The argument is that the shifting surge in vitalist rhetoric after World War II came with a catch; namely, that it was not always to the benefit of life. In economic and political spheres, the neoliberal policy behind postwar vitalist rhetoric often worked to erode individuals' connection to public life for the sake of a view that reconfigured individuals as private "enterprises" within an increasingly complex economy.

And, more glaringly, the new developments of vitalist discourse occurred, overall, within the context of one of the most explosive and, indeed, *non-vital* developments of modern science: atomic weapons. In surveying the post-WWII rhetoric of life, one notices how "the bomb" was often brought under the umbrella of the vital. Indeed, positioned as both savior and destroyer, as a taker and preserver of life, the bomb's psychological force seemed to stem from its ability to straddle the lifeline. In his final State of the Union address in 1953, for example, President Truman eventually came to what he explicitly called "the most *vital* question of all." "Could there be built in the world a durable structure of security," he asks, "or would we drift . . . toward another terrible disaster—a disaster which this time might be the holocaust of atomic war?"[3]

Situated within the facts of his administration, in which he ordered the debut of atomic warfare over civilian-filled cities, in which his administration flirted with using the bomb preemptively in Korea, and in which he oversaw the general hardening of the Cold War environment, Truman's statement points to some of the paradoxes of the new vitalist rhetoric in its historical context. Despite that it was, if anything, the vitality of America's scientific militarism that made the end of all human life feel more palpable than ever before, postwar American political discourse shifted the narrative so that it became incumbent on the "vitality" of American liberalism to rescue the world. The President, of course, did not go so far as to add "from itself."

The Vital Center

In his State of the Union addresses between 1946 and 1953, Truman spoke repeatedly of "vital people," "vital industries," "vital interests," "vital raw materials," "vital minerals," "vital economy," "vital measures of foreign policy," and so on. He further describes things, such as "the benefits of modern science and industry," as the "ideals [that] give our cause a power and vitality that Russian communism can never command."[4] Among other things, this quotation was a veiled reference to the developing atomic arms race. It is furthermore, both in language and content, a testament to the influence and staying power of Schlesinger's *Vital Center*, which, in its strong attack against the communist left, offered the "vitality" of the free (American) individual life as the only viable blueprint for political progress.

When discussing Schlesinger's contribution to the (political) discourse of life in the early postwar years, particularly in the context of the legacies of the atomic bomb, it is important to recall that for him communism was a greater threat to human life than atomic warfare itself. Schlesinger maintained publicly in 1950 (after, it should be noted, the Soviet Union successfully tested their own bomb), that the United States "cannot afford to take too intransigent a position on the use of the bomb . . . Our first obligation," he continued, "must be to assure the survival of the free world, and this must override our objections to particular weapons."[5] This statement displays a sharp turn away from the popular American sentiment that immediately followed World War II, which saw America's use of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a greater threat to the West's survival than the war itself had ever been. We see this sentiment expressed by popular commentator Edward Murrow who, just a few days after the bombings, declared over the airwaves: "seldom, if ever, has a war ended leaving the victors with such a sense of uncertainty and fear, with such a realization that the future is obscure and that survival is not assured."[6] In both statements, the endurance of American life is at stake, but where Murrow casts the bomb as a threat to life, Schlesinger, representing mainstream political discourse, casts it as its protector.

One of the great rhetorical moves of the "Vital Center" was a redefinition of the pervasive atmosphere of anxiety in postwar America, which was deeply rooted in the U.S. bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as the inevitable result of America's "truly free" political system. Schlesinger contrasted this system against the constructed totalitarian alternative in which political subjects were barred from making their own life choices. The

irony is that political freedom was hardly the real source of America's anxiety. On August 20, 1945, *Time* gravely described how "the greatest and most terrible of wars ended, this week, in the echoes of an enormous event—an event so much more enormous that, relative to it, the war itself shrank into minor significance. The knowledge of victory was as charged with sorrow and doubt as with joy and gratitude."[7] These pages of *Time* magazine expressed much the same sentiments as Murrow's broadcast. The single deepest cause of public uncertainty and fear for survival was the atomic bomb itself, which, unlike communism, was entirely American-made.

From *Time* magazine, September 20, 1945. The Caption reads: "LIFE OR DEATH" "Baby play with nice ball?" Low © All Countries

However, instead of stemming from the uncertainty of human survival as a result of the threat of atomic war, Schlesinger repositioned public anxiety as a necessary, and indeed heroic, repercussion of American liberalism and modernity. He set up a contrast between the American political system and that of a totalitarian (read: Soviet) regime:

The final triumph of totalitarianism has been the creation of man without anxiety—of 'totalitarian man.' Totalitarianism sets out to liquidate the tragic insights which gave man a sense of his limitations. In their place it has spawned a new man, ruthless, determined, extroverted, free from doubts or humility, capable of infallibility, and on the higher echelons of the party, infallible. Against totalitarian certitude, free society can only offer modern man devoured by alienation and fallibility.[8]

Once one understands that Schlesinger's voice represented the political machine that unleashed the atomic bomb in the first place, the hubris of his statement becomes apparent. The rhetorical move of *The Vital Center* to admit a degree of fallibility and alienation works undercover as absolution of the original sin, a sin that, moreover, Schlesinger clearly viewed as worth repeating to protect his ideal of liberal politics against communism.

This is the postwar American rhetoric of the "Vital Center" at work. It suggests the "vital" as a Trojan horse, which, under the banner of life and freedom of political choice, ushered in an age of foreign and domestic policies that in fact threatened human life more than ever before. Of course, with its hubris unchecked, the liberalism championed by Schlesinger, and enacted by Truman, won out. With a sensibility that allowed for increasing private sector dominance and a hardening of America's militaristic foreign policies, the Democrats' steering of America at the beginning of the postwar period represented a general turn "toward the right" of the entire American political spectrum.[9]

Vitalpolitik

We find this rightward drift, and the presence of the "vital" within it, again in the language of Truman's State of the Union addresses. Truman warns, for example, both in 1947 and 1949, against "the special and unique problem" of labor strikes within "*vital* industries affecting the public," declaring them potential for "national disaster."[10] He cheers, in 1953, the ability of "this *live and vital* economy of ours" to, among other things, "sustain a great mobilization program for defense." And, more generally, in 1948, he asserts how "growth and *vitality* in our economy depend on rigorous private enterprise" (emphases added). This last quote, bringing "vitality" and "private enterprise" together,

puts Truman and the dominant politico-economic discourses of postwar America into contact with Alexander Rüstow's contemporaneous neoliberal ideas concerning a *Vitalpolitik*.[11]

Inherent in *Vitalpolitik* is a suspicion of the social as "an absolute value rooted in its ethical purpose;" instead, if anything, Rüstow supports the configuration of smaller "communities" as more conducive paths to individual well-being (with a feeling of well-being understood, in turn, as crucial to one's productivity).[12] Rüstow described "the vital situation of man" as that which "extends from the tangible facts of his income, of his profession, of his dwelling, of his family, to the intangibles of his subconscious, of his *Weltanschauung*, of his religion." "Everywhere," Rüstow declared, "it must be our goal to create conditions and attitudes which make it possible for man to feel well."[13] Posed as an alternative to *Sozialpolitik*—a system of socially oriented (statist) economic strategies—Rüstow's "vital policy" emphasized the individual and framed all aspects of an individual life in economic terms.

The consequence of this policy, which was echoed by the growing chorus of influential postwar (neo)liberal economists and policy makers, is a general splintering of the social for the sake of economic productivity, pointing toward that paradoxical construction of a community of individuals. But what does it really promise? In his lectures at the Collège de France in 1979, Michel Foucault probed the issue, asking

> *But what is this* Vitalpolitik *that Rüstow talks about, and of which this is an expression? Actually, as you can see, it is not a matter of constructing a social fabric in which the individual would be in direct contact with nature, but of constructing a social fabric in which precisely the basic units would have the form of the enterprise.*[14]

Foucault marks out a tendency of *Vitalpolitik* to decrease individuals' "direct contact with nature" within the social field for the sake of their reconfiguration as discrete units of production and consumption (turning everyone into an "enterprise"). He later describes this as "a policy of economization of the entire social field."[15] When we read Foucault's description of Rüstow's

Vitalpolitik in conjunction with Truman's 1948 statement that "growth and vitality in our economy depend on rigorous private enterprise," we see not only the convergence of early neoliberal thought within mainstream American political and economic discourse at the beginning of the postwar, but, within that, a system which has the clear potential to prioritize the individual's economic productivity above that individual's natural integration within a "social fabric." This could perhaps be seen as the classic atomization of postwar life in action. With the stated dependence of economic vitality on rigorous privatization, we see how this discourse worked to trade out the life of the individual for the sake of a lively economy.

By looking after individuals' material "well-being," convincing them that their worldly unease and alienation was a consequence of their freedom, and casting challenges to that freedom from the outside, more than any bomb, as the single most dangerous threat to human life, Rüstow's ideas and Truman's policies helped transform the economy into a powerful means of distraction and dissociation from organic social life. Indeed, this system normalized that which was inorganic and even unnatural—i.e. the fervent economization of life or the act of splitting the atom—which assisted in the construction of a radically different understanding of life in the postwar period.

Vital Forms

With their parallels to Rüstow's notion of *Vitalpolitik*, Truman's statements marked a turn away from the public sphere that was new for a party that in the previous decades had given the country a New Deal. A striking parallel occurred within the arts too, as the new language of abstract painters in New York shunned the left politics that many of those artists had cut their teeth on.

In 1950, in the midst of the Truman administration and the rise of Schlesinger's public stock, Jackson Pollock gave an interview in which the descriptions of his painting techniques could have just as easily stood in for the new politics. By using a stick instead of a brush, to take one example, he described how he was "able to be more free and to have greater freedom" to

move about the canvas.[16] His stated desire to be "more free," and the general attitude among the New York painters it represented, was affirmed time and again by a broad spectrum of contemporaneous art criticism, from Harold Rosenberg, for whom "the gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation," to Meyer Schapiro, who maintained that "the consciousness of the personal and spontaneous in the painting... confer to the utmost degree the aspect of the freely made."[17]

According to Pollock, his new techniques were required to express the new postwar era in which he was living, the age, in his words, of "the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio." It also, perhaps unwittingly, expressed the era's politics, both with his need for "greater freedom" as well as his need to turn inward, to express "an inner world—in other words—expressing the energy, the motion, and other inner forces." All of this he explicitly filters through a language of vitality when he describes "five or six" of his fellow contemporaries as "doing very *vital* work," work that, to Pollock, "seems very vibrant, very alive."[18]

These brief excerpts from Pollock's interview bring all the elements of political and economic vitalist discourse at the end of the 1940s into the avant-garde circles of postwar New York painting. In Pollock's own telling, he crafts his techniques to maximize his freedom; he acknowledges and then quickly turns away from the realities of the new Atomic Age, reaching to try to express instead his "inner world"—his own *vital situation*. And, while shunning the tendency to form collective visions and voices that marked the interwar avant-garde (the Surrealists, for example), he nevertheless identifies a small community of individuals, whose "vital" work he affirms through an unequivocal language of life.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to suggest "life" as a framework for rethinking the category of the postwar. I offer the triangulation of Schlesinger's "Vital Center," Rüstow's *Vitalpolitik*, and, briefly, the "Vital Forms" of postwar American art—all coming to

mainstream prominence contemporaneously around 1949—as a preliminary means of tracing the shifting discourse of life away from earlier philosophico-biological fields and onto the concrete realms of postwar politics, economics, and culture. This line of inquiry strongly suggests that claims of a new vitality were not all that they seemed, and that the seeming elevation of life in fact came often at its own expense. The most striking and powerful example of this occurs within the legacy of the atomic bomb, which, after ending hundreds of thousands of innocent lives, and after rattling the U.S. psyche to its core, was transformed, under the banner of life, into a protector of American liberalism.

Briefly tracing statements by Jackson Pollock showed how a sense of life, or liveliness, saturated the production and reception of the early postwar American avant-garde. The impulse to express the age of the atom bomb through a language of vitality, without ever asking what the sources and meanings of this brand of "vitality" represented, is at the core of the paradox of "Vital Forms." In 1953, perhaps unwittingly, Guggenheim director James Sweeny captured the sentiment and pointed to the paradox when he maintained, "Yesterday is not quite out of sight; tomorrow is not yet in view. But the atmosphere of vitality is unquestionable."[19] The goal of this research is to begin to undo that unquestionable nature of vitality in postwar America.

Finally, the utility of this research exceeds the time frame given here—roughly 1945 to 1953—as it can assist in constructing a new groundwork for rethinking later emergent developments and practices. This seems particularly the case in the arts at the end of the 1950s and early 1960s, in which a younger generation of artists looked to refute the problematic claims to life that came about in the immediate wake of World War II.

NOTES

1. As in Henri Bergson's notion of the *élan vital*, first iterated in the book *L'Évolution Créatrice* in 1907.

2. "Vital Forms: American Art and Design in the Atomic Age, 1940-1960" was an exhibition and catalog organized by the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2001. Vitalist rhetoric

and the atomic legacy are connected in other recent museological contexts, such as the catalog of the Guggenheim's 2012 exhibition *Art of Another Kind: International Abstraction at the Guggenheim 1949-1960*, in which an essay titled "A Vital Force: Abstract Art and Cultural Politics at Mid-Century" appears next to another titled "Abstract Sculpture of the Atomic Age."

3. Emphasis added. Transcripts from Pennsylvania State University online resources, © 2003. PDF: *www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/poldocs/.../suaddresshtruman.pdf*

4. Ibid. From the 1951 State of the Union.

5. Arthur Schlesinger, "History of the Week," *New York Post*, April 2, 1950. The quotes reappear with further insights in Michael Wreszin, "Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Scholar–Activist in Cold War America: 1946-1956," *Salmagundi*, No. 63/64 (Spring-Summer 1984): 276.

