

How Methane Made the Mountain:  
The Material Ghost and the Technological Sublime in *Methane Ghosts*

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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Graduate Program in Art

The Ohio State University

2016

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## Abstract

*Methane Ghosts*, a twelve-minute looping video installed in an art gallery, presents imagery of a landfill for aesthetic consideration. However, this periurban landscape was built not for scenic views, but for the impolite needs of a major metropolitan area. It is supposed to be out-of-sight, and the bureaucratic entity with which I contracted to gain access explicitly asked not to be identified. The film asks questions of the natural environment and the Sublime, while the installation asks questions of our own bodies in relation to the filmed image. This essay asks questions of institutions and the categories they set.

In this essay, I consider the works of filmmakers like James Benning and Robert Gardner, the formal and material questions posed about filmmaking by critic Gilberto Perez and anthropologist David MacDougall, and the history of the Sublime in American thought, especially as related to technology and avant-garde film. This whole is framed by a consideration of my own rural agricultural childhood. Behind this fascination is a theory of the garden, a place outside traditional categories, between woods and farm, home and nature, which originally began from the first waste dumps. I consider the landfill a sort of garden, though one on a bureaucratic scale, out of reach of the individual, hidden in plain sight.

Rather than explicate the minute particulars of *Methane Ghosts*, I have chosen instead to offer an archaeology of my thoughts during its making. So I have structured the essay as a series of fragments. Like the landfill itself, one might find such scraps and then piece together some understanding. In the scraps of this essay, certain themes occur and reoccur. Since I signed a contract, I cannot include *Methane Ghosts*. Instead I sketch some jobs for future work.

Dedication

For Dad & Mom

For Xander & Reggie

For Katriner

With all my love

## Acknowledgements

I have some people to thank. Like my family, to whom I have been able to be closer, and Katrina. I love you all.

I would like to thank my dead teachers, Otto Emmelhainz and James Baker Hall, for forcefully and perfectly cutting out a path in me for the hard work of art, especially writing. Among the live ones I haven't talked to in a while, Greg Waller and Armando Prats taught me about film, reflexivity, and genre. Doug Slaymaker taught me Japanese film and Japanese besides, and was a great help to me in returning to school. That was many years ago, when I was in isolation, and now I have a large community at Ohio State to thank, chief among them my thesis committee of Amy Youngs, Michael Mercil, and Roger Beebe, each one of whom I was honored and pleased to work with. Thank you for your sustained attention, critical eyes, and thoughtful guidance. My peers in Art & Technology (Blake, Jessica, Andrew, Tess, and Sarah) have offered creative and intellectual communion and joy besides. Thanks too to my classmates, especially Lilliana Marie, Kyle Downs, Dan Jian, Boryana Rusenova-Ina, Alana Yon, Sam Van Strien, and my teachers, Ken Rinaldo, Shane Mecklenburger, Suzanne Silver, Dani Leventhal, and Ann Hamilton. George Rush, Laura Lisbon, Tiffany Halsell, Jason Kentner, and Michelle Lee somehow enabled me to sort through the logistics of earning two terminal degrees without terminal effects. Along those lines, many thanks go to the people with whom I collided in Landscape Architecture at Knowlton, in particular Katherine Bennett, Jake Boswell, Cur[b]tis Roth, and of course Eric, Steve, Larissa, Dannnah, Chris, Katalin, Tatiana, Fangyuan, Chee, Tom, Tom, Tom, Tom, Tom, Tom, Tom, RayLee, Tom, Tom, and Ian. That was a time. I'm still in recovery, but I would do it with no other people in no other way.

But in between was a long time of wandering, as rich as the bookends. But different. I slept a month on a couch owned by Mark Furlow and Siobhan Byrns, and I think they saved my life a bit. I slept on a floor owned by Stu Oakley too, whereas at Chiiori I slept on the floor and met many people there in just two months of shimmering liminal farm labor. Buffering all that are ragged years, with neither shape nor sense, with failures personal and professional, both small and total, years stitched once each summer by my transient community gathered in July haze to teach first in Danville then in Murray, headed first by Clarence Wyatt and then John Kinkade, held aloft by everyone, but especially Carter Florence, Katherine Yared, Kristen Harris, Nick Gowen, Jay Crocker, Jeff O'Field, McKay Nelson, Emily Lindon, Sarah Becker, Hannah Flanery, Raven Newberry, Fr. Sam, Melissa Stravitz, Kate Wintuska, Brie Logsdon, Katelyn Conroy, Bryce Meredith, Andy & Jessie Arnold, Lee Look, Crystal Mounce, John Wilcox, wonderful John Powell, and everyone else and all my students, who helped me define and refine whatever it is I'm doing. And play. It has been rich and strange to be rooted in a place and an institution. Now back to wandering, I suppose.

## Vita

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- 1999.....M. A. English literature and film,  
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- 2011.....University Fellow, Department of Landscape  
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## Epigraphs.

Look at this mountain, once it was fire.

-Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet, slant-quoting Cézanne

Cinephilia is also a lack of ambition.

-Danièle Huillet

Personally, I never really make distinctions as to what makes a place urban or rural besides the very obvious like transportations (buffalos and cars), structures (huts and buildings), dresses and manners. I grew up in the middle of a jungle down south, in the middle of poverty, in the middle of strife and struggle, and it's the same when I settled in Manila and New York. These are the same jungles, with poverty, strife and struggle hovering in different incarnations. My films are very personal, so I guess, they come out naturally. My culture is my cinema. I am rural and I am urban. My art comprehends both milieus. My art will struggle to understand both worlds. I am the synthesis. I will be the synthesis. Or, my art is the synthesis. My art will be the synthesis.

-Lav Diaz<sup>1</sup>

"Everything in this world is eater or eaten. The seed is food and the fire is eater"

~W.B. Yeats (From the Upanishads). Epigraph to *Forest of Bliss*, Robert Gardner, 1986

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<sup>1</sup> The Straub & Huillet quotes come from Byg, Barton. *Landscapes of Resistance: The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1995, p. 48 and p. vii, respectively; the Diaz quote comes from Tioseco, Alexis. "A Conversation with Lav Diaz." *Criticine*, 30 January 2006, online. [http://criticine.com/interview\\_article.php?id=21](http://criticine.com/interview_article.php?id=21)

## Opening.

My creative work here focuses on a landscape of waste, and what that waste produces. This landscape is tucked between the urban and the rural. Yet the sources of my interest are not urban policy nor ecological worries, but my own history, living away from cities and working in the landscape, truly as part of the landscape. There I was caught up in the land's processes, bewitched by the vision of it. I consider this bewitching here in ten scraps, not too unlike the scraps you'd find deep in the landfill, or blown off the hole in the landfill's working face on a windy day. These remnants of my doings in the last three (five, really) years of creative work remain. If one chooses, one might collage them together and invent some connecting threads.

## 1. The Woods and the Farm.

My landscape split between the woods and the farm. The woods surrounded the house in which I spent my youth. They have stayed. Some miles away the farm stood as a clearing in the woods, on five or so acres of river bottomland among tall stands of oak and sycamore. It existed purely for work, mostly manual labor, which I began like everyone else in the county around the age of seven or so. At first my brother and I plucked weeds and tobacco worms from the plants, soon graduating to setting tobacco with quick small hands on the back of a machine dragged up and down the fields behind our 1948 International tractor. This machine, called a setter, drug a water tank up on a chassis and two people down on seats just off the ground. My father and I would pull seedlings from styrofoam grids, hydroponic planters we used to start the seeds, and place the flimsy things in the dirt. The setter would squirt out a water-and-fertilizer mix every two feet, and that was when you let go of the seedling. Later came weeding with hoes until the plants could crowd out the undergrowth. The best part, the hot, dirty, work of cutting the full plants with hatchets and spearing them on tobacco sticks, came with the acrobatics of hanging them in the barn's rafters to dry. Some months later in the winter we would sit in the cold of an abandoned house, my father's childhood home, and peel off the dried leaves by hand to press into bales. A wood-burning stove couldn't do much to keep the cold away when the windows were just covered by plastic. We worked the farm like this for a long time, but now it has gone. The owner of the land died. A doctor bought it to use for mud-racing on a four-wheeler on his off days, or something equally insipid.