6. Edward R. Murrow, *In Search of Light: The Broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow 1938 – 1961*, ed. Edward Bliss and Jr. Alfred Knopf, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1967), 102-3.

7. *Time*, "The Peace," August 20, 1945, 27.

8. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: Our Purposes and Perils on the Tightrope of American Liberalism*, rev. ed. (1949; repr., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), 56.

9. See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), 191.

10. Pennsylvania State University Transcript, 87. In 1949, he echoed the same warning, declaring "Without endangering our democratic freedoms, means should be provided for setting up machinery for preventing strikes in vital industries which affect the public interest." (116).

11. The notion of *Vitalpolitik* is present in Rüstow's massive work "Freedom and Domination," which was first published in German in 1949 and was known to economist and political theorists in America. See for example Carl J. Friedrich, "The Political Thought of Neo-Liberalism," *The American Political Science Review* 49, no. 2, (June 1955).

12. Carl J. Friedrich, "The Political Thought of Neo-Liberalism," *The American Political Science Review* 49, no. 2, (June 1955): 513.

13. "*Ortsbestimmung der Gegenwart*," a radio lecture given by Rüstow on October 26, 1953 which was printed in the *Berner Bund*, January 23, 1953. Also quoted in Carl J. Friedrich, "The Political Thought of Neo-Liberalism," *The American Political Science Review* 49, no. 2 (June 1955): 513-14.

14. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics, Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Picador, New York (2008), 148.

15. Ibid., 242.

16. Jackson Pollock interview with William Right, *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 583-85. The interview was taped for the Sag Harbor radio station in the summer of 1950.

17. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News* (1952), reprinted in *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon, 1959), 27. Meyer Schapiro, "The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art," *Art News* 56, no. 4 (Summer 1957): 36-42.

18. Jackson Pollock interview with William Right, *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, 585.

19. James Sweeney, quoted in Tracey Bashkoff and Megan Fontanella, *Art of Another Kind: International Abstraction and the Guggenheim, 1949-1960* video, 8:58. June 8, 2012. http://www.guggenheim.org/video/art-of-another-kind-international-abstraction-and-the-guggenheim-19491960. Italics added.

Mimesis and Disciplinarity: Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen*

Tim Ridlen

Maya Deren has been called a legend for her work in the 1940s conjuring a new audience for film, and legitimating a mode of filmmaking that celebrated the amateur and the poetic film.[1] Reading Deren's work and writing against the tendency to label her cinematic idiom one of poetic metaphor, and against the grain of her own repeated comparisons to poetry, I propose in this paper that Maya Deren's cinematic idiom is one of possession and pertains to Walter Benjamin's concept of the "mimetic faculty."[2] Reading Deren's attempt at a film in Haiti about the Voudoun rituals of possession through Benjamin's idea of the mimetic faculty allows us to understand Deren's incomplete film in relation to her project to develop a cinematic avant-garde, and not as a failed scientific endeavor that exoticized the anthropological Other. Differing slightly with such readings of Deren's *Divine Horsemen*, I hope to show that, while Deren's project remains utopian in its attempt to turn the mimesis of cinema towards the "moral problems" of the Atomic Age, it holds out for an alternative kind of embodied knowledge through the moving image.

In his essay "On the Mimetic Faculty," Benjamin speaks of the body that first tested the mimetic faculty in child's play, where "[T]he child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill and a train."[3] Benjamin's invocation of child's play gives the mimetic a dimension that goes beyond likeness, beyond the visual alone, and relies more on *innervation* than copying, reanimating that which is represented. For Benjamin, mimesis acts like a tactile possession, breaking the

bounds of conceptual thought, and at both the level of inscription and the level of collective reception, it serves as an innervating rehearsal for a different kind of knowledge.

Deren's technique for film was elaborated throughout her lifetime, but in 1946 she wrote about it as a "ritual film." In her book, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and Film*, she made the techniques of a "ritual film" explicit, among them slow motion, reversal, montage, in-camera editing, and negative printing.[4] The ritual film is not reducible to these techniques, however. With the term "ritual," Deren attempts to capture a dimension of the social relevance of art through a depersonalization and elevation of the individual. In Deren's thinking, a ritual form of art is one whose achievements could match the achievements of science in its contributions to society by answering "moral problems which have been the concern of man's relationship with deity."[5] That is to say, the ritual form of art would contribute to an understanding of the world, just as science has done, but bring with it a moral component that was previously the function of religion. The crux of such a moral function is that the "ritualistic form treats the human being not as the source of the dramatic action, but as a somewhat depersonalized element in a dramatic whole."[7] At different moments in the production and reception of film, the artist, the actor, or the viewer is elevated to a "heroic stature" as they are endowed with meaning through their relationship to the whole. Furthermore, this relationship consists of a "conscious manipulation" or construction resulting in "the new, man-made reality."[8] Conscious construction alone does not guarantee that any and every artwork would be moral, but by theorizing a social relationship between the individual and the collective whole as the lynchpin of such construction, Deren's idea for a ritualistic art was an attempt to complement scientific knowledge with a form of knowledge that is collectively created.

The appearance of related concepts, such as intoxication, trance, and possession, in both Benjamin and Deren's writing must be read for their collective and social dimensions, something left by the wayside in the more evident sources of Deren's

thinking.[9] For Deren, reading the social dimension of ritual drives a crucial development in her interests from "trance" to rituals of possession. While the "trance film" notably becomes the label that Parker Tyler and P. Adams Sitney use to describe the early avant-garde, Deren's films included, Deren herself speaks of a ritual film that emphasizes its social existence, or "the large facts of its total culture," and of possession as "socially prescribed."[10] The label of Sitney and Tyler rests upon the trance as an expression of the individual consciousness, wherein, using *Meshes of the Afternoon* as an example, "the heroine undertakes an interior quest."[11] In her earliest plans for the Haitian film, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead's footage of Balinese trance rituals would be intercut with the new footage in Haiti. However, Bateson and Mead's project took trance as a cathartic expression of the individual, while Deren sought out rituals that had an element of collective authorship.

Some of the same themes from Deren's films pervade Benjamin's writings. In his essay on Surrealism, Benjamin takes the "intoxication" or "trance" of Surrealist experience, and most importantly, the apparent "magic" of technology, and tries to redirect its course towards revolutionary ends. The cinema's power of innervation lies in the ability to face the mechanical, fragmenting side of technology and its modes of representation while investing those representations with new (psychic) energy. As Miriam Hansen puts it, "To imagine such an enabling reception of technology, it is essential that Benjamin, unlike Freud, understood innervation as a *two-way* process or transfer, that is, not only a conversion of mental affective energy into somatic, motoric form but also the possibility of reconverting, and recovering, split-off psychic energy through motoric stimulation."[12]

Ten years after Benjamin used the term innervation to describe a process that could be induced through mimesis, Deren focused her attention on the ritual that induces possession and described the power of possession in such a way that assumes the ritual to be a form of social and collective innervation. In Benjamin's lexicon, "possession" arrives with the concept of "the aura." For Benjamin, the aura is dispersed in modernity, but not

obliterated. The (indexical) trace, as Benjamin says, is merely "the appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be," while the aura is the "appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth."[13] For Benjamin, the process of the aura's decline in modernity is a transferal into lived experience. The aura is distinguished from the trace, which is an appearance in an image or object of that which could not be fully grasped, but in modernity the aura is that which grasps us. As he says, "it takes possession of us."[14] The decline of myth and the dispersion of the aura of the artwork is the transferral of the unknown and ungraspable into the lived experience of everyday reality. To be possessed by the aura is to feel oneself "thoroughly known by the unknowable," as Benjamin had earlier said of nature and the act mourning.[15]

The effect of a ritual film and the preservation of a mimetic faculty are not achieved by the application or advancement of technology indiscriminately; the power of the camera not only allows us to see what the eye alone cannot, but more importantly it compels reconciliation of that represented with the lived, experiential knowledge of our own perception. Deren's use of gestalt principles pushes beyond the perceptual or phenomenological experience alone in that it asks the viewer to consider the technology of cinema as a constitutive element of the whole, a "total culture." Crucially, the "logic" of the film that Deren refers to is constituted in equal measure by the intention of the individual artist and the technology of cinema, something Deren ultimately considered collective and social.

Deren's conception of a ritual film, including what she thought she knew about possession, would be challenged by her work in Haiti. Although left incomplete, two "versions" of her film exist. The first version is 225 minutes of ostensibly "raw" footage shot by Deren and compiled by Anthology Film Archives, and the other is an amalgamation of Deren's footage, sound recordings, and text edited together by Teiji and Cherel Ito, released in 1985.[16] Clouded by a male voiceover reading from corresponding sections of Deren's book, the film that is known today as the *Divine Horsemen*, the Ito version, resembles a classical documen-

tary in its expository mode. The running commentary drives the arc of the film and the images serve to illustrate text from Deren's book, an inversion of Deren's original impulse to follow the formal logic of the dance. The editing by Ito appears to strive for continuity and legibility of each ritual scene, while Deren's technique in shooting appears to focus on capturing the body of the dancers and the development of the ritual from beginning to end in long takes. Each part of the ceremony is recorded, starting with the drawing of the Vevers, or symbols of the deities, the *loa*, with flour on the ground. The priest (Houngan) or priestess (Mambo) makes the introduction and offering to the *loa*. All of the footage is recorded with a handheld camera from the perspective of someone standing within or alongside the peristyle that defines the ritual space; however, the shots are all held at medium length so as to frame about half of a person's body standing in the foreground.

The positioning, movement, focus, and manipulations of the camera as well as the framing and timing of each shot contain only traces of Deren's abandoned project. When the ceremony proceeds from the introductions by the Houngan, a significant transformation in time takes place as Deren's camera begins to record in slow motion. The exact switch from real time, for lack of a better term, appears in most cases to happen just after the sacrifice with Deren's camera still focused on the priest. The congregation joins in dancing around the Vevers and the ceremonial post at this same moment. The pans and tilts of the camera, movements that seemed in real time an attempt to capture all the elements of the scene, subside and the camera waits for the *loa* to arrive. In the scene of possession by the *loa* Damballah, identified as such by the Ito version of the film, a figure, a man in a white, short-sleeved shirt with a scarf on his head, jumps ecstatically as the congregation joins in. Only when he nearly falls over, skipping backwards on one foot, does Deren's camera begin to follow the man and focus attention on his movements. Directly behind him, the drummer pounds on his drum and watches the *loa* mount the dancer. He appears to drive the action of the ceremony as he pounds with focused

attention. In slow motion, and with no matching sound of course, each thwack of the instrument is visible but somehow too slow to keep a rhythm for the film viewer. The figure's dancing also seems to lose its rhythm, but certainly not its energy. Deren's camera moves closer, through the crowd, and thus the frame registers another body—that of the camerawoman—moving quick to capture the action but somehow moored down by the frame rate of the camera. Finally Deren's shot arrives at a close-up of the man's face, which registers nothing of the camera's presence just as the camera is able to register nothing of the presence of the *loa*. The rhythm of the drum, the movement of the dance, the movement of the camera: all fail to register in the time of the film, the viewer's time in experiencing the image. And yet, the presence of bodies, rhythms, and movements compels the viewer to reconstruct and approximate the image as a "real" time being represented. This particular juncture is where the "really real" of the time being represented and the "unreally real" of the film's time in slow motion tests itself against a viewer's ability to reconcile the two. Failing to capture any particular logic of the dance or evidence of Voudoun possession, the use of slow motion in Deren's footage for the *Divine Horsemen* is at the heart of her attempt to compel the collective audience to reconcile the "whole" experience of the artwork created.

The use of slow motion in Deren's footage invites a "tactile" perception, which as Hansen suggests, relies on the concept of innervation in a Benjaminian theory of film. In "The Artwork in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibilty," Benjamin lays out the task of film as synonymous with the "tasks which face the human apparatus of perception," those that "are mastered gradually—taking their cue from tactile reception—through habit."[17] Hansen has read this as an attempt to "square Kracauer's iconoclastic valorization of distraction with Brecht's montage aesthetics" for "new kinds of mimetic experience, a '*Spiel-Raum*' or room-for-play for trying out an alternative innervation of technology."[18] The only way to redeem such insights in the "Artwork" essay, as Hansen does, is to read them through parallel constellations in Benjamin's thought.[19] Although Benjamin suggests collective laughter, whether in response to Mickey Mouse or Charlie Chaplin, as one potential "preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis," the rehearsal or innervation occurs also with the use of slow motion, which Benjamin writes about in the third version of the "Artwork" essay, notable here because it is so prominent in Deren's footage for *Divine Horsemen*. In this sense, tactile reception is a matter of perceiving a disjuncture between what is represented and what is known *through one's embodied experience* to be true.

Still from *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*

In her later writing of 1960, Deren describes the perceptual efficacy of slow motion in terms that are consistent with those of Benjamin: "When we see a man in the attitudes of running and identify the activity as a run, one of the knowledges which is part of that identification is the pulse normal to that activity. It is because we are aware of the known pulse of the identified action while we watch it occur at a slower rate of speed that we experience the double-exposure of time which we know as slow-motion."[20] Importantly, then, the perceptual matching of "pulses" exceeds the ability of vision alone. To return to the scene of

Damballah, the three visible rhythms of the scene move in slow motion, but none are quite in sync with one another. In addition to the visible rhythms on screen, the non-visual rhythms of lived experience exist for the viewer, and existed for the ritual participants whom we see on screen. In the Ito version of the film, the soundtrack of ritual music sutures the visible rhythm of represented time to both the viewing time and the time of the profilmic event. The non-visual rhythms of lived experience must be reconstructed cognitively by the viewer. The Ito version adds the perceptual dimension of sound for us, standing in for a "real time"; however, the perception of movement and position so noticeable without sound, literally the tactile experience of bodies in space, can only be stimulated, invited, but never definitively contained in the film itself. Deren's footage invites this addition, where the "double-exposure of time" can only be that of two lived experiences meeting across the event of the film.

After Benjamin's materialist conversion, he sees that the possibility of being "known by the unknowable" is not lost, but perhaps yet to come in modernity. Reconciling slow motion in perception is an exercise of the mimetic faculty, a rehearsal of a form of knowledge that is actually concerned with *being known* as a kind of knowing. The anthropologist Michael Taussig has described this as the "active yield" of mimesis, wherein one does not passively give oneself over, but rather chooses to yield to possession by the auratic.[21] When Benjamin writes "clearly it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye," he does not imagine humanity standing behind the camera, but rather in front of it, possessed by it.[22]

Whatever the discipline of anthropology gained through Deren's writing is of less concern here than the way Deren's abandoned artwork marked the edges of both disciplines. Deren was no doubt crossing disciplinary boundaries in her quest for a new film form. Critiques of Deren's project have relied on casting Deren's avant-garde as ideologically invested in authorship, and thus ill-equipped to take on the social complexity of the subject matter. Such complexity of subject matter is certainly one factor in Deren's decision to abandon the film; however, that

complexity extends to the filmmaker's work in total and to her project for an avant-garde that would deal with the "formal and philosophical concepts of [its] age."[23] That is to say, her failure to complete her film in Haiti as an artwork betrays a dialectic at the heart of Deren's project for a cinematic avant-garde. It is to the medium of film itself, and the way it draws upon a mimetic faculty, that we should look for an understanding of Deren's idiom and her epistemological project for film. Deren's film, in its failure, contains the promise of the mimetic faculty as an epistemic mode in art: that is, an epistemological project that finds the interdisciplinary in projects that appear to be constrained by their discipline, and a kind of reading that looks for the social in experiences that appear at first to be immanently individual.

NOTES

1. See Vévé A. Clark, Millicent Hodson, and Catrina Neiman, *The Legend of Maya Deren: A Documentary Biography and Collected Works, Volume I, Part One: Signatures (1917-1942)* (New York: Anthology Film Archives/Film Culture, 1984).

2. Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 720-722. Further references to the *Selected Writings* volumes are abbreviated *SW* and numbered.

3. Ibid., 720.

4. Maya Deren, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (Yonkers, New York: Alicat Bookshop Press, 1946); Reprinted in Bill Nichols, ed. *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

5. Ibid., 20.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid. "If it can be said that, in romanticism, the tragedy results from the destructive, tragic nature of its central figure, then it must be said, by contrast, that in ritualistic form the tragedy confers often upon an unsuspecting person, the heroic stature of the tragic figure." I read the "unsuspecting person" in this case to be the viewer.

8. Ibid.

9. Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *SW4*, 336. Benjamin's critique of Bergson amounts to a charge of isolating experience, or placing the value of memory solely in the individual experience, and not the collective.

10. Deren, *Anagram, 16*. Maya Deren, "Religious Possession in Dancing," *Educational Dance* (1942). Reprint in Clark, *The Legend of Maya Deren*, 492.

11. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The Avant-Garde 1943-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10.

12. Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: Univ. of California Press, 2012), 137.

13. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 447.

14. Ibid.

15. Benjamin, "On the Language as Such and the Language of Man," in *SW1*, 73.

16. For the moment, I have not been able to see the version held at Anthology Film Archives, and so must rely on published descriptions of the footage and the more widely available version edited by Teiji and Cherel Ito.

17. Benjamin, "The Artwork in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *SW3*, 120.

18. Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 102-103.

19. See Walter Benjamin, "One Way Street," in *SW4*. The tactility of film, in this case, was already prefigured in his earlier encounters with Surrealism, not only in the Surrealism essay but also "One Way Street" and the then influential ideas of Alois Riegl. See Antonia Lant, "Haptical Cinema," *October* 74 (Autumn 1995): 45-73.
Benjamin mentions Alois Riegl in his "Artwork" essay, but inverts the two opposing concepts of visuality and tactility so as to claim tactility for the modern, specifically in cinema.

20. Maya Deren, "Cinematography," in *Essential Deren* (Kingston, NY: Documentext, 2005), 121.

21. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 45.

22. Benjamin, "The Artwork," in *SW3*, 117.

23. Maya Deren, "Cinematography," 128.

The Case of Pruitt-Igoe: No Random Crisis

Sabine Horlitz

Pruitt-Igoe, a post-war public housing project built in St. Louis, Missouri, to house around 12,000 tenants, rose to national fame when several of its thirty-three buildings were imploded in spring 1972. Praised as a model of visionary architecture and urban planning when the complex was opened in 1954—as a plan that according to *Architectural Forum* "saves not only people but money"—Pruitt-Igoe became demonized as a place of vandalism and crime less than 20 years later when demolition came to be depicted as the only possible solution.[1]

In this context, Pruitt-Igoe—or rather the image of its destruction—served as a function at once symbolic and real. It came to stand for all that was wrong with state intervention in the housing market and the welfare state as such, but it was also used as a concrete example for the handling of other large-scale public housing projects, namely Cabrini Green in Chicago. Here, the *Chicago Tribune* anticipated the later development by stating, "Faced with a similar problem, St. Louis found the answer in dynamite .... Chicago should take the hint."[2]

It is no accident that the dominant narrative, which highlights Pruitt-Igoe as an outright if not a model failure, precludes any socio-historic factor that could cast a shadow on this unambiguous claim. Reproduced extensively and detached from both time and space, and from any reference to its initial context, the image of the housing structure slumping down in dust became an all-purpose symbol of the failure of a seemingly mistaken social welfare policy and its respective model of urbanization.[3]

Pruitt-Igoe demolition, April 1972

This unambiguous definition of Pruitt-Igoe's meaning is based however on numerous omissions, polemics and blind spots. It fails to mention a variety of facts and events, which can only be briefly mentioned here, that do indeed render its history much more ambivalent and conflictual. If fully acknowledged, it would make it impossible to hold on to the claim that Pruitt-Igoe was an outright failure, its demolition both imperative and to the benefit of all.

The first assumption that has to be questioned is the often evoked notion that public housing was a program initiated by a benevolent state with the primary aim to better the housing and living conditions of the urban poor.[4] In fact, public housing was a program permeated by numerous contradictions, in which the social issues were subordinate to efforts of urban improvement such as slum clearance and urban renewal as well as the interests of the real estate industry. Pruitt-Igoe in particular was the product of an urban terrain and a politics that had been fraught for decades by racism, poverty and uneven patterns of development.

The debate has left out not only Pruitt-Igoe's conditions of production and the manifold mechanism of domination and technologies of governance, for which this public housing project was paradigmatic, but also the relationship between public housing struggles, the civil rights and black power movement and the respective challenges of power relations and the distribution of social wealth. The dominant narrative ignores entirely the many collective actions of Pruitt-Igoe's residents or the extensive debates around its demolition. There is no mention about either Pruitt-Igoe tenants' participation in the St. Louis city-wide public housing rent strike of 1969, the first such strike in the U.S. and one that ultimately changed federal legislation, or about the repeated attempts to remodel the project undertaken by major architectural firms such as SOM as well as local grassroots organizations. Furthermore, the project's constant lack of funding was silenced, a fact acknowledged even by the director of the Department of Housing and Urban Development's regional office: "Of course, the whole housing field is starved. Congress has made its judgment and housing has not received the highest priority."[5]

Only a few weeks after declaring a moratorium on housing program assistance on January 8, 1973, which froze the funding for major urban development and housing programs, President Nixon declared that the urban crisis had been overcome. In a nationwide radio address broadcast on March 4, 1973 he stated:

I want to report to you today on the quality of life in our cities and towns. A few years ago we constantly heard that urban America was on the brink of collapse. It was one minute to midnight, we were told, and the bells of doom were beginning to toll. ... Today, America is no longer coming apart. One of the most difficult problems of the 1960's was the alarming increase in crime—up 122 percent from 1960 to 1968. Today, the rate of crime is dropping in more than half of our major cities. Civil disorders have also declined. ... City governments are no longer on the verge of financial catastrophe. Once again the business world is investing in our downtown areas. What does all this mean for community life in America? Simply this: The hour of crisis has passed. The ship of state is back on an even keel, and we can put behind us the fear of capsizing.[6]

Yet besides praising the achievements of his administration, the president also warned:

We must recognize that some of the methods which have been tried in the past are not appropriate to the 1970's. One serious error of the past was the belief that the Federal Government should take the lead in developing local communities. America is still recovering from years of extravagant, hastily passed measures, designed by centralized planners and costing billions of dollars, but producing few results. ... In one of our huge, high-rise public housing projects, less than one-third of the units are now fit for human habitation and less than one-fifth are even occupied. ... There are too many leaks in the Federal pipeline. It is time to plug them up. That is why we are changing our entire approach to human and community development. We are putting an end to wasteful and obsolete programs and replacing them with ones that work.[7]

The "high-rise public housing project" that Nixon referred to in his radio address was most likely Pruitt-Igoe—a point of reference he also made in his message to the Congress on the restructuring of federal housing policy in November of the same year.[8] The president made use here of the Pruitt-Igoe blast that had already attracted widespread attention and was referred to as both the result and expression of an architectural and social disaster. The media as well as professional and scholarly publications identified it with "the death of the city of the future" and "the housing failure of the century."[9] Pruitt-Igoe was labeled a "monster"[10], a "ghost town"[11] or "dumping ground"[12], a "planned slum" where one can "observe the evils brought forth by the do-gooder mentality"[13] or a "crime-infested jungle" that "had to be abandoned"[14]—virulent judgments that were directed as much at modernist design as at government-led urban planning.

Pruitt-Igoe nowadays is most present in architectural and planning discourse, following the interpretation of architectural historian Charles Jencks, who pinpointed the moment of the buildings' destruction as that of the death of modern and the beginning of postmodern architecture. In the 1970s the project

was also used in political debates pertaining both to the urban crisis of its day and to the role of government intervention.[15] In this context, politicians, bureaucrats, and their respective scientific aides alluded to Pruitt-Igoe as clear evidence of the fundamental failure of federally funded public housing and welfare policy in order to legitimize major cutbacks in the related government programs. They thus propelled forward a shift in urban policy that ran parallel to national and even global political-economic developments, namely the end of the Fordist-Keynesian welfare state and the emergence of a new "regime of accumulation"—to use David Harvey's term—now more widely referred to as neoliberalism.[16]

Nixon's radio address showed that in 1973 the course for a conservative shift in politics and the corresponding changes in city politics at the federal level was already set. In his address, Nixon explained what he understood as urban crisis—high crime rate and urban unrest—and what he saw as a means to overcome it—private investment in inner city areas and no more federally funded welfare programs. Dubbed "high-cost, no result boondoggling by the Federal Government" by Nixon, funding programs for cities were to be cut because the time of crisis—which here can also be read as the danger of redistribution of societal wealth—was surpassed and the national course of a functioning capitalist society had been taken up again.[17]

In contrast to the 1960s, by the 1970s massive cuts to welfare could be implemented without causing major resistance among the people affected. Furthermore, Nixon successfully managed to pick up on the rhetoric of the arguments and demands of the civil rights movement, urban activists and urban renewal critics, while at the same time working to implement an extremely destructive and restrictive politics. In order to legitimize the restructuring of federal welfare politics that he propagated, he catered to the widespread resentments against federal intervention in local affairs and promised to give "the lead role back to grass roots governments again," emphasizing that the time had come "to reject the patronizing notion that Federal planners, peering over the point of a pencil in Washington can

guide your lives better than you can." In this context he cannily referred to Lee Rainwater's notion of a Federal Slum, which the sociologist had used in a study of Pruitt-Igoe, and declared that "in the field of housing we must stop programs that have been turning the Federal Government into a nationwide slumlord."[18] In November 1973, Nixon eventually concluded, "Credit is the lifeblood of housing."[19]

Speaking in this manner about federally funded social housing projects and Pruitt-Igoe in particular was part of a fundamental transformation of the national self-image and the restructuring of federal welfare politics. Restructuring included massive cuts in social services and socially oriented expenditures, promotion of programs for the privatization of public services, and, in the field of housing, a reduction of programs for the urban poor in favor of funding of homeownership through low-interest loans and tax reductions targeted at the middle and upper classes.

This change of politics, or "conservative counterrevolution" as historian Alice O'Connor has put it, would not have been possible without establishing a social consensus.[20] It required arguments delegitimizing welfare politics, which demonstrated that social spending and organized labor ruined the economy; that state intervention—regardless whether in labor or housing markets—only has negative effects; and that all of these societal tasks were accomplished best by private companies.

Central to this mobilization of conservative ideology was the implementation of changes in the research landscape through massive investments in conservative think tanks and newly funded research institutes, accompanied by large numbers of publications. Various researchers and scientists began to question whether urban problems were really all that serious, and above all, if they could be controlled by federal interventions. They rallied against the values, political culture and understanding of social connections, which dominated the 1960s and, as was later apparent, propagated a much more powerful interpretation of urban crisis.[21]

This conceptual reformulation of urban crisis and the corresponding change in interpretations of the causes and possible

solutions to urban problems successfully transformed local and national debates and influenced urban politics right up to the present. Here, two processes were of central importance: The negation of the existence of urban crisis, or rather its recoding into a moral problem alongside a "culturization" of poverty on the one hand, and the delegitimization of welfare politics and its decoding into a project fostering crisis on the other hand, or as political scientist Edward Banfield has put it: "Government cannot solve the problems of the cities, and is likely to make them worse by trying."[22]

Ultimately, the solution for the diseased society was put forward as a free market economy and personal responsibility. In this context the dominant representation of Pruitt-Igoe as a failed project supported a fundamental discursive change and a shift that not only affected urban power relations, but also power relations on a national scale. The debates about the concrete destiny and future of Pruitt-Igoe so exceptionally fraught with conflicts dragged on for years and were accompanied by powerful collective actions on part of the tenants—regardless of how fragile and ambivalent they have proven to be in the long term. At the same time, the dominant discourse was purged of any contradictions and didn't entail the smallest hint at conflicts or the existence of self-serving interests. It thus didn't originate from analysis, but was rather part of the production of meaning and a certain "truth" that presented neoliberal change in politics as necessary, just and in the interest of the common good. The case of Pruitt-Igoe is therefore not a proof of the failure of social welfare's accomplishments, but rather must be seen as part of the construction of this very failure.