The woods, though, are still ours for now, and I visit them as often as I can. The trails I use to enter them were set by cattle, and the trees are tall but thin, just 70 or 80 years old. Much of the undergrowth has been crowded out by bush honeysuckle, an opportunistic species not native

to this place. From just over the hill's crest you can hear US-27, a road made wider so that developers can buy up what farms remain and cut them into subdivisions. They will have the names of the things they destroyed, like "Shady Grove" and "Farm Creek," and whoever takes out mortgages to live in them will commute 45 minutes north to work. The worth of the land is no longer labor, production, or the blood of culture flowing through it. Now it's just finance.

Along with the woods and the farm were the fictions. I did not much like working on the farm, though I quite liked being out in the woods, hiding, pretending I was not doing farm work. I also liked being inside, first in a comic book, then in a book book, and last in a movie. Perhaps I should call it cinema, since all the movies were foreign. I was never young, alive, and in love in an apartment in Paris with bookshelves in the walls, nor in Osaka's cramped back alleys, but I pretended to be for much of my youth. The screen was an escape, sure, but one with academic airs since I could read Rosenbaum or Sontag after and flatter myself I was educated. It was also a consolation, in light of the world's state offscreen. Faulkner spoke of fiction's power to console in his Nobel address, calling it "not merely the record of man, [but] one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail."<sup>2</sup> But eventually fiction became less a consolation and more a consolation prize, all art just a trinket next to a much larger set of wounds it can address but not heal. In my case this wound is the ongoing disaster of my old community, which is in large part a disaster of our cultural relationship to land and labor,<sup>3</sup> and the divorce of wages from that labor.<sup>4</sup>

I have witnessed in my lifetime a move away from the work of the hand and family on the land where they live. Now, rather than a stewardship as we make land and it makes us, work

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<sup>2</sup> Faulkner, William. "Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature." In *Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters*. New York: Modern Library, 2004. P. 120.

<sup>3</sup> Two key references here are Jackson, Wes. *Becoming Native to This Place*. Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 1994; and Berry, Wendell. *Another Turn of the Crank: Essays*. Washington DC: Counterpoint, 1995. Berry, a farmer in Henry County and an essayist of brilliance, has written dozens of books that could fit in this reference.

<sup>4</sup> "Simply put, a population that makes up the core of the Republican base [white, middle-aged men] has been committing suicide, overdosing on opioids, and drinking itself to death at a rate comparable to the AIDS epidemic. And the Republicans not only spent zero time trying to help them during the Bush and Obama years, they didn't even seem to know that this was happening to them." Longman, Martin. "What Really Made the Right Nuts." *Washington Monthly* 13 March 2016. Online.

has become reified into the abstractions of “production,” usually in transnational corporate forms conducted through information technology. That form has pooled resources and hollowed out labor, especially in rural areas.<sup>5</sup> Of course, production continues without labor. This is true even in rural areas, though crops and livestock matter less than the potential energy stored in fossil minerals extracted through gaping geologic stoma.<sup>6</sup> When these extractive industries have gone (“Obama’s War on Coal”<sup>7</sup>), what’s left are scars and open wounds, but there’s still the attention and activity generated for online marketing firms to data-mine, as well as the production and consumption of drugs from methamphetamine to heroin.

From all this production comes waste. In part it is mine waste, dumped into streams. In another part it is waste-production, whether as information from the nonsense-machine of the Internet or as packaging waste brought into small communities, usually by Wal-Mart. All this waste goes somewhere. If it is urban, it most likely piles up on the dross land between the rural and urban. If it is rural, we probably just burn it or throw it by the wayside. We also have waste-lives, whether from drug overdoses<sup>8</sup> or the wasted potential of people born so removed from the

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<sup>5</sup> E.g., “...most of the job losses from 2008 to early 2010 were in the middle- income category, jobs that pay from roughly \$14 to \$21 an hour. What is disturbing is that in the job turnaround since then, only one in five such jobs came back. Instead, very low- end jobs, paying \$7.70 to \$13.80 an hour, accounted for most new employment.” Madrick, Jeff. “Our Crisis of Bad Jobs.” *New York Review of Books*. 2 October 2012. Online. <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2012/10/02/our-crisis-bad-jobs/>

<sup>6</sup> See Reece, Erik. *Lost Mountain: A Year in the Vanishing Wilderness: Radical Strip Mining and the Devastation of Appalachia*. New York: Riverhead, 2006; and House, Silas, and Howard, Jason. *Something’s Rising: Appalachians Fighting Mountaintop Removal*. Lexington, KY: U of Kentucky P, 2009. Both works narrate the process of mountaintop removal, in which firms located outside the state rely on decades-old coal leases and lax government regulation to remove the tops of mountains, pushing them into stream beds which feed into river systems down mountain, in order to expose and remove seams of coal. The practice has waned somewhat, but the geomorphic transformation of the watershed is now permanent. The latter book outlines the complex relationship of local people to the practice and mining in general, as labor marks both identity and a way to stay above poverty even as mountaintop removal damages human and nonhuman health.

<sup>7</sup> This commonplace among people where I’m from refers to the factual decline of the Appalachian coal industry due to overextraction and the changing economies of energy production, but elides those facts for the fictional story of a decline brought on deliberately by the presence of a black man in the White House who hates America. This is a legacy of racism among both disenfranchised poor rural white people and much better-off white people, but it is also the legacy of the manipulation of both groups brought on by the Southern Strategy. Ken Ward debunked this commonplace during the 2012 election in “The Myth of the ‘War on Coal.’” *The Nation* 10 October 2012. Online. <http://www.thenation.com/article/myth-war-coal/>

<sup>8</sup> In rural counties, deaths from drug overdoses went up 394% between 1999 and 2009, over 100% more than in urban

economic centers that they never fulfill their gifts. Best of all is waste-desire, the frustrated kind created so often in people far from the centers through mass media, ghost pictures of other lives and other places better than the one they're in, of desires unfulfilled and impossible besides. It's a common story, one which I certainly have my part in, tucked in a dark room swaddled in images of elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

All this is old news which has occupied me, my eyes, and my hands for some time now. For a long time, when I saw fencerows of barbed wire woven with trees, I saw them stitching together the land like a patchwork quilt of fields. Now I understand they are frayed stitches, and that the social fabric comes apart a bit more with each farm's consolidation or development. Though this question has occupied me, my energies toward it have been wasted, because I cannot stop financialization [sic] and its reduction of complexity to spreadsheets, nor the lack of income redistribution necessary to spread the gains of globalization,<sup>10</sup> nor the ignorance of entire

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areas. Ferro, Shaunacy. "The Rise of Overdose Deaths in Rural America." *Popular Science* 12 November 2013. Online. <http://www.popsoci.com/article/science/rise-overdose-deaths-rural-america>

<sup>9</sup> Here I want to tell a someone else's personal story which fits poorly in this opening passage. I think the desire for escape, and effecting that escape through fiction, whether novels or comic books or cinema or athletic contests or video games, is a common and essential element of growing up. Ideally the fictions set into motion patterns of behavior which open pathways that lead young people to the accomplishments of adulthood. But a desire for escape can lead to escapism, especially among the communities I know best, rural ones throughout Kentucky where the distance between the desire fiction may excite and the institutions which can help one realize those desires is very great. Such escapism becomes disease and continues only in a perverted form. As an example, for six years I taught a summer class in Film Studies for high-school seniors with untapped academic potential. My students came from all over, some from private schools in Louisville, some from public schools in rural Appalachia. One student from the mountains had constructed his identity around the Hollywood films he saw every week in the cinema the next town over. He desperately wanted to succeed in that industry, though he was under not-unreasonable pressure from his family to find a stable, good job, like being a doctor, closer to home. In our class he was difficult, in part because I mainly taught world cinema he could not relate to, in part because of a social distance from his more privileged classmates I could have done more to help him bridge. Last summer, about 9 years after our encounter, he sent me an e-mail thanking me for inspiring him to pursue his Hollywood dream. He reported that he had dropped out of a premed program to follow his dream and that now he was in talks with Fox, the movie studio, about a script he had written.

I don't believe him. And it is not because of him; I don't believe that larger system has any use for him beyond his role as a consumer. He may very well be talking to a studio and they may very well be leading him on just in case. It is, after all, business. I do suspect that the dogged pursuit of his dream, in that these dreams are false, has warped his relationship with the economic and social realities around him, based on what I saw when he was younger, and based on people I have known who have lived past their similar dreams.