The dominant narrative of Pruitt-Igoe's failure thus serves as a means to perpetuate and naturalize exactly those findings it pretends to analyze. In doing so, it foreclosed a debate around the socio-political context of public housing and thus stood in the way of a basic discussion of the provision of housing and its societal implications (and indeed still does), from which more radical and fundamental demands, such as the decommodification of housing could be developed.

The image of the detonation in its forcefulness and suggestive power was perfectly suited to illustrate the prevailing simplification of complex circumstances. Frequent references to the blast as evidence of public housing's or even the welfare state's failure thus cannot be seen only as a somewhat superficial illustration of a political point but should be regarded, rather, as an ideological tool to reframe discourse on 1970s urban crisis. In doing so, the crisis was naturalized and the regulatory measures—namely urban restructuring and ultimately the political shift towards neoliberalism—were made to appear not as the outcome of political decisions but of bare necessity.

NOTES

1. "Slum Surgery in St. Louis," *Architectural Forum* 94 (April 1951): 129.

2. Clarence Page, "Cabrini Green's Valuable Real Estate," *Chicago Tribune*, February 5, 1986: 11.

3. Republican congressman Newt Gingrich's article "Notes on Self-Government" is apposite here. In it Gingrich declared Pruitt-Igoe "a classic example of the Liberal Welfare State bureaucracy at work ... too big, too impersonal and too destructive on human dignity. It lumped so many poor people into one area so tightly that civilization broke down and a no-man's land of vandalism and violence was created. ... The project couldn't be saved. ... It had to be destroyed." But even more, he completely rejected the idea of a state striving for social accountability. "As a conservative I believe the time has come to move from the Liberal Welfare State to a Conservative Opportunity Society." Newt Gingrich, "Notes on Self-Government," *Atlanta Daily World*, September 8, 1983: 4.

4. See Peter Marcuse, "Housing Policy and the Myth of the Benevolent State," in *Critical Perspectives on Housing*, ed. Rachel Bratt, Chester Hartman and Ann Meyerson, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

5. Marsha Canfield, "U.S. Shortchanging St. Louis Public Housing – McCormack," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, March 13, 1970.

6. Richard Nixon, "Radio Address About the State of the Union Message on Community Development," in *The American Presidency Project*, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, eds. (Santa Barbara, CA, 1973). http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=4128.

7. Ibid.

8. Richard Nixon, "Special Message to the Congress Proposing Legislation and Outlining Administration Actions to Deal with Federal Housing Policy," in *The American Presidency Project*, ed. John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, (Santa Barbara, CA, 1973). http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=3968.

9. Ibid.

10. "Costly St. Louis Housing 'Monster' to Be Cut Down to Size," *The Washington Post*, December 5, 1971: A2.

11. Eric L. Zoeckler, "High-rise Ghost Town in St. Louis," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 30, 1974: 3B.

12. "The Experiment that Failed," *Architecture Plus*, October 17-18, 1973.

13. John A. Richardson, "Visual Pollution Degrading America," *Chicago Tribune*, July 20, 1974): 12.

14. Neal R. Peirce, "A Chance to Break the Welfare Cycle," *Boston Globe*, August 25, 1980: 1.

15. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), 9.

16. David Harvey, "Flexible Accumulation through Urbanization: Reflections on 'Post-Modernism' in the American City," *Antipode* 9, no. 3 (1987): 260-286.

17. Nixon, "Radio Address About the State of the Union Message on Community Development."

18. Ibid.

19. Nixon, "Special Message to the Congress Proposing Legislation and Outlining Administration Actions to Deal with Federal Housing Policy."

20. Alice O'Connor, "The Privatized City: The Manhattan Institute, the Urban Crisis, and the Conservative Counterrevolution in New York," *Journal of Urban History* 34, no. 2 (2008): 333-353.

21. Ibid.

22. Edward C. Banfield, *The Unheavenly City* (Boston: Little Brown, 1970), 281.

DAMAGE REPORT: EXCERPTS (CONDENSED) FROM A PROJECT LOG

Edward Kihn

He who imagines disasters in some way desires them.
—Theodore W. Adorno

VENTURETOWN, BIOTECH BEACH, USA

"It's true, we manage risk like nowhere else." So sums up an Emeritus faculty of UCSD's Rady School of Management, one of a handful of people I approached for a film project concerning this ever-present but amorphous subject—risk management, and the multifarious forms it takes in the area. Attempting to ascertain my intentions, or align them with his expectations, he shows me a trailer for a feature-length film called "Venturetown USA."

Luminous images of the harbor and the Salk Institute at sunset fade in and out accompanied by glorying corporate synth; the namesake of the Jacobs School of Engineering effuses about "sharing" his products with consumers; another man, ostensibly involved in women's beauty products, praises "winners" as those who "make it happen" and denounces the "losers" as those "who let it happen."

In this bootstrap binary, the Emeritus, I think, has pegged me as the latter, although perhaps he sees in me a bit of an "outlier" and my project as a "Black Swan," one of those improbable opportunities that might pay off wildly—I gather with a fantastic audiovisual paean to the SoCal culture of speculation?[1]

"RISK CULTURE"

Almost thirty years ago, in an oft-cited text, the German sociologist Ulrich Beck described our epoch as one of risk. In the "risk

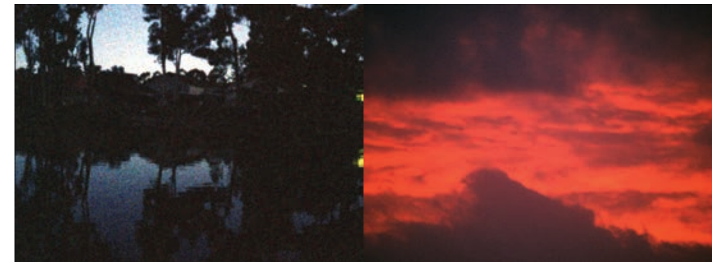
society," as he calls it, the proliferation of technology creates an unprecedented potential for non-linear accidents. According to Beck, this potential issue arises, in part, from the fact that the mounting, overlapping and globally uncoordinated responses to accidents develop a logic of pre-emption, a "culture of precaution." This risk society opens a Pandora's box of unknowns and so unleashes the potential for more accidents, possibly of nature and scale heretofore unheard of.

Why had this so-called "culture of risk" taken such hold in Southern California? The sociologist Charles Perrow offers this answer:

> *...economic policies, such as the location of defense industries, the diversion of water to wasteful agricultural practices and to cities built on the barren (but sunny and warm) coastline, and ample cheap migrant labor—all this has meant that the area has become vulnerable to rainstorms and mudslides, floods, polluted land and air, wildfires and made moderate earthquakes more destructive. Economic policies that are made possible because of political power have wrought the damage. The culture that grows in southern California...evolves out of these policies; the people moving there did not come with a Risk Culture, any more than those who settle on the flood plains of Mississippi and drown.*[2]

Indeed, to my mind, if there's one exemplary moment of intrigue in the constellation of San Diego-La Jolla, it's the palpable tension between unruly physical geography and outwardly unperturbed exurban development. From the mesas of La Jolla, where the temporarily stilled geological tumult of eons gives the lie to the apparent stability of corporate parks and mega-mansions, to the fire-conducive chaparral-dense mountains of El Cajon, to the elevated freeways that cross dormant fault lines—the city as a whole suggests at many junctures, if not a willful flouting of material reality, an anarchic attempt to make it over in an image suited to the necessarily optimistic precepts of business.

How, then, to make a concrete tie between risk and this local terrain whose endless "natural history dioramas,"—as a friend put it—exert a constant pull?[3]



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Risk Culture & "the elements"

If in SoCal, and San Diego in particular, a "culture of risk" had formed in the collisions of human actors with geography and weather—what we still refer to as "the elements"—why not approach this culture through that very elemental framework: water, air, earth and fire and the way they are analyzed in this region to mitigate risk?

In this context the elements represent less as an embrace of mysterious, cosmological or even "natural" forces, but rather as something like what Michael Taussig describes as "the seam where matter and myth connect and disconnect continuously."[4] In the case of my project, this "seam" is where the objectivity of technical simulations meets the speculative delirium of risk-management; where artificial microcosms of the real meet the fully "artifical" macrocosmic reality of the "anthropocene"; where ruins reveal their novelty, and the new is revealed as ruins-to-be.

Film, 16-millimeter film in particular, suggested itself as the medium of investigation, for as longtime celluloid devotee Peter Hutton says, "it tends to take us back in time rather than project us forward"—this fact owing, of course, to the medium's selfsame obsolescence.[5]

By capturing sites, people, and objects in its "net of obsolescence," 16-millimeter film suggests that a high-tech forecasting startup like the company Earthrisk (air) belongs equally to the dustbin as the 60s-era equipment lying around the Scripps Hydraulics lab (water), the rubble at the Englekirk Center's earthquake "shake table" (earth), or the Heartland Fire Training Center (fire). At the same time, out of this alchemy emerges a questioning of technology and "risk management" as progress.

This elemental framework took hold more intuitively than logically. I was driving toward the local environs, albeit mediated, disenchanted, denatured: the ocean that I rarely visited, the mountains I only saw in the distance, the fire that spread through stories about 2007, and the closest of the intangible-tangibles, the vapor that came unannounced and gently swallowed the whole place up. The project found its shape in four short films,

each associating a technological site and simulation with one of the elements. Each film covers a single day, moving in the morning from the local environs into a given site and then, at dusk, back out. Each of them traces the unreconciled relationship of the simulations witnessed in the light of day and the social contexts in which they occur.

Below are excerpts from a log I kept during the months in which I documented these simulations.

WATER: UCSD'S SCRIPPS HYDRAULICS LAB

Today the word "simulation" is perhaps most often associated with the process of scenario modeling via computer programs. But Grant Deane, the proprietor of the Hylab argues that if computers are getting better at generating the variables of any number of natural processes, these models still can't account for the complexity or "emergent properties" of the "biggest interface on the planet"—that between the atmosphere and the ocean.[6] Deane and his team use the Hylab's 60s-era channel—a 44-meter tank equipped with massive wooden oars and a bellowing flume—to generate whitecapped waves. The goal seems equal parts absurd and sublime—namely, to "count all of the bubbles in the ocean."

6.11.13, 1500 HOURS

When we arrive, the channel is already running. The waves are as white as they are blue, thick with bubbles from newly piped-in saltwater. In front of the channel a host of spectators discusses the test with Deane's team. An elderly man in a burgundy sweater stands out, the others swirling about him in eager conversation. Gazing contentedly at the waves, the elderly man occasionally pivots his head to engage them. My crewmember claims to know who it is, while I, with callow incredulity, retort that, no, he *must* be dead.

Listening to the bubbles with a hydrophone and photographing them helps Deane and his team understand how aerosols move between the ocean and the upper atmosphere.

Theoretically, the results will help climate modelers create their simulations of when and how atmospheric events will unfold. So it was with little difficulty that I reconciled the image of grown men, scientists deep into prestigious careers of research, raptly attentive to something as seemingly innocuous as bubbles.

AIR: EARTHRISK

Once the long-vexing problem of sound interference caused by snapping shrimp had been solved during World War II, the development of sonar had the most impact on newly expanded sub-surface warfare.[7] However, it was the novel techniques of wave forecasting developed by Dr. Munk, the eminence in the burgundy sweater, and a team of scientists at Scripps that allowed Allied landings in the Pacific, North Africa, and the European theaters—including the D-Day landing at Normandy Beach.[8]

Also among the elite corps of wartime forecasters was a man named Irving Krick, the first commercial meteorologist whose "analog" predictions were sought out by interests ranging from Hollywood studios to farmers.[9] What Munk is to Deane and the Hydraulics Lab, Krick is to Steve Bennett, the former Scripps Meteorologist who now heads a long-range weather forecasting startup called Earthrisk. Whereas Krick and Bennett represent an ascendant, evermore "risky" private science, Munk and the team from Hydraulics stand for a more and more defunded public one.[10]

Earthrisk's software, Temprisk, is an updated and automated version of Krick's "analog" approach to forecasting—one in which past events serve as "analogs" to future ones, or as Bennett says, where "past behavior is indicative of future performance." As he tells it, in 2008 a group of energy companies solicited him and his team of Scripps meteorologists to find a method to forecast weather beyond the two-week bounds typically associated with the "simulations" of the NOAA and the European Center for Medium Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF).[11]

Bennett and his team come up with a 6,000-page historical tome of statistical information, which they hand to a risk-analyst from one of the companies. Overwhelmed, he informs them that there is no way to sift through the information to make the decisions he needs to. So Bennett develops software—which later becomes Temprisk—to process the data and forms a company called Earthrisk. The company now offers a subscription to Temprisk, and, although the takers are so far limited to natural gas companies, Bennett envisions, à la Krick, selling information to agribusiness, box stores ... really, I guess, anyone whose business relies on weather.

Office 2.0

Earthrisk's office represents the "post-fordist" melding of *homo laborans* and *homo ludens* under the sign of *homo economicus*: a ping-pong table sits near the entrance, a trickle of insouciant pop issues from the radio. A Wall of Accolades greets you as you enter. Titled "The Weathermen," one article has Bennett and the company's CEO, John Plavan, flanked by palms, beaming in the San Diego sunshine. Perfect. Another frame holds a series of mounted business cards—Bennett's professional vita—among which is displayed the logotype of none other than Enron.