<sup>10</sup> "Trade benefits those who produce exports and those who consume imports... It hurts the producers of goods which can be made better or more cheaply abroad. But the gains to the winners exceed the gains to the losers: that is, the winners could make the losers whole and still come out ahead themselves. ...[But] free trade without

industries, whether real estate or housing, for the land they chew up and the long echoes of their business. Or even agriculture, where the increasing hype of “local” and “organic” may have more to do with transforming groceries to resemble the wealthy, white ones in California where the movement took off.<sup>11</sup> Farming was never for me, at least as a vocation, but the fact that distant economic and political forces determined that for me, rather than a process of personal discernment, sticks in my craw. Thus I have made some videos and a few objects, a couple of talks of fancy, fantasy visions and works of criticism, in lieu of agency in the wider world.

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redistribution (especially the corrupt version of “free trade” with corporate rent-seeking written into it) is basically class warfare waged downwards.” Kleiman, Martin. “Trade, Trump, and Downward Class Warfare.” *Washington Monthly* 4 March 2016. Online. [http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/ten-miles-square/2016/03/trade\\_trump\\_and\\_downward\\_class059814.php](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/ten-miles-square/2016/03/trade_trump_and_downward_class059814.php)

<sup>11</sup> Guthman, Julie. “Bringing Good Food to Others: Investigating the Subjects of Alternative Food Practice.” *Cultural Geographies* 15 (2008): 431-47.

## 2. Gardens.

If my landscape split between woods and farm, both stood a bit away from the home. Usually the home sat in the clearing in the woods.<sup>12</sup> Next to the home and deeply entwined with it is usually a garden. Unlike tobacco and its sticky, poisonous leaves and the cancer they bring<sup>13</sup>, a plot of kitchen vegetables may inspire and delight. Ours lived in concert with the house inside. It still does, actually, and it now offers a way to think about creative work.<sup>14</sup>

This way of thinking may be aspirational. Farms sit poorly with gardens, and I have mostly identified with the former. (I have also typically accepted the division between the hard work of art and the hard work of, well, work.) Yet the garden offers a way forward, not just out of misidentification but out of tired categories and old ruts. I hope to show the garden as a pathway, if not framework, for making art.

As to tired categories, the garden offers a few.<sup>15</sup> The word has a porous definition, and so it has fitted poorly into academic studies. “Garden” brings to mind the kitchen garden, a pocket mirror of the farm without the endless repetition and rush to market. Yet these small plots appear too rarely in studies of the garden. Instead, works of landscape architecture from Stowe to Central Park accompany surveys of the pleasure garden, artful enclosures of plants in the residences of

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<sup>12</sup> What sounds archetypal in this passage owes much to Dripps, R. D. *The First House: Myth, Paradigm, and the Task of Architecture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997. My thanks to Michael Mercil for introducing me to this book.

<sup>13</sup> My only uncle Jim Randall, my father’s brother who farmed tobacco as a child, quit smoking during my time in this program. A few weeks later he was dead of a lung cancer he did not know he had. He loved neither the woods nor the farm but the river where he would go to fish.

<sup>14</sup> The garden as a place of creativity is most certainly a treacly cliché. So are memorials for the dead, and images of childhood. What is to be done?

<sup>15</sup> This litany of woe omits entirely the “Gardening” section at the big-box bookstore, as well as the better half of Home & Garden Television.

privileged ancients.<sup>16</sup> Here the garden becomes the work of Mughal and Roman Emperors, not the household. Even now, one may see the artist's garden, whether Ian Hamilton Finley's Little Sparta or Derek Jarman's Prospect Cottage, receive a book-length consideration while more humble home gardens appear only in urban planning's scatterplots of urban agriculture yields.<sup>17</sup> Studio art is studio art; art history is art history; and food production is food production. Meanwhile, though the farm might appear in USDA reports, images of the farm appear only in some landscape painting and in the occasional historical survey of documentary photography, though these photographs favor human portraiture.<sup>18</sup> Even if one looks past the people who work it, one sees that the farm's formal qualities have emerged from practical, not aesthetic, demands. Of course, we can appreciate those qualities aesthetically, even as we can investigate the ecological and productive essence of formal pleasure gardens. My working theory of the garden is this: even as these places sit within studies and categories, they go where they may because they are not, ultimately, human creations. They are long-unfolding processes in a place, and their open form draws in seeds and creatures who have as much say as the gardener.<sup>19</sup> These considerations informed the beginnings

<sup>16</sup> For instance, John Dixon Hunt's *Greater Perfections: The Practice of Garden Theory* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2000) posits "three natures," situating the garden between the wilderness and the farm; however, he subsequently considers only a refined collection of landscape architecture at the country homes and palaces of the landed gentry. Matteo Vercelloni and Virgilio Vercelloni's *Inventing the Garden* (Los Angeles: Getty, 2009) defines the garden as the planted enclosure; their survey opens with a Sumerian pictogram of a tree in a triangular plot, fenced in, and then continues through the enclosed pleasure gardens of ancient Persia (pp. 12-14). One suspects that the long history of gardens that offer pleasure to the poor, not through trysts and escapes but vegetables, has been trodden into the ground and forgotten for want of a wall and a palace guard.

<sup>17</sup> That said, I do recommend this research survey which introduces a special issue on vernacular gardens: Kimber, Clarissa. "Gardens and Dwellings: People in Vernacular Gardens." *The Geographical Review* 94:3 (July 2004): 263-83. It reveals the limitations of academic research on the topic, outlines the categories of that research, and offers future directions. Kimber is a geographer, and much work in that field straddles categories with fluidity.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., the Farm Security Administration photography of 1937-1942, or Lewis Hine's photographs for the National Child Labor Committee from 1908-1924. More recently, see the work of my teacher: Hall, James Baker. *Tobacco Harvest: An Elegy*. Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 2004. Hall was a fine art photographer in the mold of Minor White and Ralph Eugene Meatyard, but this book of photos is a straightforward effort to document the 1973 tobacco harvest on Wendell Berry's farm.

<sup>19</sup> The example *par excellence* of the open-form garden is Louis Le Roy's Ecocathedral, a garden in which Le Roy organizes bricks into towers and platforms and then allows nonhuman forces to bend, break, and infiltrate his work. See Boukema, Esther and McIntyre, Philippe Velez. *Louis G. Le Roy: Nature, Culture, Fusion*. Rotterdam: NAI, 2002; and Raxworthy, Julian. *Novelty in the Entropic Landscape: Landscape Architecture, Gardening, and Change*. PhD thesis. Queensland, Australia: University of Queensland, 2013. I thank Rob Dredge for introducing me to

of my work *Methane Ghosts*, set not in a productive farm but what amounts to a burial ground.<sup>20</sup>

If the picture of gardens drawn by art history is wanting, a look outside the field yields an entirely different one. Work by the botanist Edgar Anderson and the geographer William Doolittle,<sup>21</sup> for instance, refigures the garden outside its traditional categories. By quite literally digging into gardens' archaeological remains, they uncover the anthropological processes of how people use, and are used, by plants. Anderson places the garden's origins squarely in this relationship, noting that plants have tended to align themselves with human uses. Of particular importance are the middens, dump-heaps in which our refuse fostered a biologically welcoming place for seeds to sprout, fostering connections and crossbreeding among plants; he posits that the first crops for cultivation likely came from these chaotic, but unusual, patches of plants.<sup>22</sup> Eventually these volunteer plant communities became the plants in the first gardens, a form Anderson locates

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Raxworthy.

<sup>20</sup> My working theory owes much to my own background and community in Kentucky, both the Jeffersonian rural ideal envisioned and enacted by Wendell Berry on his Henry County farm north of Louisville and my own less-than-ideal work on our farm growing tobacco, a plant that slowly kills the people who rely on its stimulant kick to get through long working days. It also owes to studies in gardening and urban agriculture conducted with Katherine Bennett, a professor of landscape architecture at Ohio State University, and studies in agricultural policy led by Dr. Jill Clark. Further work in gardens went on with Amy Youngs and Ken Rinaldo, whose work in garden installations led me to study with them. Further work in farms occurred with Michael Mercil, who led a too-short tour of central Ohio's agricultural landscapes. These thoughts also saw refinement during the year (off and on) I spent volunteering with WWOOF, Worldwide Workers On Organic Farms, in Japan, and during two brief courses in permaculture design, first with Peter Bane and Keith Johnson alongside students from Indiana University-Bloomington for two weeks in 2007, then over ten days with Dave Jacke in western Massachusetts in 2012. Studying permaculture led me to take an interest in waste streams, and a landscape studio with Jake Boswell spurred my interest in landfills. I should note that I came to Ohio State University to study landscape architecture, not art, as a compromise between my interest in land, agriculture, culture, and development, and my hopes to effect some change in these through my working life. This chapter reflects thinking I began in that department, and attempts to justify that time spent, and to fight with and against that discipline. That I wound up studying art again should be left to the psychology department.