Earthrisk isn't exactly "disaster capitalism" in the sense described by Naomi Klein.[12] However, the co-emergence of the company's statistical interface and the belated recognition of anthropogenic climate change suggests more than a fortuitous connection. Indeed, CNBC reports: "EarthRisk... focuses on the energy trading market. By focusing in on probability models for *extreme* heat and *extreme* cold, it can help investors profit in the futures market."[13]

But, the black swan rears its head. How to account for—and project—new, heretofore-unheard-of extremities in weather? Bennett's answer is ... there aren't any:

The nice thing in weather is that there's no such thing as a true black swan event. ... Weather is a physically bounded system. ... In a lot of other fields, especially in economics, there are true black swans.

Meaning that the stock market has never moved up to a certain amount in a day, until it did. And then experts are left to figure out why did the stock market move that way? And the explanation only comes in retrospect. ... That would be a true black swan. If San Diego California were to be thirty degrees below zero Fahrenheit, that's a different planet, that's not the planet we're on today.[14]

First of all, I want to tell him, San Diego *is* a different planet. And what exquisite hubris, in a time when weather seems to approximate the wild spikes of the market, and the market is treated as a "natural" planetary system?

EARTH: ENGLEKIRK

To get access to the Englekirk Center I'm bounced around between various people, but the IT specialist Robert Beckley is my point person. Beckley is a former Army man whose buoyancy is a welcome contrast to the physically leaden quality of the site. At some point in our months-spanning exchanges, a kernel of wisdom—"The best way to predict your future is to create it!"—begins to appear as a post-script to Beckley's emails. More than the ethos of an individual "risk-technician," it's a rather striking encapsulation of "risk culture" as a whole. For in what Beck calls "staging"—in my project represented by simulations—prediction and creation exist on a delirious continuum: the simulation potentially eclipsing the intended "safeguard;" the safeguard producing, *ex novo*, the next catastrophe.[15]

Unhomely

I'd never heard the name "soft-story" for a type of home that peppers the California landscape, before seeing its *unheimlich* double atop the shake table at Englekirk. I'd never *seen* it as such until it was proposed as a model of architectural instability about to be destroyed. The "soft" story is, of course, that bottom floor, typically a carport supported only by beams, that crumbles quickly in an earthquake.

The inside of the double's hastily built wooden carapace is filled with all manner of instrumentation—wires snaking across

the floor, accelerometers suspended by diagonal cable, CCTV cameras bolted down for the "shakes" or simulated quakes. While I film, the names of earthquakes, whose equivalent energies the building would now be subjected to, boom over the PA system —*Loma Prieta, Cape Mendocino, Northridge, Superstition Hill*— followed by the tremulous "white noise" that could be any kind of low-wave seismic vibration. On the last day, the majority of the instrumentation is removed. The final "test" will be an "experiment by destruction."[16]

8/17/13: 10am. "Spectral acceleration in 10..."

After six or so attempts, the soft-story giant is hobbled. The assembled crowd erupts in howls and exclamations of enchanted disbelief. Amidst the celebration is the incongruous sight of Beckley consoling Pouria Bahmani, the lead graduate on the project, streaming with tears as he faces the culmination of studies galvanized by the 2003 quake in Bam, Iran, that claimed 30,000 lives. Still, as with the spectators' howls, dramatic catharsis seemed ill-suited to Englekirk—this place where tragedy looms like a specter in the very tests undertaken, ostensibly, to prevent it.[17]

FIRE: HEARTLAND

More artificial ecologies: now, fire and earth. As with Hylab and Earthrisk, more coincidences. Dave Miller, head of the Heartland Fire Training Academy in El Cajon, used to collect the rubble from Englekirk for a rescue school he ran near the quake center. At Heartland, similar detritus forms part of a simulation infrastructure that also includes a four-story burn tower, a backstop to practice "nozzling," and an "environmental building" housing a live burn "classroom," which became my primary focus.

Of all the sites, Heartland's "classroom" gives itself over to the element in question most fully, conjuring its danger in greatest proximity to the simulators. But the classroom also evokes the sterile distance of the laboratory, with labcoats replaced by flame retardant suits. The sight of my footage prompted several people, including Grant Deane from the

Hylab, to remark on the odd mixture of outward nonchalance and restlessness displayed by the firemen "in their element." Deane even suggested that, like his efforts in the Wind Wave Channel, this "classroom" should be considered a form of "emergent complexity" with heat and anxiety replacing wind and waves as the variables producing otherwise "un-simulatable" conditions.

Outlying the Training Center are municipal buildings and industries of various kinds—chemical plants, construction materials and the like—places that manufacture the very materials whose increasing toxicity and flammability are what Miller fingers as the single greatest culprit for evermore-intense fires. "Risk isn't changing," he says, "the fire service's definition of risk is changing." Right, risk is about definitions, about who controls them, who gets to say what is and isn't a risk.[18] Miller describes scenarios where various "expert" opinions, typically those of environmentalists and firefighters, compete to define the outcome of a wildfire and therefore how it should be contained: for instance, how much it should be let to burn or how much fire retardant can be dumped into those riparian areas in wildlands where people increasingly build their homes. This conflict over definitions of risk synchs with Beck's description of the risk society as one in which the unprecedented proliferation of knowledge introduces a new level of uncertainty and unpredictability, new hierarchies and relations of domination.

However, the facts on the ground at Heartland refute Beck's conclusion that these hierarchies have replaced traditional inequalities, that, while "poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic."[19] For if fires are getting more mobile, by the look of it the dirty, sweating, buzz-cut recruits at Heartland are not. They will incur not only the basic cost of exploitation that we all do as "workers" of various stripes, but also the added cost of serving as human barriers to increasingly chaotic fire regimes, not to mention floods, landslides, quakes and tsunamis in areas made vulnerable by exploit, indifference, or "risk taking."[20] As Capt. Miller sums up, the fire service is increasingly "all risk."[21]

Sun sets on the training center's rubble pile—a simulation that presents the catastrophe, as it were, after the fact, like a video fast-forwarded to the end, past the paroxysm and gore.

A crow caws from a jagged perch on the top of the heap, then disappears behind it, directing our attention over and beyond the rubble to an expanse of trammeled earth—what appears to be the nether-zone of a landfill where families of birds pick at carrion and scraps—and more cawing, this time seemingly in response to the hydraulic belching of waste management trucks in the distance. Here you get a different view of the disaster—this one taking place in slow motion.

NOTES

1. Nassim Nicolas Taleb, the "quant"-turned-armchair-philosopher for the "risk-taking" jetset, uses the term "outlier" to describe events that cause a sea change precisely because of their off-the-radar, unpredictable nature (e.g., 9/11, The Great Depression). He calls the event generated by such an "outlier" a "Black Swan." See Nassim Nicolas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of Highly Improbable Events* (New York: Random House, 2007).

2. Charles Perrow, "Culture, Structure, Risk," in *Risk Society and the Culture of Precaution*, ed. Sabine Berking (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 51.

3. I owe this kernel to Cathy Gere who, in turn, related it from another friend.

4. Michael Taussig, *My Cocaine Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), xviii.

5. Peter Hutton interview with Scott Macdonald, *A Critical Cinema 3: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 244.

6. At Earthrisk the term used is "chaos effects," at Englekirk "non-linear" behaviors. All of the simulations in some way work with a "stochastic" process where complete control eludes the simulator, where the very thing attempted to be conjured and controlled, is, paradoxically, unpredictability itself. On the capability of computer simulation see Johannes Lenhard, Günter Küppers, and Terry Shinn, eds., *Simulation: Pragmatic Construction of Reality* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006).

7. Helen Rait and Beatrice Moulton, *Scripps Institution of Oceanography* (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1967), 138.

8. Although, unlike Munk's prediction of a high but manageable swell on June 6th, Krick predicted serene weather in the Channel on the 5th, a day when the assault would've been dashed on the rocks of Normandy Beach. See James Rodger Fleming, *Fixing the Sky: the Checkered History of Weather and Climate Control* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 99.

9. David O. Selznick, for instance, employed Krick to forecast the night shots of a burning atlanta for "Gone with the Wind." Ibid., 99.

10. "Risky" in the sense of "financialized" risk; but also, and perhaps for other reasons as well, "questionable." Of course, one has to take into account that since the war, one of Scripps' main sources of "public" funding has been the Navy and that today science funding very often comes in the ideological package of "Public Private Partnerships," in which state resources are deployed under the auspices of corporate management in the name of "efficiency." As Deane relates it, the Hylab has been affected by the declining funds from public agencies in recent years. Grant Deane interview with the author June 11, 2013.

11. As Bennett explains, unlike the algorithms deployed by the major weather forecasting centers, Earthrisk's algorithms do not constitute a "simulation," which is rather an attempt to artificially account for all of the air parcels presently in the atmosphere in order to extrapolate a forecast.

12. See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2008).

13. Chris Morris, "Big Data Companies try to Outwit Mother Nature's Chaos," *CNBC.com*, May 23, 2013, http://www.cnbc.com/id/100761506. (italics mine).

14. Steven Bennett interview with the author, December 17, 2012.

15. Ulrich Bech, *World Risk Society* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007), 10.

16. A term used by the 19th century French physiologist Claude Bernard to describe the practice of killing something in order to study its function. Claude Bernard, *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* (New York: Dover, 1957 [1927]), 8.

17. As Bahmani admits, the the regime of tests has incredible limits: asked how the soft-story houses will behave in an actual quake he responds: "We won't know till [it] happens..." Despite this very new ability to simulate an earthquake to scale, risks are not reducible to the apparatuses that calculate them. The more elaborate, far-reaching, and interwoven these technological regimes for staging, or simulating, risk become, the more they entrain their own uncertainties, or "unknown unknowns."

18. Beck, *World Risk Society*, 31.

19. Ulrich Beck, *Ecological Enlightenment* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995), 50.

20. Gerry Canavan, Lisa Klarr, and Ryan Vu., eds., "Ecology and Ideology," special issue, *Polygraph* 22, (2010): 2.

21. Dave Miller (Captain, Heartland Fire Training Academy) interview with the author, November 26, 2013.

Stealth Killers: Rethinking the Notion of the Environment with Claire Denis' *I Can't Sleep*

Katrin Pesch

I Can't Sleep (J'ai Pas Sommeil, 1994) closely follows a group of loosely connected characters in Paris whose paths cross in a story about a serial killer who ruthlessly murders old ladies in their apartments. French director Claire Denis wrote the script, which features a transvestite grappling with HIV and drug addiction, in response to the sensationalist news coverage and public uproar unleashed by a series of murders committed by the popular dancer Thierry Paulin, a native of Martinique.[1] Front page news for a year and a half, the story suddenly died, vanished out of sight, and became as "silenced and invisible" as the victims of the crimes themselves.[2] In interviews, Denis frequently refers to Jean Baudrillard's question: how is it possible that the killer and his accomplice "were erased from the French landscape only because they were in jail. They have raised so many questions—even the worst questions?"[3] *I Can't Sleep* evolves from a controversial subject—a gay, black, HIV-positive serial killer who has been constructed as a monster—and according to Denis, the question of "political correctness" was always present during the making of the film.[4] She addresses the representational problems she faces partly by shifting attention away from the main character, Camille, and the murders he commits, in a double movement of decentralization and deferral. Instead, she approaches Camille somewhat obliquely through the persons, places, and things in his immediate environment.

I Can't Sleep developed out of a close examination of the narrative space produced in the wake of a series of horrific

events and presents a fictional refiguration of this space. The structure of the film suggests that the murders cannot be reduced to the deeds of an individual. Rather, they are embedded into the environment in which they occur and, in a sense, can be described as an environmental catastrophe. From this perspective, *I Can't Sleep* provides a compelling starting point for this essay, written at a time when polar vortexes, hurricanes, and heat waves shake up conceptions of "the natural," and anthropogenic climate change takes center stage. An often-evoked image within current debates about ecology is that nature is not an Other, something "over there," outside of us, that we are not a part of.[5] Consequently, thinking about how people's relationship with nature is expressed and refracted by film and in cinema seems most pertinent in films that don't deal with environmental issues per se, such as *I Can't Sleep*. Denis' cinematic inquiries into controversial subjects are deeply ethical in the sense that they do not appropriate the places, stories, and people they depict. They address persons and situations caught in the visible or invisible crises that haunt the present, but do so without claiming privileged access to them.

In this essay, I consider how *I Can't Sleep* operates structurally, and how it formulates a critique by way of description; then, I move on to engaging the film as a test site to challenge narrow understandings of environmental crisis that exist both within and outside of academia.

Denis and co-writer Jean-Pol Fargeau started with the question, "What is it to be the brother, or the mother, or the neighbor of a monster?"[6] Thus they brought the killer from the "over there" of front-page news and prison cell back to his Parisian neighborhood. But if *I Can't Sleep* sets out to narrow the gap between self and other, it never pretends to be fully able to do so. The cinematography oscillates between proximity and distance; the film's characters stay impenetrable regardless of whether they turn their face to the camera or show their back. Most of cinematographer Agnes Godard's shots in *I Can't Sleep* are medium shots and close ups. The characters are framed tightly and positioned deliberately so as to suggest, and then reformulate relationships.

The film undercuts the representational logic of classical cinematic narratives by unfolding slowly in a mosaic of observation and chance encounters. Camille's story is not explicated, but rather approximated through the parallel stories of Daïga, a young Lithuanian woman who arrives in Paris in a run-down car that marks her foreignness, searching in vain for an acting career, and Theo, Camille's brother, a musician making do as a carpenter who fights with his wife Mona about returning to Martinique with their young son. Owning nothing but a couple of suitcases stuffed with clothes, cigarettes, and cans of caviar, Daïga is handed through the Slavic community until she's taken in as a cleaner by Ninon, who runs the hotel where Camille lives with his boyfriend. Daïga's and Theo's stories are more developed in the conventional sense in that they are both structured around a conflict: in Daïga's case around a theater director's false promises, and in Theo's case, around the irreconcilable disagreement with Mona about whether to give up their life in France. Repeated shots of *Sacre Coeur* anchor the story in the 18th *arrondissement* of Paris, a neighborhood the film introduces as populated by diverse ethnicities, flows of tourists, and swarms of policemen, and characterized by its crumbling historic charm as much as its modern city flair.