<sup>21</sup> Along with this botanist and this geographer I should mention the work of D.J. McConnell, a researcher of unknown allegiance who has written a peculiar book-length study of the tropical homegarden, a widespread form of home-scale agriculture which he posits as the primordial beginnings of all agriculture. He calls them "gardens of complete design," a lovely phrase and ideal. While the book focuses mostly on Sri Lankan homegardens, it extends its speculations backwards and forwards in history with a strange prose that can only come from the pen of someone who has been at it so long he just don't care any more what anyone thinks. I'm sure some quote from it could be apropos here, but because it is so tropical and so singular, I left it to the archaeologists of footnotes. McConnell, D.J. *The Forest Farms of Kandy and Other Gardens of Complete Design*. Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2003. Additional work on tropical homegardens, from an agroforestry perspective, comes from P.K.R. Nair, in particular "Do tropical homegardens elude science, or is it the other way around?" *Agroforestry Systems* 53 (2001): 239-245.

<sup>22</sup> Anderson, Edgar. *Plants, Man, and Life*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1952. Pp. 144-49.

in developing-world vernacular gardens, like the home garden-orchard in Santa Lucia, Guatemala he diagrams.<sup>23</sup> To help our understanding, he uses “glyphs” for each plant to represent in plan view not just their location, but also their shape and relative size. It is not a geometric garden, but its mix of plants and uses reveals an order that contradicts certain Cartesian assumptions of order:

It was covered with a riotous growth so luxuriant and so apparently planless that any ordinary American or European visitor, accustomed to the puritanical primness of north European gardens, would have supposed (if he even chanced to realize that it was indeed a garden) that it must be a deserted one.<sup>24</sup>

Yet it is a garden. It serves for food and medicine, with at least 25 species of plants, all useful in one way or another, and offers pleasure besides.

A half-century separates Anderson’s book from Doolittle’s essay, and much has been learned and remains to be learned. Doolittle draws on a career’s worth of field work studying the interconnections among gardens, landform, settlement, and plant and human life throughout Latin America. He puts it more directly than Anderson, who hinted at but did not state outright garden’s human seeding:

Being in proximity to, and usually slightly downslope of, dwellings, dump heaps were regularly “irrigated,” albeit inadvertently, with household wastewater, were continually “fertilized,” again inadvertently, by additions of household garbage and human waste, and were situated so that people could not help but notice the changes plants go through. Dump heaps were perfect habitats for mutation and hybridization to both

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 138-39.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 136-37.

occur and be capitalized on. If gardens, as we typically think of them, evolved out of dump heaps, they were, to use economic and sociological parlance, unanticipated consequences and, in biological terms, exaptations rather than adaptations.<sup>25</sup>

He draws a direct connect between this unanticipated consequence and the unmentionable processes of human voiding, noting that for much of human history,, the pit toilet— whether “outhouses, privies, or latrines”— handled all human feces. Such toilets remain in use today throughout the developing world. They usually sit at the edge of the yard, the distance one might travel for a bit of privacy. Doolittle notes, “‘Going to the bathroom’ can involve nothing more than discreetly seeking a moment’s privacy among the luxuriant vegetation in the garden.”<sup>26</sup> Then the waste fosters the growth of new vegetation.

The picture these researchers draw relies little on sustained human attention. People eat, excrete, and perhaps notice the changes in the plants; they do it again. Most of life moves out-of-sight. One assumes these early people noticed effusions of flora a small walk from their homes, and eventually developed a rich botanical knowledge that enabled them to make their trash dumps more consciously, separating out the species that pleased them, or placing them in particular relationships to their homes. Eventually, our ancestors had sufficient leisure to enclose and decorate these spaces. Not much later we wound up with art historians talking about Persian tilework and entomologists trying to figure out how to arrange row plantings to maximize fruit yields in urban garden plots, and here we are. So much for the garden.

By contrast, the farm marks the extension of the home into the world of production and consumption. While they share the essential features of gardens, like plants and certain geometric forms, farms exist only for financial reasons. They inevitably tie a particular crop into a market

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<sup>25</sup> In his essay “Gardens Are Us, We Are Nature: Transcending Antiquity and Modernity,” *Geographical Review* 94.3 (2004): 391-404. P. 392.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 393.

out and away, whether through a government-controlled base-and-auction system as with tobacco, a roadside farm stand selling to motorists, or an agribusiness agent with a contract in hand. In this system, the land becomes reified into a means of financing the family and their life. The family becomes a node in the much larger system of agribusiness.

Etymology here offers some insight. The Greek word *οἶκος* meant “house” and “household” in its original language, and it has descended into English as both the words “ecology” and “economy.”<sup>27</sup> Often recalled by environmentalists to illustrate the effects of the household on the world in an era when we are exhorted to “think globally, act locally,” this etymological parallel speaks to an essential similarity between the two. Ecology, with its scientific concern for which wastes become food for which organisms, resembles the intellectual discipline of economics, charting the relationships of supply and demand through mathematics. Even a cursory glance at an ecology textbook reveals scatterplots and graphs quite similar to those in the dismal science.<sup>28</sup> Both concern themselves with measurement and the interplay of complex systems. In a more local sense, the economics of the household, especially the farm household, depends on the ecology in which it persists. Nonetheless, this still accepts the rationalization of the economy of the two, and eschews the unwilled generation of the garden. Our hands are all over the household and all over the farm, our petty plans and charts and graphs. The garden, or at least the first garden, was a gift.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The word “ecology” enters English through the German word “Oecologie,” coined by Ernst Haeckel, the author of *Art Forms in Nature*, in 1866. By 1893 it had entered English as “ecology” thanks to the International Botanical Congress. Worster, Donald. *Nature's Economy A History of Ecological Ideas*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. P. 192. Worster notes that *οἶκος* means both “the family household and its daily operations and maintenance,” the sense from which we get “economy.”

<sup>28</sup> Quite.

<sup>29</sup> Georges Bataille may be as relevant here as Lewis Hyde, but I have not read *The Accursed Share* yet. It's on the to-do list, but you can only do so much.

### 3. The Landfill.

Seeing the garden as a bounty in the household's waste can open new understandings of human beings in their homes. It applies in simplest form to what is in arm's reach. However, the location of my work extends to the far reach of the home: a landfill on the outskirts of the city. Like the earliest gardens, it is a dump. Like the farm, it is the extension of the home into the world of consumption and production, if on a massive scale. However, the main product is not food crops but a byproduct: waste. It is repurposed waste to be sure, household waste transformed into a rising landform, with the methane gas arising from within turned into fuel. Nonetheless, both uses deal with byproducts about which everyone feels a bit of guilt.

Unlike both the garden and the farm, the landfill dwarfs the human scale. In the flatlands of central Ohio, it towers over other landforms for many miles. Whereas old landforms, like the Appalachian Mountains, take shape over millennia thanks to geological, meteorological, and hydrological influences, this landform has grown in a few decades thanks to some acts of local government and business. Land artists like Robert Smithson made gestures in this direction in the early 1970s, but their works shrink before the vast industrial-scale earthworks of the contemporary economy, whether or not Edward Burtynsky has photographed them. Mountaintops vanish; oceans as vast as Texas swirl with microscopic plastic; seas rise. Such works, the products of government and industry, have led some scientists to dub our geologic epoch "the Anthropocene," an era when the human hand exerts the primary influence on the geologic record.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> E.g., Waters, Colin et al. "The Anthropocene Is Functionally and Stratigraphically Distinct from the Holocene." *Science* 8 January 2016: 137-147. This article, the latest in geologists' ongoing discussion of whether or not they should change the name of the geological epoch we live in, has the same air of someone debating the arrangement of the deck chairs. The academic project is at root one of naming and classification, and this era needs a Diogenes. See

While the landfill marks a far reach of the home's daily production of waste, it also extends past that reach. Individual human hands may create it bit by bit, but they cannot alter it in a meaningful way. That job falls to the institutions which created, manage, and determine it.<sup>31</sup> In an era of widespread ecological crisis and (at least nominal) ecological consciousness, we are often told to "think globally, act locally." The fact is, however, that individual intervention into systems this large is effectively useless. Any intervention relies instead either on policy or collective action, both hard to figure.<sup>32</sup>

So is this site. It presents a challenge for photography and video, not to mention plein-air painting, because it defies easy apprehension. Situated between the interstate highway and a sleepy local road, it covers a site of several hundred acres. Though it stands at least 180 feet higher than the flat land around it,<sup>33</sup> the rise is so gradual, and the top so flat and long, it can barely be seen from afar. Up close it rises so dramatically it appears like a vertical wall of grassland. There is no middle ground, and no human scale from which to interpret it. Indeed, work on the site occurs mainly within a series of trucks and specialized heavy vehicles, not on foot. Yet, at the right moment, in the right light, this low flat mountain is lovely. So I went there to film it.