Both Theo and Daïga are observers and, one could say, stand in for the director. Theo is disturbed by his neighbor's nightly crying and tries to figure out what's going on. Through Daïga we get a close look at some of Camille's personal things, including his suits, paintings and photographs of himself and his family. "Even when you read reports of the trial, in such cases, the opacity remains," Denis commented on her research, "and it is through the bystanders—witnesses, policemen, and most importantly the family that the criminal is discussed."[7] But it's not only through their observations or interactions with Camille; it is also through Daïga and Theo's characters themselves that we learn vicariously about him. The discrimination and daily racism they endure, for instance, add facets to the image of Camille that forms in the course of the film. Similarly, Daïga's aunt stands in for the victims, who themselves remain unknown.

Camille is mostly shown drifting through various situations, a "floating body"; in permanent transit, he rarely settles down.[8] We see him among friends and acquaintances, at his mother's birthday party, or crashing at his brother's, passing through situations that show him as someone at different times acting tender, passive-aggressive, or violent. The camera's gaze following Camille is made palpable throughout the film. From scanning his body or tracking his movement it oftentimes seamlessly segues into a point-of-view shot. For example, in an often-discussed sequence, the camera lingers over Camille's body, settles on his face hidden under the cushion, and reveals in the next shot that this is the point of view of his nephew Harry.[9]

In an article published shortly after *I Can't Sleep* premiered at Cannes Film Festival in 1994, Thierry Jousse writes, "What the director is interested in, is what the camera records literally, that is to say a mixture of gesture and thought, something that is purely exterior and invisible at the same time."[10] This interplay of something expressive and something inscrutable, something that is legible and illegible at the same time, is crucial for the type of description Denis offers in *I Can't Sleep*. Charged with a gesture and a thought, every shot tells a story that is at once literal and removed. In one sequence, for instance, one can see Camille pay for a dinner with friends, laying out hard currency center frame. Then, the camera moves up to show his friend/lover, who secretly handed him a wad of money earlier in the film, thus introducing a completely different economy that destabilizes the possible meaning of the shot.

Denis has described the film's structure as a mosaic. The image of a mosaic also implies something about the sensation or picture that the film produces as a whole. The shots and sequences that form the pieces of this mosaic don't occupy a predetermined space like pieces in a puzzle, and even though they provide clues they don't function like factual pieces of evidence. As a result, observation is privileged over explanation, and Denis avoids the pre-eminent stance that often seeps into an assumed critical distance. In keeping her characters opaque, she acknowledges that—just as the viewer—she can never fully know

them. In light of Denis' statement that the director has a moral obligation not to betray her characters, this reticence becomes a gesture of respect.[11]

I Can't Sleep is interspersed with the sound of radio announcements warning elderly Parisian women to beware of the murderer who enters apartments, taking the valuables and the lives of old ladies residing alone. Although silent and unseen, the killer lives vividly in the public mind—a fear-inducing, bodiless entity. It's not until more than halfway through the film that Camille is revealed as the "killer of old ladies," and two consecutive murders stand in for the serial killings. "These scenes forbid editing," Denis has said about the depiction of the murders, which are shot in a single, full view. "Otherwise," she writes, "it would be disgusting, and not very moral, to embellish the crimes."[12]

The script for *I Can't Sleep* situates the story in "the hottest summer ever."[13] Although the weather suddenly turned "cold as winter," and even the wardrobe had to be changed once shooting began in July 1993, the atmosphere of a city that offers no escape still permeates the film.[14] In fact, weather forecasts had predicted a heat wave in France that summer, and a scene with Theo and his family on the roof was originally based on the expected heat wave. In an interview shortly after the film's release, Denis speaks about her desire for the heat wave as a documentary element that turns the city into a character—"un Paris éttouffant," oppressive and stifling.[15] But her description of people outside, touching, sitting in cafés, and watching each other also evokes a more romanticized image of a heat wave, and the heat wave Denis so desired was to serve a different purpose for her film than the one I bring into the picture here.

I Can't Sleep's description of an environment caught in the heat and the recurring radio broadcasts sending warnings and announcements of death bring to mind another environmental catastrophe that took place roughly a decade after the film was made—the deadly heat wave that hit Europe and, most brutally, France in August of 2003, where it took the lives of 15,000

people, mostly the elderly. Just like the story of the killer, the heat wave has long disappeared from the media landscape and faded from public consciousness. But the radio announcements in the film eerily resemble the bodiless voices of broadcasts in the summer of 2003, which reported rising numbers of elderly people dying alone in their apartments, unable to fight the heat. The description of the heat wave as a "stealth killer"[16] descending "silent and invisible ... on silenced and invisible people" also applies to the furtive killer Camille, who haunts Paris in *I Can't Sleep*.[17]

In contrast to the young scientist's assertion in last year's blockbuster *World War Z*, I'm not suggesting that "*Mother Nature* is a serial killer."[18] However, the concept of nature has indeed been under scrutiny in recent decades, and this paper emerges from a discursive environment invested in shifting anthropocentric perspectives in order to gather human and non-human participants in a collective beyond the modern divide. To a certain extent, putting a serial killer and a heat wave on equal footing thus presents a polemic as to what it could mean to decenter the subject. No matter how different in scale, in their unfolding, both of these events can be understood as environmental catastrophes that stem from systemic failures of modern Western societies. Although time forbids to explore the issue further, it is worth noting that there is yet another environmental crisis alluded to in the film. Suffering from HIV, the character Camille is in the grip of a stealth killer himself.

Eventually, the killer dies in prison, out of public view; the temperature falls and the bodies are buried. In both cases, the underlying problems are not attended to. Just as the story of the killer taken up by Denis, the catastrophic effects of the 2003 heat wave have raised pressing questions that have yet to be resolved. *I Can't Sleep* refrains from demonizing the killer and suggests that the shocking murders cannot be isolated from the environment in which they take place, but that they also cannot be fully explained by it. While the film avoids generalizing assumptions about the socio-cultural experiences of immigrants' lives in Paris, it immerses itself in the neighborhood of the 18th

arrondissement and traces (missing) links between persons, the city and, by extension, society. Camille's detachment from his actions is thus a central theme of the film. In one scene he is shown performing "Le Lien Defait" by the French musician Jean-Louis Murat. The lyrics say, "the bond is broken," or in Denis words, "The link is cut, there is no more connection."[19] Ultimately, the killer's detachment resonates in the public's disengagement with the event, which is forgotten once the scandal dies off.

This disconnect is also echoed by the public's response to the heat wave: uproar and shock are replaced with calm and indifference after the heat cools. The horror, then, lies not just in the events themselves, but also in our contorted relationship with them—in missed connections that become apparent through the absence of care. No matter how brutal the murders or how senseless an event such as the 2003 heat wave, such occurrences cannot be neatly categorized, isolated, or explained away as natural evil or disaster. Rather, they have to be understood as arising from the failure to acknowledge the multiple ways in which natural and cultural forces affect, alter, and determine each other. Denis' statement about *I Can't Sleep*, "life is a story of connections—without them society will self-destruct,"[20] thus relates to events such as the heat wave as well. Even if the heat wave does not care, we have the responsibility to care about it as much as the aftermath it causes; the same is true for the serial killer.

What can be gained by entering into the chill, hard-boiled world of *I Can't Sleep* to emerge heat-drenched in Paris in 2003? This essay aims to create an environment in which to think with Denis' film rather than about it. Rather than a work to be analyzed and explained, her film becomes a springboard for further exploration. However, the serial killer depicted in *I Can't Sleep* and the 2003 heatwave are each situated within specific and complex circumstances, so drawing an analogy between them simply based on the fact that both have been framed and eventually forgotten as "Other" will only get so far and this proposal is not advocating to erase differences. Rather, I want to suggest that an experimental methodolgy can be extrapolated

from Denis' approach, which Martine Beugnet has described as a way of figuring "bodies reacting to familiar or foreign environments."[21] In the beginning of this paper I stated that *I Can't Sleep* presents a fictional refiguration of the narrative space produced in the wake a series of horrific events. The project I'm hoping to develop uses Denis' method of description in *I Can't Sleep* as an inspiration to compose a refiguration of the narrative space produced in the wake of an environmental catastrophe such as the 2003 heat wave. Anthropogenic climate change produces entities that are frightening and contested and that cannot be fully grasped; as heavily mediated events they warrant approach from a cinematic perspective.

NOTES

1. Martine Beugnet, *Claire Denis* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), 85. Paulin was arrested in 1987 in Paris and charged with the murder of 22 elderly women, all of whom had lived in his neighborhood, the 18th arrondissement. Paulin was HIV-positive and died in prison before his trial.

2. Patrick Lagadec, "Understanding the French 2003 Heat Wave Experience: Beyond The Heat, a Multi-Layered Challenge," *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 12, no. 4 (2004): 160-169.

3. Claire Denis, "Interview," by Jonathan Romney, *The Guardian*, June 28, 2000, http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,,338784,00.html. See also Jean Baudrillard, "Cool Killers," *Autrement* 104 (1989): 143-145.

4. Claire Denis, "Entretien Avec Claire Denis," by Thierry Jousse and Frédéric Strauss, Cahiers du Cinema 479 (1994): 25-30. See also "Claire Denis Interview: Colonial Observations," by Marc Reid, *Jump Cut* 40 (1996): 67-72. http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC40folder/ClaireDenisInt.html.

5. Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

6. Denis and Romney, "Interview," n. pag.

7. "Entretien Avec Claire Denis," 27. This translation is from Beugnet, *Claire Denis*, 95.

8. Nikolaj Lübecker, "The Dedramatization of Violence in Claire Denis' *I Can't Sleep*," *Paragraph* 30, no. 2 (2007): 25.

9. Janet Bergstrom, "Opacity in the Films of Claire Denis," in *French Civilization and Its Discontents: Nationalism, Colonialism*, ed. Tyler Stovall and Georges Van den Abbeele, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), 67.

10. Thierry Jousse, "Les Insominiacs," *Cahiers du Cinema 479* (1994): 22 (my translation).

11. Claire Denis, "Noir Désir," interview by Serge Kaganski, *Les Inrockuptibles 57* (1994), quoted in: Bergstrom, "Opacity in the Films of Claire Denis," 2003.

12. Jousse and Strauss, "Entretien Avec Claire Denis," 27 (my translation).

13. Denis and Romney, "Interview," n. pag

14. Ibid.

15. Jousse and Strauss, "Entretien Avec Claire Denis," 26, 28.

16. Lagadec, "Understanding the French 2003 Heat Wave Experience," 160.

17. Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 17. Klinenberg's analysis is frequently cited in the discussion of the 2003 heat wave in France.

18. *World War Z*, directed by Marc Foster (Paramount Pictures, 2013), DVD.

19. Claire Denis, "Claire Denis Interview: Colonial Observations," by Marc Reid, *Jump Cut* 40 (1996): 67-72.

20. Ibid. 70.

21. Martine Beugnet, quoted in "Foreign Bodies—The Films of Claire Denis," May 2011, Arsenal Cinema, http://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/arsenal-cinema/past-programs/single/article/2037/2804//archive/2010/october.html.

The Animated Spectator

Tom Sparrow

The work of art is crossed by three interrelated problems, although there are of course many more than that. The three I have in mind are these: orientation, emancipation, and animation. Of these three, it is the last—the problem of animation—that is, arguably, the least considered. In the following I give an account of each of these problems, briefly stage their terms, and introduce a principle for thinking about the identity of sensing beings like ourselves. At stake in this trio of problems, when taken together, is the question of the relationship between art and its spectators. Or, more broadly, the question of the interdependence of personal identity and the aesthetic. The principle of aesthetic animation provides one answer to this question. My contention is that our identities are intimately bound up with the aesthetics of our environment, and so the sensory encounters that occur there, whether quotidian or extraordinary, resulting from artifice or natural occurrences, are responsible at the most fundamental level for making us who we are. In short, we are animated by the aesthetic infrastructure we inhabit. Without it, we are lifeless.

When you disembark from a flight into a foreign city for the first time, you find yourself faced with the problem of orientation. Where am I? Where do I go? In a sense, this is not just a practical problem. It asks about the ground upon which you stand, where you are situated, how you find your place and how you locate yourself. These are problems that affect a person's very idea of who they are and what they can accomplish. To find oneself disoriented is to find oneself out of sorts, misplaced, misidentified—out of step with oneself. Our everyday lives are

stabilized by a certain congruity between body and world, self and setting. Our lives function well or poorly depending upon how well we are aligned with the environment we inhabit, or oriented within it. As Sara Ahmed put it, "we only know which way to turn *once we know which way we are facing*."[1] Our identities are anchored in the ways our bodies fit into or fail to fit into the space surrounding them. Arriving in a foreign land among foreign bodies, different languages, and unfamiliar sensations brings into striking relief the way in which our orientation in the world enables us to be who we are. Is not Kafka's *The Trial* the story of disorientation without the promise of reorientation, the story of a man whose identity is both called into question and irrecoverably lost in a web of accusations issuing from no place in particular? Orientation depends not only on how we assume our place in the world, but also how that place is addressed to us.