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Pappas, Nikolas. "Socrates, Cynics and Flat-Nailed, Featherless Bipeds." *New York Times* 4 April 2016. Online. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/04/04/of-socrates-cynics-and-flat-nailed-featherless-bipeds/>

<sup>31</sup> In this case, the institution which created, manages, and determines the landfill in question asked not to be identified. I have included in the Appendix the contract which their lawyers drew up as a condition of granting me access to the site, with all identifying information redacted. They were a delight to work with, though it took them an epoch to warm up to what I wanted to do.

<sup>32</sup> I use this term both for its quantitative connotations, counting up the numbers, and as a reference to the artistic practice of figure drawing. Of course, it's a nonhuman figure we're figuring here. Go figure.

<sup>33</sup> Personal interview with my guide and driver at the landfill, who shall, like everyone else who works there, remain nameless by request and contractual obligation, 18 November 2015.

#### 4. Notes on Tools

I should note what camera and software I used, if for no other reason than that farmers' hands get shaped by their tools. I used a Digital Bolex, a curious digital video camera which tries to emulate the philosophy of 16mm film production, such that the film stock and not the camera determines how good the image looks in the theater. To achieve this the Bolex captures raw sensor data. Other current cameras, like DSLR cameras, broadcast cameras, and "film" cameras like Canon's C300 and the Arri Alexa, apply post-processing to the image data, like white balance, even when shooting in what they call "raw." The Bolex is not "better" than the best of these cameras, but it theoretically allows for roughly equivalent image processing at a lower price, since its processing depends not on the camera but on the post workstation. Given that it yields a high dynamic range, using a CCD sensor with a slightly more organic look than CMOS sensors, it is often said to look like 16mm film, at least by the company's marketing.<sup>34</sup> While this is not true, the Bolex does accept old C-mount lenses. I mostly used a Super-16 Angenieux zoom and some adapted 35mm Canon FD-mount telephoto lenses. These 1970s lenses have a softer look than contemporary ones. I find many new lenses rather clinical, perfect for the way an optical engineer sees, but not so much for an artist.

Using this camera and these lenses is a financial compromise as much as an aesthetic preference, in an effort to get the most pleasing image within a certain financial range. I find that financial questions are always worth considering in film production, since aesthetics often succumb to finance, or at least the person doing the financing. Film is lovely and expensive, still,

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<sup>34</sup> And one prospective grad student who saw my installation during a tour and asked if it was shot on 16mm film.

and despite its unmatched highlight rolloff and archival lifespan, I suspect a preference for it may have as much to do with nostalgia and romance as its technical qualities. The alchemical wonder of getting a roll of film back from the lab and watching it for the first time is a bit like seeing into the past, like a ghostly visitation. Those sensations were never by design, and the faster, cheaper production of video has won me over. That said, I doubt I will ever fall in love with a video camera in the same way I might adore an Aaton, resting on the shoulder, or even a spring-wound Bolex, with its shy 100-foot roll and light leaks.

At least this new camera lets me pretend I am in a lineage, especially with an Angenieux zoom used by many experimental and documentary shooters in the 1970s and 80s. If nothing else shooting raw video allowed great leeway in Davinci Resolve (a color correction tool) to push and pull the exposure and color saturation. Much of the look of the film happened in post-production, perhaps in a way that is analogous to how we rework our memories. Of course, film may be a material ghost,<sup>35</sup> with a literal reflection of light off a person engraved into the emulsion and reanimated for our entertainment by more light, so that we are literally touched by the residue of their image. But video may be a neural memory, reactivated only when fired by electricity, reworked a bit every time. I prefer to think of film as bricks and video as sand, one a solid image thrown at the viewer 24 times a second, the latter pixels pouring through the fingers.<sup>36</sup>

All this will be rendered moot by the time you read it. Software changes by the hour and digital camera equipment is not much slower. I shot in 2K video, though HD was the standard five years ago. Now cameras boast resolutions like 4K, 5K, and even 6K and beyond. This despite the

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<sup>35</sup> In Gilberto Perez's elegant phrase: "...the camera is not the only machine that makes the film image. The projector, the magic lantern, animates the track of light with its own light, brings the imprint of life to new life on the screen. The images on the screen carry in them something of the world itself, something material, and yet something transposed, transformed into another world: the material ghost." In *The Material Ghost: Films and their Medium*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998. P. 28.

<sup>36</sup> I own a Polish movie poster of Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Amator* (*Camera Buff*), presenting an image of a brick with a camera lens attached. I own no comparable picture for a "film" shot on video, making such a comparison as to the political power of that medium, and I imagine the pixels pouring through the fingers may as well be my agency slipping away, or digits flushing out of my bank account considering the unrelenting pace of technical upgrades deemed "necessary" for "pro"-level production.

fact that the vast majority of theaters project in 2K, and the physics of the human eye mean that almost no-one can tell the difference. For me, the number of “K” is purely related to my financial situation in relation to industry trends, not aesthetics. Such tools don’t matter as an end in themselves. New software changes yearly not because the hands of the workers lend it their shape, but because its manufacturers must charge more to meet quarterly sales targets for the shareholders. Such tools are not timeless like a Japanese *kama*, a Bialetti coffee pot, or a bicycle, perfect forms arrived at over time which persist despite time. Best to treat tools whose replacements lurk around the corner with a bit of scorn, and let the hand’s shape stay firm. If the farmer falls in love with the plough, who can trust the crops?

## 5. Notes on Production

I produced my twelve-minute landscape film over a series of months, first acting alone, then within a system of approved actions built by the bureaucratic entity with which I engaged. Having identified a site, one which drew me due to its location, scale, context, and smell, I began to visit in February, 2015. I began filming in April, usually with a tripod in the back seat or riding as a passenger. In August I began visiting the site in earnest, filming from several vantages and walking long stretches of the site's perimeter. In a sense I was working like a travel photographer, or a *flâneur* in the mold of Jem Cohen, who travels through cities to see what he can film. In my case, I found the same things, returning to key vantage points where I could film undisturbed, out of sight of the landfill's workers and staff. A favorite spot put me just across the road from the working face, on the edge of a bridge over a busy road; another was next to a bosque opposite the working face, in an area full of greenery and wildlife. One of the best, nestled in cornstalks, got cut down in the fall.

Unlike a travel photographer pushed on by the itinerary, I returned again and again to the same spots. I came at different times of day and in different weather conditions. Afternoons yielded images shimmering in heat-haze, well into November; mornings typically were swollen with even light before the sun could burn off the haze. Entire shooting days yielded nothing, as the images were spoiled by flat light or simply uninspiring. The best moments were when a cold front moved through for silver clouds on stark blue, when the heat boggled my sight, and when the sun went down.

I worried constantly about the authorities, as I began filming well before I had official permission to do so. No one ever approached me, but I always went at non-peak times. (Football

games were a particular boon, as central Ohio becomes a ghost town.) Just in case I was stopped by the authorities, I joined a professional organization of documentary filmmakers, but they never sent my union card.

My initial inquiries for site access went unnoticed. Only when I reached out through someone with prior connections, recommended to me by a member of my committee, did I get a response. That response was several weeks after my inquiry, and that foreshadowed a pattern. Any communications had to be vetted from above. Eventually my liaison asked me to telephone. I spent about 45 minutes explaining and reassuring, and then, after this individual vetted it with the directors, I was granted permission.

That meant I signed a document (see the Appendix). It includes restrictions and what directors call “final cut,” though I believe the lawyers merely wanted to make sure I did not show faces or brand logos which could incur liability. Eventually we set a date, and I was able to enter the site for an hour and a half, driven to the very top of the mountain, next to the gashed-open working face, by a guide. All the footage between the methane flares, the up-close footage and machinery, came from this two hours. (I got an extra half-hour because my guide left the lights on in the van and had to get a jump start.) I never actually met anyone but the guide, as all our business was conducted online and on the telephone.

I’m not sure if they ever saw the finished piece in the gallery.

## 6. Landscape Films.

I do not recall the first time I saw one of James Benning's films. Neither do I recall which of his films I first saw. Though no one would mistake *Landscape Suicide* for RR, they all seem like one longer film, autonomous units flowing one into the next. In a way the first film of his I saw was all his films, and I feel like I have always seen all his films. Perhaps this mirrors a trajectory in my viewing habits. Whereas much of my early film viewing was urban-frenetic, city symphonies like Dziga Vertov's *Man With the Movie Camera* (1929) and urban dramas like King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928), watched on VHS in an AV screening carrel in the basement of the University of Kentucky library, increasingly my later viewing has been rural-mesmeric, like Lav Diaz's almost six-hour *From What Is Before* (2014) and Bela Tarr's seven-hour *Satantango* (1994). Watching the earlier films can feel like riding a rollercoaster, but watching the later ones recalls being stuck in the barn waiting out the rain. In the Diaz, a woman rides motionless in a canoe for five full minutes, the camera in the canoe, locked dead-center on her, while the riverscape moves behind. Likewise, *Satantango* opens with an almost ten-minute shot of cows walking through a muddy field. The camera follows on a dolly track for a while, a move which seems utterly decadent compared to the Diaz. Yet both directors adhere to narrative convention, creating fictional worlds with characters and plots. By contrast, the sensation of watching James Benning is like being stuck in that barn, held rapt by the sight of ants walking in a line in the dust, until the last ant leaves and a lightning flash bathes the whole scene in a completely different light. Questions of fiction simply evaporate, but questions of meaning remain.

I might explain this sensation by noting how viewing his films recalls viewing a landscape. You are situated in a particular place, perhaps the best vantage to take it all in. You wait,

surrounded by the sounds of that landscape, whether birds and wind or cars passing in the far distance. Something, or nothing, happens. Minute details become imbued with gravity. You forget yourself. In a Benning film, a cut then occurs, and it all happens again. Even films which rely on speech or written text, like *Landscape Suicide* (1987) and *Four Corners* (1997), build meaning by placing that text in counterpoint to an image, sound, or sequence of images. Between the cuts enters the chance for analysis and interpretation.

Benning's films cut with great precision. For example, in the first part of the three-feature *California Trilogy*, the 90-minute film called *El Valley Centro* (1999) focuses on the Great Central Valley, a landscape radically transformed by agribusiness. Benning composes the film of 35 shots, each lasting precisely two minutes and thirty seconds. In the very middle of the film, a shot reveals a landscape, leading into a flat horizon not quite halfway up the frame. The sky brings clouds low, and the bare, pebbled ground is lashed by strong winds. Tumbleweeds blow past, making up the "story" of the shot. The relative size of the tumbleweeds offers a narrative: early on a large one blows just by the camera, and near the end a small one scuttles in from the left side. The shot is just long enough to get lost in, but not quite long enough to induce boredom. Soon enough it cuts. This individual shot is whole in itself, but it is sandwiched between two other shots, one of an idle dredging boat, the other of a race car under repair.<sup>37</sup> Two human technologies of motion sit still while the wind makes the static landscape move. Meaning inheres in the first shot, but the earlier and later images add new strata of meaning. That the film begins with a spillway and ends with an aqueduct—two sides of the same thing—adds a sense of completion and context to the whole.

In his overall body of work, he develops a politics. For instance, *Landscape Suicide* considers the deeds of two murders, presented in re-enacted interviews. It begins with a shot of obsessive tennis and ends with a shot of a man flaying a deer on Wisconsin snow. That the man is Benning's

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<sup>37</sup> The film's credits identify these shots as "dredge, Delta Dredging Company, The Delta," "dust storm, Shell Oil, Blackwells Corner," and "stock car, King's Speedway, Hanford."

brother, though signified in the closing credits, matters little; the re-enacted interview with the farmer and serial killer Ed Gein offers it all the context it needs. The obsessive repetition of the tennis, treated with an absurd gravity, marks the absurdity of teenaged Bernadette Prott's crime. Both the opening and ending mirror one another as American activities, one Californian, one Midwestern, with both called into question for how they could have shaped these two people.<sup>38</sup> In *Landscape Suicide*, as well as in Benning's earlier Structuralist films and his later text-based films, his politics are more explicit, examining the ruined post-union towns of the Rust Belt and the history of genocide and enclosure in the American West.

By the time he has shifted to his even more austere late style, as in the spare landscape shots of the *California Trilogy*, he relies on a more open form. Considerations of politics become more subtle. Commenting on *Sogobi*, the trilogy's film which focuses on wilderness, he recalled, "my first idea was to make a film that was purely about nature and about landscape that wasn't encroached upon, almost in a biblical sense, finding real grandeur. ...it became less interesting to me, the encroachment became more interesting to me than the beauty."<sup>39</sup> The whole trilogy finds the political in the way landscape transforms under political and economic overlays, whether from Californian water battles or migrant workers in the farm fields. Yet, while the critic Claudia Slanar finds that Benning's landscapes are "not simply presented according to a romantic and sublime pictorial tradition,"<sup>40</sup> they do work, at least on the surface, simply. These films recall Peter

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<sup>38</sup> Another filmmaker, not American, is here relevant not least because his film resembles *Landscape Suicide* in form and concern. Adachi Masao 足立正生 made a number of left-wing documentary essays in the late 1960s and early 1970s before defecting to Lebanon in the wake of a Japanese Red Army passenger plane hijacking and bombing he had a hand in. I include him here for his film AKA *Serial Killer* 略称・連続射殺魔 (1969), a portrait of a young man who becomes a serial killer after drifting through a series of odd jobs. The film follows his journey from a rural town to Osaka, where he finds increasingly alienated work in factories; like Benning, Adachi focuses on the landscapes which shaped the man. His "landscape theory" 風景論 holds state power responsible for the crime; in the film's middle, we see American aircraft carriers. Their presence supersedes the previous landscape forged by the emperor system, but both homogenize public space and effect violence on their subjects. Hirasawa, Go. "Underground Cinema and the Art Theater Guild." *Midnight Eye* 25 August 2005. Online. <http://www.midnighteye.com/features/underground-cinema-and-the-art-theatre-guild/>

<sup>39</sup> Qtd. in Slanar, Claudia. "Landscape, History and Romantic Allusions." In *James Benning*. Pilchar, Barbara, and Slanar, Claudia, eds. Vienna: Synema, 2007: 168-80. P. 170.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

Hutton<sup>41</sup> in their sensitivity to what is before the camera. Watching their films is being in the presence of something. In other words, he opens his eyes to what is there. This simple act of looking is political. As Benning says, his political stance “kind of sneaks up on you.”<sup>42</sup>

However, it does not browbeat you. These films are open, both in form and politics. Their conclusions allow for subtlety. Perhaps this openness, a sense of not over-determining what is in the shot, was what I took from Benning.

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<sup>41</sup> Hutton’s work I know through a few early shorts, though *At Sea* (2007) I should mention as a film on spectacular infrastructure and labor which did not influence me, as I only watched it through the night before my thesis defense, but which lingered as an apparition just out of sight throughout my thesis work. It bears comparison to Benning’s later work and is a masterpiece.

<sup>42</sup> Qtd. in Slanar, p. 170.

## 7. Gardner

At some point I worked my way backwards from *Leviathan* to *Forest of Bliss*. *Leviathan* is the power at the end of the book of Job which Job cannot fathom, but *Leviathan* just shows an ethnographic portrait of a fishing trawler. Helping us to realize we cannot fathom it, the filmmakers craft a high-Abstract Expressionist portrait of work from footage taken on small waterproof cameras placed in sympathy with the eyes of birds, fish, and machine.<sup>43</sup> Roaring sounds swirl around shots of cameras thrashing in and out of the ocean as crushed-black birds, just out of reach, gash the sky. These images weighted with apocalypse offer a grand spectacle; strangely, the film emerged from within the institutional framework of an anthropology department. Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab has supported a diverse group of filmmakers, all PhD candidates or tenure-track professors, working to make visually and aurally powerful ethnographic films that have played quite well on the art film circuit.

The Lab itself seems like a descendant of the 16mm filmmaking of Robert Gardner.<sup>44</sup> He began his career as an anthropologist, seeking to preserve a visual and aural record of cultures dying before the onslaught of Westernized development, and ended his career more known as a filmmaker of poetic, arresting documentaries. His first major success, *Dead Birds* (1963)<sup>45</sup>, charted

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<sup>43</sup> These perspectives make the film's images strange, renewing our view of (someone's) everyday life in a way similar to what Susan Sontag calls "photographic seeing," in which the photographer selectively frames images to re-present them as unusual, not as true. Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977. P. 89-93.