Standing in front of a work of art, *The Three Skulls* by Cézanne, for example, it is generally clear to the visitor how to orient herself. A wall-mounted painting hanging in a museum effectively tells her how to approach it. The visitor's orientation to the painting is assigned by the painting itself, and in a precise way. Objects, too, orient us in this way. If I aim to pick up a pencil, a toaster oven, or a basket of laundry, these items require that my body's sensorimotor system negotiate their contours in quite specific ways if my intention is to be fulfilled. Failure to orient my body toward the shape, size, weight, and texture of the objects will end in failure to use them in the way I wish to use them. Analogous rules apply to perceiving or contemplating these objects, as Merleau-Ponty describes in *Phenomenology of Perception*. He suggests that "for each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen."[2] The spectacle presented by the painting as well as its presentation requires "a certain kinaesthetic situation" to be achieved if its identity is to be disclosed.[3] The proper orientation to the painting, as Merleau-Ponty concludes, will yield the perfect balance of clarity and richness.

The situation is not so clear when it comes to installation, performance, or participatory art. It is not so clear when the work under consideration is of a massive spatial or temporal scale, where the best means of accessing the work elude the viewer. When a visitor enters the *Silver Clouds* exhibit at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, they enter a room where a number of "silver," reflective Mylar balloons, shaped like pillows, float at random. Visitors are allowed to touch the balloons if they wish. In this particular work, there is no obviously proper orientation to the work of art, and this can lead to a certain kind of disorientation. Visitors must find their own way into the exhibit. The identities of the exhibit and its visitors—as spectator or participant—are something that must be negotiated. To be sure, any work of art will disorient its spectators to some degree. Its discernment will require some kind of negotiation. Disorientation is what challenges and, in the end, what transforms the spectator when the aesthetic encounter is transformative. In some cases disorientation will be overcome as the spectator negotiates with the form, content, and significance of the work. In some cases the identity of the work of art will elude the spectator altogether, leaving her disoriented or at least incapable of orienting herself to the work. This can be especially challenging when it comes to installation or participatory art, not because painting, sculpture, or performance is by nature more accessible, but because the latter typically indicate to the spectator some ideal point of orientation. They tell the spectator which direction to face. With an installation that must be entered by the spectator, or some other work that requires spectator participation—architecture, notably—the orientation point can be lacking or, as it were, shifting: there are many points at which to enter or access the work as something bearing an aesthetic identity.

When an everyday object or a work of art solicits us to access it in a particular way it does so by presenting us with determinate properties and facades, some of which are clearly defined while others are more ambiguous or subtle. Given the perspectival nature of our perception of objects, the world of

objects likewise presents us with a system of what Alphonso Lingis calls *levels*. The levels are the indeterminate sensory phenomena that set the tone of a given situation or scene, that announce a determinate environmental, perceptual, or aesthetic event or field. Their ambiguity or formlessness do not make them any less real than the determinate figures they announce or accompany, they just make them more unwieldy, mysterious, and indiscernible. They at once orient and disorient, as Lingis portrays in the following descriptions:

As we approach an outdoor café in the night, we see a volume of amber-hued glow. When we enter it, our gaze is filled with the light. We begin to make out forms discolored with an amber wash, like fish seen through troubled waters. After some moments, the luminous haze neutralizes and the faces of people emerge in the hues of their own complexions. The tone of the light has become a level about which the colors of things and faces surface according to the intensity and density of their contrast with this level.

We enter a concert hall and find ourselves enveloped by the confused hubbub of the crowd and the rumble of the orchestra tuning. The conductor lowers his baton, the opening notes of the music begin, and our hearing finds the key and the volume level of the music.[4]

From these descriptions it is possible to glean what Lingis means by levels. They are akin to the sensory medium through which a given object or scene must be discerned, and according to which the object or scene must appear. It is no surprise, then, that he speaks of the levels as issuing a kind of practical imperative to would-be perceivers of these objects and scenes. The levels are sensory phenomena to which perception must orient itself, not in order to grasp the levels themselves, but in order to perceive the objects and scenes intended. They are neither objects nor objectifiable themselves; nor are they mere background. Works of art, too, exhibit and obey the levels.

Photo: Bobby George

The levels can be stabilized, of course, by controlling the environment in which a work of art is placed. The levels can be manipulated or modulated through environmental control. In natural settings, which is to say, outside the art world, the levels are no less prone to manipulation and control. In every case they are part and parcel of the aesthetic landscape, something to which sensorimotor creatures such as ourselves *must* respond. It is to the levels that a photographer *must* adjust his camera if he is going to capture the fortuitous shot as it appears. The levels are inescapable, beckoning us to access the world in this way or that. They are the prescriptive dimension of the aesthetic, issuing not from the objects themselves but from the interstices of aesthetic experience.

The extent to which we can access the levels or participate in the world is in part determined by the capacities and incapacities that define us, whether intellectual, corporeal, social. Art, as we have begun to see, is something that can alter our capacities and incapacities. Art is potentially transformative, for better or worse. Occasionally art is neutral or insignificant, incapable of moving us. It is potentially disabling, capable of marking, scarring, or traumatizing us. Art invites exposure of our bodies to uncertain sensations, sensory encounters whose effects we cannot anticipate or predict. These encounters may orient and animate us in ways detrimental or enlivening to our wellbeing. Censorship, when aiming at beneficence, is a response to art's ability to permanently disorient us. But art can also emancipate. Sometimes censorship is meant to combat this potential.

Art can emancipate, in the terms we have been considering so far, when it addresses the spectator as an agent capable of being oriented by it. That is, when the work of art realizes its own potential to animate its viewer and, consequently, enliven that viewer in a particular way. This does not mean that the work of art is always, or always should be, charged with the responsibility of shaping those who take it in, but that there is a potential in art that derives from its ability to orient and disorient its spectators. And this potential can be exploited, toward emancipatory ends, when the work of art encourages its spectators to negotiate with it. Emancipation, as Jacques Rancière reminds us, is about "blurring…the boundary between those who act and those who look."[5] But is it not also true that those who look are always those who act? Or, put otherwise, is it not the case that when one looks one is made to act in specific ways dictated by whatever is looked at? If the aesthetic is always accompanied by levels which prescribe that our sensorimotor system orient itself in specific ways, then looking as well as acting is always rife with emancipatory (and oppressive) potential.

Whether or not it emancipates its spectators is a matter of how the work of art is oriented toward them and, conversely, how it commands their orientation toward it. Does it encourage their activity or their passivity; their obedience or submission;

their criticism or disorientation? If the body of the spectator is susceptible to the sensory content of the work of art, then the body itself is implicated in the work of art. Censorship deprives the body of this aesthetic complicity, but at a price. Censorship is, in a quite literal sense, a form of sensory deprivation whose command reads: *Thou shalt not be exposed to these sensations!* But censorship must always assume that it already knows what the body can do, what it is capable of, and how it will be oriented or disoriented by the work of art. It is wary of the exposure that accompanies aesthetic experimentation and, on these grounds, it prohibits experimentation. At what cost, however? The virtue of aesthetic experimentation is that it allows the body to discover what it can do. To be sure, there is risk in experimentation. But there is also liberation and exhilaration. Censorship prevents their realization, sometimes in good faith, but too often illegitimately.

Embracing aesthetic risk, at the expense of censorship and in the name of potential emancipation, requires a double affirmation. First, the Dionysian affirmation of "all that appears" must be embraced.[6] This places all images, sensations, encounters on the same footing. It democratizes the aesthetic and gives voice to every expression. Second, emancipation calls for giving oneself over to the contingency of aesthetics, taking a chance with the levels, and making oneself susceptible to the sensory material of the work of art. If Emmanuel Levinas is right to say that aesthetic experience produces a "unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom, because the subject is caught up and carried away by it,"[7] then the emancipatory potential of art asks that we give ourselves over to its unpredictable effects/affects, come what may. Nothing here is certain. So much is out of our control.

Japanese writer Yukio Mishima is as well known for his ritual suicide as he is for his novels, films, and plays. In his brief autobiographical work *Sun and Steel* Mishima asks us to reflect on the nature of identity, and in particular the role that the aesthetic plays in shaping who we are. He tells the story of his decade-long transformation from pallid, introspective writer to

ripped, glistening bodybuilder. What is fascinating about this story is the terms with which he tells it. Mishima describes his transformation as a kind of education provided by the sun that shone on his skin and the steel he lifted in order to build muscle mass. His is a story of conversion of self and material, a conversion of self as *material*. The aesthetic properties, the material comprising the scene of his transformation—sun and steel—provided the lesson, the nourishment, which allowed Mishima to become someone else. "Little by little," writes Mishima, "the properties of my muscles came increasingly to resemble those of the steel. This slow development, I found, was remarkably similar to the process of education, which remodels the brain intellectually by feeding it with progressively more difficult matter."[8] The "interrelationship of muscles to steel was one of interdependence," he continues, "very similar, in fact, to the relationship between ourselves and the world."[9]

Mishima provides us with a way of thinking about how the aesthetic properties of the world shape us and, in so doing, provide us with form and vitality. Or rather, he offers us a figure for the negotiation of material that is the construction of aesthetic identity. Weightlifting, as strange as it may seem, is a kind of consumption, for Mishima. What the weightlifter consumes—and this is as true of the spectator of art as it is of all of us who take in the aesthetic properties of the environment—is precisely the aesthetic material of the training ground. This consumption is, in turn, converted into labor and, eventually, a new identity. The principle animating Mishima's new body, his bodybuilder's identity, is to be found in the sun and steel that emancipated him from his identity as writer. This is not to say that the bodybuilder Mishima was trapped inside the writer Mishima. It is simply to say that by consuming sun and steel, rather than ink and paper, a new Mishima was born. As Lingis summarizes it, "the properties that came to compose the excess musculature came from the steel and were its own properties. In the contact with the substance of steel, Mishima found a body become ferric substance."[10]

Mishima quite literally embodies the potential for orientation, emancipation, and animation that the aesthetic harbors within it. What we consume, aesthetically speaking, gives rise to who we are. The sensory properties of the work of art, but no less the everyday scenes and habitats we frequent, feed our sensorimotor systems and orient our identities.[11] Let us call this the *principle of aesthetic animation*. Now, if it is true that the aesthetics of the everyday world as much as the aesthetics of the art world give form to our identities, indeed, animate our very existence, then exposure to new aesthetic forms takes on an imperative of its own. Exposure to and experimentation with new aesthetic forms is nothing less than flirtation with new identities, new bodies, and new senses of self. Censorship ceases to be a matter of moral corruption or political propaganda; it becomes a matter of life and death.

NOTES

1. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 7.

2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 302.

3. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 303.

4. Alphonso Lingis, *The Imperative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 25.

5. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2009), 19.

6. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 17.

7. Emmanuel Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 4.

8. Yukio Mishima, *Sun and Steel*, trans. John Bester (New York: Kodansha International, 1970), 25-6.

9. Mishima, *Sun and Steel*, 32.

10. Alphonso Lingis, *Foreign Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 82.

11. On the aesthetic significance of the everyday, see Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Spheres of Glass

Lesley Stern

I wandered, lonely, escaping from the Seattle Sheraton, from the giddiness of social encounters and a plethora of conference talk, escaping Chihuly. Chihuly ornaments and glass sculptures are nested in every niche of the Sheraton, commanding attention from every shiny polished vantage point. Almost every hotel in Seattle (and many other hotels around the world) exhibit Dale Chihuly glass works, but his great popularity is centered on the garden installations. I saw “Gardens of Glass: Chihuly at Kew” in 2005, but was neither charmed nor seduced. As a tourist and gardener and sometimes critic, like others of my ilk I would always rather be seduced than not. On the other hand I’d rather be intrigued than charmed (but of course you cannot always choose the things that move you, you cannot orchestrate those moments when the air turns cold and you shiver, or when a hot feverish breeze gets under your skin, or when perplexity renders you speechless; for all that a certain kind of taste is trained into your body, you cannot always predict how you will react). So now, visiting Seattle for the first time, Chihuly Garden and Glass is on my bucket list. I’m intrigued to see how these glass works work in their native setting, hoping my mind can be changed.

After all, the conceit of these garden installations is potentially intriguing: the insinuation of fantastical glass sculptures in amongst real plants. They are mostly, though not entirely, gigantic, these sculptures, bearing names like garden grass, reeds, blue herons, sun, French Blue Ikebana with orange and scarlet frog feet, green trumpets, red orange reeds. They imitate and mimic. As you wander through the garden you encounter vegetative landscapes, living matter, interspersed with signs of

the synthetic, squishy materials juxtaposed with brittle surfaces, warm and fleshy with glassy coolness. Of course no garden is entirely natural, but if all gardens are to some degree designed then grand public gardens like Kew are meticulously curated (and so too, one imagines, the "original" Chihuly Garden). As a viewer ambling through a series of interconnected gardens or galleries, one's curiosity could be tickled, one's sense of assurance about which goes with what. Mimesis in this mise-en-scène possesses the potential to provoke the irreality of the garden itself.

But the garden and museum fell short of conceit.

So here I am, escaping the extravaganza, walking back to the downtown conference along 5th Avenue. Walking segues into trudging. It seems as though I have been hiking for days through rough terrain. A sliver of anxiety worms its way up, up from heavy footsteps into my stomach and buzzes there, a caged mosquito, looking for blood. An old familiar feeling, a feeling that hasn't visited for months. Perhaps, I tell myself, it is not somatic at all, just disgruntlement, the massive gaudy Chihuly glass works—luridly pretty, drained of affect—weighing heavily upon my fragile psyche. Suddenly a wave of home-sickness ripples through me, a yearning—to be home, curled up in bed with Elvis and Roxy, or in the garden picking fava beans, or in with the chickens, cooing, stroking their silkiness.

Lonely as a cloud.

When all at once I see a crowd, a host, of spectral chickens. Dead, plucked and headless chickens, impaled, fluttering and dancing in a shop window. Two washing lines slice the window vertically. Meat hooks hang from the cord lines, piercing the elongated yet rather fat necks, all skinniness concentrated in the legs which dangle in the air, feet splayed open like hands stretching, feeling for solid ground. In between the legs and the necks plump appurtenances, rounded if rather lumpy breasts. Is it a shop, a restaurant, an office? There is no lettering, no description, no invitation.