<sup>44</sup> The SEL's founder, Lucien Castaing-Taylor, would surely disagree (see note 50, p. 28), but Gardner pioneered artistically-made ethnographic films; at least one SEL film, *Manakamana* (2013), used Gardner's Aaton 16mm camera, the same one he used on *Forest of Bliss*, though in the source his name is twice misspelled "Gardener," which suits my purposes just fine. Macdonald, Scott. *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary & Avant-Garde Cinema*. New York: Oxford UP, 2015. P. 413.

<sup>45</sup> Gardner, Robert. *Dead Birds*. 1963.

the intertribal combat of the Dani people in New Guinea. It followed ethnographic convention of the day, with an exegetical voiceover and narrative arc, but played as a narrative feature film in small part due to its violent action. His last major success, *Forest of Bliss* (1986), portrayed human rituals of death by the Ganges River in Benares, India, with poetic detail and direct sound.<sup>46</sup> In refusing narration, exegesis, and even a clear “main character,” it stands as the key ancestor of the SEL films, opening the genre of ethnographic film to visual and aural abstraction. Like these later films, *Forest of Bliss* treats events as though the viewer is present as they unfold rather than dole them out through an all-knowing narrator’s commentary. More importantly, the film composes its images with arresting visual style, stripping down scenes into the barest poetry.

Of particular interest are the film’s pairing of death and refuse with the body. Before the first title card, a prelude frames human action with animal: the first shot shows a dog in silhouette at morning on the river’s far shore. Some misty images of boatmen and boats fill the prelude’s middle, and the mist renders the dog in high relief and the boatmen indistinct. The prelude ends with a riot of sound as a pack of dogs tears another dog to shreds. Life is vague, death concrete. Bodies don’t last. Much later in the film, at about 19 minutes in, another shocking image shows a human corpse floating face-down in the river. Rigor mortis has set in, and the soft tissue inside the body has already rotted out. The corpse’s anus reveals a dark void inside the body, gazing like an empty eye socket back at us. The image stands out as the first explicit image of death in a film about burning corpses; in Gardner’s construction it links directly to two shots before it, one of wood for funeral pyres, one of birds flying overhead. He notes that the two shots had no connection in reality, but their combination links to the image of wood afterwards, an attempt “to say that wood has some death-related meaning, that it is not just for keeping people warm at night.”<sup>47</sup> Yet while this meaning comes across clearly in the edit, the lingering void comes across

<sup>46</sup> —. *Forest of Bliss*. Co-produced with Ákos Östör. 1986.

<sup>47</sup> *Making Forest of Bliss: A Conversation Between Robert Gardner + Ákos Östör*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Film Archive, 2001. P. 48.

more clearly in the image of the rotted-out corpse. It shows creation leading to decay, the core of the human predicament. The image shocks, hovering outside the flow of time. Its void is like a dead lens staring back at us, or a slice of black leader playing through the projector.<sup>48</sup>

In the earlier film, the opening and closing sequences reach not for visual but for verbal poetry. *Dead Birds* has drawn its title from a myth, we are told in voiceover, in which birds stand in for the souls of the people:

There is a fable told by a mountain people living in the ancient highlands of New Guinea about a race between a snake and a bird. It tells of a contest which decided if men would be like birds and die or be like snakes which shed their skins and have eternal life. The bird won and from that time all men, like birds, must die.

The film to come plots the doings of a tribe of the Dani people, told through two “characters,” one a man, one a boy. The man goes to war with a neighboring tribe, and the film presents a breathless account of battle. After scenes of war, the film ends with inclusio:

Soon both men and birds will surrender to the night. They’ll rest for the life and death of days to come. For each, both awaits but with a difference that men having far knowledge of their doom bring a special passion to their life. They will not simply wait for death, nor will they bear it lightly when it comes; instead they’ll try with measured violence to fashion fate themselves. They kill to save their souls and perhaps to ease the burden of knowing what birds will never know, and what they as men who have

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<sup>48</sup> “He wrote me, ‘One day I’ll have to put it all alone at the beginning of a film with a long piece of black leader. If they don’t see the happiness in the picture, at least they’ll see the black.’” Marker, Chris. *Sans Soleil*. 1983. “Staring Back” is the name of a collection of photos by Marker published by the Wexner Center, the arts institution affiliated with this university.

forever killed each other cannot forget<sup>49</sup>

The words are lovely and, again, a bit much. In the context of ethnography, they rank as an affront to the values of the discipline once it finally arrived in the years after the colonial system collapsed (though Jean Rouch arrived there years before Gardner).<sup>50</sup> They also reveal an essential tension between the discipline of anthropology and Gardner's project, as he never truly had that much interest in the discipline to begin with. He was a filmmaker when he went in and he was one when he left.<sup>51</sup>

While few complained at the time of his films' earliest success, later anthropologists came to question Gardner's approach, finding it hopelessly mired in 19th-century Romanticism.<sup>52</sup> He

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<sup>49</sup> Gardner, Robert. *Dead Birds*. 1963.

<sup>50</sup> Lucien Castaing-Taylor considers *Dead Birds*, with its "anachronistic discourse" and its "divine cinematographic omniscience," "an embarrassment to ethnography for decades" for how its "purple-prose voice-over imprisons the Dani [tribe] in... Stone Age formaldehyde concocted here in Cambridge, Massachusetts," but he considers *Forest of Bliss* Gardner's sole masterpiece. Qtd. in Macdonald, Scott. *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary & Avant-Garde Cinema*. New York: Oxford UP, 2015. P. 378.

<sup>51</sup> As a graduate student in Anthropology at Harvard, he failed the initial sitting of his oral exams for his PhD. He took them again and passed, was awarded a Master's degree, and then left the academic career path, saying to himself, "Make films, Gardner." Later he in part financed the Harvard Film Studies Center through returns on an investment in a television station, the same station on which his *Screening Room* series was broadcast. Ibid., pp. 59, 74.

<sup>52</sup> A lack of disciplinary rigor has brought him harsh criticism. A representative attack on his work in the early 1990s came from Jay Ruby, then professor of anthropology at Temple University. His framing of the attack is worth quoting in full:

Ethnographic film has always been a field dominated by documentary filmmakers who fancy themselves amateur anthropologists. Beginning with the work of Robert J. Flaherty, many of the films called ethnographic were made by people without training in or knowledge about anthropology. These films may become useful because teachers of anthropology contextualize them for their students, but then almost any film, documentary or fiction, can be useful to teach with if it is placed in the right context.

As an academic anthropologist interested in seeing ethnographic film become a part of the anthropological mainstream, I believe the chief criteria that should be employed in critiquing a film designated as "ethnographic" are those of anthropology and not the aesthetics of film. Is the film the result of ethnographic research? Is the person who conducted the fieldwork in a position of authority in the production so that decisions as to the shape of the film are determined by the results of the research and not the current fad in film form? Does the film successfully address itself to anthropological concerns or not?

Ruby, Jay. "An Anthropological Critique of the Films of Robert Gardner." *Journal of Film and Video* 43.4 (1991): 3-17. P.4.

He ultimately faults Gardner for working with outdated assumptions, for being at heart a 19th-century Romantic

was, quite simply, not an ethnographer. He instead worked as a specialist in film on other people's projects, lending them a visual élan they would otherwise lack.<sup>53</sup> *Forest of Bliss* he made with Ákos Östör, an anthropologist who did field work in Benares well before Gardner became involved.<sup>54</sup> Back in Cambridge he spent time interviewing experimental filmmakers<sup>55</sup> and helping them with their projects.<sup>56</sup> He tried to become an anthropologist and remained an artist. As to his ultimate project, I disagree that it is at heart Romantic, even though he began his filmmaking career in an effort to film the last vestiges of dying cultures. That is a Romantic project, but also a rationalist, taxonomic one. The two urges mirror one another: when Romanaticism reacts against Reason, it accepts Reason's terms. Rather, I see in his last, best film an urge to grapple with what he does not fathom, and perhaps cannot be fathomed. Faced with death, his film possesses an existential urgency. As Gardner himself put it:

[This quote] is as close as I've come to giving an explanation of what the film is about.

"Everything in this world is eater or eaten, the seed is food and fire is the eater." I hope what this is saying for people is that the nature of the world is such that things don't

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who fancies himself more film artist than researcher (p. 14), who "systematically avoids the economic and political conditions of the people studied and filmed and is therefore easily criticized as... supportive of political and economic neo-colonialism and other forms of oppression" (p. 10). These are fair criticisms, especially in light of the academic project of taxonomic sorting. Gardner's work looks better when considered as one man's art, not when viewed as social science.