My dragging footsteps freeze.

Behind the chooks hangs a large Chinese paper lantern, once scarlet now faded to puce, and in the right foreground, on a dusty cluttered desk, a jar of bright lively daffodils. Golden. In contrast the chickens are pasty and pale, a grimy faded yellow. The sickly yellow of birds-eye-custard, dished up in my childhood at the end of every vile boarding school meal, smothered over every horrible pudding, the horribleness only exacerbated by this fraudulent cover-up. Or is it whiteness turned old and musty and tinged with the ochre of decay? I step closer, nose against the glass. There is something odd about these chickens, they are too smooth, too drained of blood, too dusty, their necks—inauthentically fat—are hollow. There is something about them that makes me want to reach out through the glass to feel their textural duplicity.

These are imitation carcasses, synthetic chickens, plasticcy. Relief and hilarity. The sense of laughter, however, isn't just provoked by the discovery of the hoax, rather it's to do with the uncanny persistence of irreality, an undecidabilty that persists in the scene before and after discovery, for now I'm part of this scene that I stumbled upon. The sense of unease, shadowed by the intimation of disease returning, the horror provoked by this exhibition of dead and naked chickens, the unasked-for juxtaposition of my silky girls and these synthetic mute corpses, is somewhat alleviated by the certainty that they are merely imitations. I'm off the hook, "my chickens" whose heads I would never chop off, who I would never pluck and hang and eat, are OK, they remain in the realm of the real while these phantoms are merely incarnations of a spectral brutality. But then the scene I witness—as though in a museum, as though this is an exhibit, as if it were a still frame from a movie—insists on including me in its mise-en-scène, on incorporating the dissociation from which I suffer. Cognitive dissonance shot through with strains of the uncanny. When I see ducks hanging in Chinese butchers, gleaming and velvetty in their soy basting, I can't wait to taste and to experience in the mouth the crunch of their crispy

skin. Even chickens, I never hesitate to eat chicken, I enjoy the cooking of chickens and chicken parts. "Chickens" in general. Not particular chickens. Not my chickens.

I was sitting alone in my wagon-lit compartment when a more than usually violent jolt of the train swung back the door of the adjoining washing-cabinet, and an elderly gentleman in a dressing-gown and a traveling cap came in. I assumed that in leaving the washing-cabinet, which lay between the two compartments, he had taken the wrong direction and come into my compartment by mistake. Jumping up with the intention of putting him right, I at once realized to my dismay that the intruder was nothing but my own reflection in the looking-glass on the open door.[1]

Freud, writing here about the uncanny, presents us with a scene conceptualized as a frame within a frame. He is jolted, subjected to a shock. We might almost say that the movement involves transference, it is a movement between—between the viewer and the image. Enter the chickens as a third term, a mediating twist.

Speaking of cognitive dissonance, of the personal and the social, of no man being an island:

The "taming" of this continent, in five centuries and change, required a mighty mustering of cognitive dissonance.[2]

How bizarre to come upon this apparition on an ordinary street, while ambling along, to encounter thus the uncanny echoing or correlation of living and dead, natural and artificial, self and other, chickens and daffodils. Somehow this view into another world (office, butcher's shop, Chinese restaurant?) wakes me up, looks back, interpolates. The austerity of the frame, string strung across the window asymmetrically, the sickly color-co-ordination, the insinuation of springtime and gardens, of a host of golden daffodils, into this macabre composition is provocative in a way the Chihuly is not.

It would be wrong to say that on glimpsing those daffodils my heart with pleasure danced. But a lightness did indeed enter into my leaden feet, as I imagined a dance

macabre between those denuded plastic chickens and my feathery cooing girls.

You have to walk through the Chihuly museum in order to reach the garden. Which means your experience of the garden is overdetermined by the sense of aesthetic homogeneity indoors. Actually the transition between the two realms is striking. It is called the glass house, and although modeled on the great glass houses of the nineteenth century such as the Crystal Palace, it is a very simple structure, bare and austere. In contrast to the nakedness and transparency in which you find yourself, a huge sprawling floral abundance hangs from the ceiling: glass flowers, larger than life, fashioned in red gold and orange, drip lusciously, suspensed in space, suspended forever. As you stand under them it is almost impossible not to imagine the whole gigantic structure crashing, splintering, dispersing into a thousand pieces. It's a gloriously extravagant composition, this mixing of glass textures, this invocation of an aesthetic of timelessness through an illusion to practices of preservation, to ways of keeping things alive in artificial environments. Like glass houses, like museums, like tombs.

In the glass house a space opens up in which to meditate upon scale and materiality.

But after the glass house is the garden and before the glass house there are galleries, endless iterations of frilly floraciousness. The psychedelic underwater worlds are interchangeable with the flowery abstractions. The garden is just another gallery, a medium of display, a staging for the performance of anxiety: to elevate glass blowing from a craft to a grandiose art. Such production requires factory conditions and many workers. Nothing new in this, but the process of effacement in the name of a single genius artist serves to efface process in general. I so wanted the installation to yield a tension, a gesturing to something outside itself, to the multiple imbrications of nature and art, to the materiality created out of breath and fire. What I found was an abundance of precious cheerful-

ness but little sense of the uncanny, or of the fragility of glass, how close it is to splintering. Nor much sense of how the social is inscribed in the material world. Wonder is a word often used to describe the Chihuly effect, but for me wonder served to efface the complexities of process.

Wonder is also the predominant response elicited by another famous and popular display, the Ware Collection of Glass Models of Plants, in the Harvard Museum of Natural History (often acknowledged by Chihuly as an influence). This collection is composed of 3,000 models of 'Glass Flowers' constructed by father and son Leopold and Rudolph Blaschka, over five decades from 1886 through 1936. In fact all kinds of plants, not just flowers, make up the collection which was commissioned in order to teach students of botany. The models are disturbingly life size (too large to be miniatures, too small to be sculptures) and remarkably accurate in anatomical detail and color.

The wonder that these "flowers" elicit is complicated by a range of emotions and epistemological speculations, as evidenced in the richness of critical writing that circulates around them. Much of this writing hovers between description and defiance of description. How unlikely that these scientific models should be made of glass rather than other substances so much more amenable to modeling (they are constructed primarily though not exclusively of glass) like wax or papier mache. Their materiality, in practical and imaginative terms, is of the utmost importance. While extremely thingy they are also chimerical. Wonder is generated in the play between seeing and not seeing, knowing and not knowing: you know they are made of glass and yet ..... "They look real enough but as if the real is from another realm," says Jamaica Kincaid. It is she who captures the uncanniness of the artificial perfection, and nails the relation of these objects wrought in glass to the garden.

The glass flowers and their many stages of being are in a state of perfection stilled. It is always a gardener's wish to have perfection and then to have it forever. It is also within the gardener's temperament to first desire forever and then to do everything possible to dismantle

and smash forever. If the flowers encased in cabinets stored in the museum make up a garden, they are not the exception to this latter sentiment. Though it seems as if they will last forever, every cabinet bears a legend warning of their fragility. The people taking care of them give assurance that they will last forever. But as every gardener knows, forever is as long as a day.[3]

Glass matters here, but other materials matter elsewhere. Plastic and yarn, for instance, can be exploited for their mimetic potential. What matters is scale and texture and the way that the materiality of the sculptural object is able to gesture outside its own perfection (its mimetic perfection, or formal coherence) to chisel a crack in the cognitive dissonance that glues everything together.

Think of Ian Hamilton Finlay's glass poem, Wave/Rock. The poem is constructed not on the page but on a thick sheet of glass onto which the words Wave and Rock, many times over, are sandblasted. The letters of the word wave "break" on the rock constructed not on the page but in glass. The form of the words mimics their meaning, enacts their materiality. Waves break, and simultaneously the process of waves breaking is frozen, the cycle of nature is eternal, and at the same time fragile, vulnerable to destruction particularly in and by human hands: the one who sculpts, composes, the one who reads and sees and knows and does not know. Wave/Rock dislodges an habitual cognitive dissonance. We might almost say that the movement involves transference, it is a movement between—between the viewer, looking at and through the glass, and the image.

Enter the chickens, proposing a third term, a mediating twist. For me the chickens in this instance represent an ecological dimension that Finlay Patterson most likely did not intend, but that the work now speaks.

Glass in the end is not the most important thing (though glass contains a particular potential). It is the materiality of the process incorporated into the sculptural object, the "work" in the "work" which gestures towards something playful and also

potentially destructive. The wave, this one wave which is also many waves, all waves, breaks over and over again but is itself vulnerable, and perhaps after all not so eternal.

Take Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reefs. This is a project initiated by the Institute for Figuring, run by Christine and Margaret Wertheim. The Wertheim sisters, inspired by a type of mathematical modeling called hyperbolic geometry, put out a web call to invite women to join them in crocheting a coral reef, following some simple mathematical rules for generating a certain kind of spatial configuration and dimensionality (interestingly embodied by reefs and reef creatures). Women from all over the world responded to the invitation, contributing individual items and elements. The Institute for Figuring initiated workshops, crocheting workshops which incorporated an ecological component, a learning about reefs, about the threats posed to their existence particularly from the onslaught of plastic detritus. The artists, as well as using more familiar materials such as wool and yarn, incorporated into the sculptures recycled materials, such as plastics. Leslie Dick, from whose fabulous essay I learnt of this project, writes of a "mental shift in scale (from individual item to larger combination)" which is "mirrored by the relation of the Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reefs to their real-world counterparts, particularly the Great Barrier Reef in the Pacific. Leslie Dick contends that the project, drawing on so many practitioners, produces a new kind of artist (and thus art work), one immersed in reverie, in a project that enables a rich variety and combination of imaginative explorations. She invokes this kind of artist:

While she may have confidence in her expertise, her work avoids grandiosity, remaining at a manageable scale (until it joins the larger combination). This artist particularly enjoys the invitation to sink below the ocean, to enter its dreamlike darkness, an alternate reality of color and shape. She enjoys making phallic shapes, using her hook and yarn to build leaning towers, star shaped fortresses, a landscape drawn in lumps of color. She enjoys making vaginal shapes, fuzzy, curly edged openings, soft to the touch, fronded and weird.[4]

I have only seen images on screen but these marvelously thingy things look so incredibly life-like, so reefish, it's uncanny. And dissonant too, the way "alien" materials are almost seamlessly crocheted into the sculptures. There is a cognitive dissonance at large in our world now: we revel in the beauty of underwater worlds, of forests and canyons, of places like the Great Barrier Reef, and we are filled with wonder at art that mimics that beauty and preserves for eternity a Platonic perfection. Peeking into the world of "Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reefs" jars that perfection, chisels into the glue of cognitive dissonance, invites reverie and wonder and playful engagement but also a cognitive recalibration, a reimagining and respinning of a conceit that intertwines the natural and synthetic worlds.

Speaking of cognitive dissonance—as we were making our way back from the spectacular San Juan Islands where we spent a night on Orcas island, a catastrophic event occurred in beautiful Washington State, one of the deadliest landslides in U.S. history. As we hiked around Cascade Lake and climbed to the top of the tower on the top of Mount Constitution, marveling in this world seemingly so pristine, a community in Stillaguamish Valley in the foothills of the North Cascades were suddenly without warning buried under mud. A natural disaster? Unforeseen, said the emergency manager of the area. Timothy Egan wrote a week after the event that in fact there had been warnings, most notably a report in 1999 that outlined "the potential for a large catastrophic failure" on the very hillside that just suffered a large catastrophic failure (although it seems the inhabitants of the endangered community were never told of these official reports). Egan reports visiting the area 25 years ago and being shown a mudslide occurring on a hillside above the river, a hillside in which old growth forest had been clear felled, leaving nothing to hold the hillside in torrential rain. Just like the hillside above the small, disappeared community, of Oso.

Egan says, "The "taming" of this continent, in five centuries and change, required a mighty mustering of cognitive

dissonance… A legacy of settlement is the delusion that large-scale manipulation of the natural world can be done without consequence.”

Scale and texture. A continent, an ocean, a garden, a shop window, forests, mud, glass, yarn, plastic, plants, the real and the imitative, the beautiful and the catastrophic.

I return to San Diego where rather than rain there is a drought, and the river if it can be seen at all, is skinny. I make a routine visit to the hospital on the UCSD campus and am astounded by the number of new buildings, massive grandiose medical buildings mostly, being developed on the very edge of canyons. Mesas have been sliced into and rearranged. Glass and concrete structures teeter on air. We have no old growth forests here, just coastal scrub and chaparral. But they too hold the earth down. What, I wonder is the cognitive dissonance we suffer from here? I imagine a performance art project enacted by chickens let loose on the medical campus, or even an installation of dead, plucked and headless chickens, hanging from the canyon walls, dangling over freeways, reaching for the daffodils.

NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, in a footnote to his 1919 essay, "The Uncanny," in *Art and Literature*, trans. James Strachey, comp. and ed. Angela Richards, The Pelican Freud Library 14, (London: Penguin, 1985), 371. Freud situates his essay as an investigation into aesthetics: "understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty but the theory of the qualities of feeling," (339).

2. Timothy Egan, "A Mudslide, Foretold," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/30/opinion/sunday/egan-at-home-when-the-earth-moves.html.

3. Jamaica Kincaid, "Splendor in the Glass," *Architectural Digest*, June 2002. http://www.architecturaldigest.com/ad/archive/artnotebook_article_062002.

4. Leslie Dick, "The Institute for Figuring and Companions: Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reefs. Track 16 Santa Monica," *X-tra* 11, no. 4 (Summer 2009). http://x-traonline.org/article/the-institute-for-figuring-and-companions-hyperbolic-crochet-coral-reefs.

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