<sup>53</sup> Castaing-Taylor: "Gardner lost interest in anthropology early on, and has never really done ethnographic fieldwork on his own, but in a typical cinematic division of labor, has borrowed from the anthropological expertise of others." Qtd. in Macdonald, Scott. *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary & Avant-Garde Cinema*. New York: Oxford UP, 2015. P.378.

<sup>54</sup> Östös spent "six or seven months" doing fieldwork in the city, while the film's production took only ten weeks. *Making Forest of Bliss: A Conversation Between Robert Gardner + Ákos Östör*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Film Archive, 2001. P. 7.

<sup>55</sup> Gardner's extensive television interview series *Screening Room* aired in the 1970s. He used a microphone and turtleneck to interview experimental filmmakers like Hollis Frampton, Suzan Pitt, Peter Hutton, Emile de Antonio, Jonas Mekas, and only one ethnographer, Jean Rouch, whose cinematic accomplishments are no less great. Documentary Educational Resources. "DER Documentary: Screening Room Series." Online. <http://www.der.org/films/screening-room-series.html>.

<sup>56</sup> For instance, he helped Suzan Pitt film her animation *Asparagus* by securing a room at Harvard and a 35mm camera for her to use. Pitt, Suzan. Artist's talk after "Suzan Pitt: New Restorations," Wexner Center for the Arts, 25 February 2015.

survive forever but, instead, are destroyed in any number of ways typified by burning or eating, and that then everything is brought forth again only to have the same thing happen over and over.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Making Forest of Bliss: A Conversation Between Robert Gardner + Ákos Östör*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Film Archive, 2001. P. 7.

## 8. "An Agreeable Kind of Horror."

Talking about landscape, at least in the West, is hard to do without bringing up the sublime. While the term has been consistently associated with scenic views and their small cousin landscape painting, its precise definition has mutated over the years. This is especially true in America, where the shift into a postmodern era and its concern with the underlying construction and politics of images has moved representations of wild nature out of the conversation. This shift has not removed them from the culture, of course, but it has led us to take them for granted.<sup>58</sup>

The origins of the sublime stretch back to the 18th century in England, where a translation of Longinus led Edmund Burke to consider it in a book-length essay. He drew a distinction between the Sublime and the Beautiful, for the latter could only endear the viewer, while the former could sweep one up in a fit of fear and horror.<sup>59</sup> This horror did not, however, abolish one's sense. It merely overwhelmed reason for a brief moment, a "permissible eruption of feeling" in historian David Nye's phrase. It grew of the same wider cultural energies which accounted for Diderot's encyclopedia and Samuel Johnson's dictionary.<sup>60</sup> In other words, by negating reason, the Sublime helped chart what reason was. Thus it had a central place in the Enlightenment project.

Over the years, however, the horror changed as it became more familiar. Soon enough Joseph Addison could write on an "agreeable kind of horror" when describing the effect the chaotic, jutting forms of the Alps had in his mind.<sup>61</sup> The alps were horrific in a nice kind of way. This was a

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<sup>58</sup> Macdonald, Scott. *The Garden in the Machine: A Guide to Independent Films About Place*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2001. P. 3.

<sup>59</sup> Nye, David. *American Technological Sublime*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994. P. 6.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>61</sup> Qtd. in Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007. P. 337.

far cry from the negation of reason which Burke described. Familiarity with the sublime dulled its power, making it just another way of aestheticizing the landscape, a mountain range, or the sun setting over a valley.

In our current culture it has dulled as well, having become the go-to word when someone feels moved by a work of art. One may overhear it at an art opening, those events where people glance at the works and focus on the social. This condition has led James Elkins to vote to bury it as a “relic of other centuries, perennially misused as an attractive way to express the power of art, kept afloat by academics interested in other people’s ideas, used... as a covertly religious term,” ultimately a term gone “weak,” unlike the “fresh and exact” terms we might otherwise employ.<sup>62</sup> However, Elkins writes from a contemporary art historian’s vantage, and part of his complaint is the way his colleagues in science (i.e., all the other authors in the anthology in which his essay appears) have precious little knowledge of contemporary art and its discourse. Contemporary art has moved on from the sublime, just as it long ago moved on from the tastes and assumptions of the average scientist.

For its part, the sublime has moved on from art as well, to other areas of amazement. Whereas we once drew amazement from scenes in nature, and in them saw the handiwork of God, in contemporary America, we see the sublime less in nature’s wonders and more in the feats of human hands, especially the *techné* of advanced engineering and computation. Human-made things like military weapons and vast infrastructural works become the repository of the sublime, even if we cannot find God in them. Nonetheless, Nye argues that “even if the sublime is not a philosophical absolute but a historicized object of inquiry, ...the sublime experience still retains a fundamental structure”<sup>63</sup> and that structure shares much with Burke’s theorization of it. In Burke’s description, the sublime is at its heart “astonishment; and astonishment is that state

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<sup>62</sup> Elkins, James. “Against the Sublime.” In *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*. Eds. Hoffmann, Roald and White, Iain Boyd. New York: Oxford UP, 2011: pp. 75-90. P. 89.

<sup>63</sup> Nye, David. *American Technological Sublime*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994. P. 9.

of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.”<sup>64</sup> Nye holds this astonishment equal to the contemporary feeling of awe one may feel on seeing the Grand Canyon, a natural formation so vast as to resist all attempts to figure it. Its size refutes our ability to understand its scale; its munificence refuses our desire to wrap it up in one perfect view.<sup>65</sup> It is, simply put, too much. Faced with it, reason shuts down.

Nye figures this sublime complexity through American history beginning in the railroad, a technology bridging space, and ending in the atomic bomb and the space race,<sup>66</sup> technologies establishing American dominance on the world stage. However, these accomplishments are ambiguous. Whereas the bomb represented a triumph of military might and an end to the Second World War, it effectively negated our ability to find the sublime in technological achievement. Nye asks, “Who identifies with the bomb?”<sup>67</sup> Rather, the idea of escape from a world made uninhabitable by radiation took hold, “a nostalgic return to the technological sublime,”<sup>68</sup> just as one might escape the ambiguities of adulthood by an escape into the fantasy films of childhood.

In a sense, this represents not the exhaustion of the sublime moment but an exhaustion of the sublime as a category. Philosopher Charles Taylor traces this eventual exhaustion to the roots of the sublime in the Enlightenment project:

At first, the horror was neutralized, by the disenchantment of the world and the development of a buffered self. The agent of disengaged reason was no longer ‘got to’ by the eternal silences of alien vastness. Wild places were exorcized, the scary legends connected to them were debunked by humanist thinkers. Mountains and planes were harmonized, brought together in the single ordered space of maps, and of scientific

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., chapters 3 and 9, respectively.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 255.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

theory.<sup>69</sup>

In other words, as reason charted out the territory, the sublime ceased to be felt as a threat. The return of the sublime as that “agreeable kind horror” came with the place of excess in the reasoning mind, as a sort of intellectual expectorant:

The sight of ‘Excess,’ vast, strange unencompassable, provoking fear, even horror, breaks through this self-absorption [of the detached, reasoning self] and awakens our sense of what is really important, whether this be the infinity of God, ... our supersensible moral vocation, ... or ... our capacity for heroic affirmation of meaning in the face of a world without telos—the truth of eternal recurrence.<sup>70</sup>

Thus, the sublime continues as an occasional shock out of the reasoning self, a kind of laxative for pent-up rationality. However, one consequence of the Enlightenment was the increasing reduction of the sight of Excess to the sight of Excel spreadsheets; of the unknowable expanse to the endless parades of codified facts; and of unimaginably vast natural scenery to picture postcards. We have, simply put, grown immune.

This immunity poses a problem in our current age. We popularly call this age the Anthropocene not because we revel in our power to change the world, but because we view our human-made age as an apocalypse we cannot undo. Not only can we not change the path of catastrophic climate change, we cannot address the rot in our communities. We can not even imagine a political process of negotiation and compromise after which we all begin a viable way forward. There are fantasies of escape, of course, mostly dealing with technologies newer than the rocketship.

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<sup>69</sup> Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007. P. 337.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339.

Some of these fantasies hold out hope for a radical technological advance, like an atmospheric sulphur hose that will reflect sunlight away from the warming planet,<sup>71</sup> or for an exponential leap in computation so great we can all climb inside and live forever thanks to computing power growing to infinity just a touch faster than the world ends.<sup>72</sup> More common is the fantasy of our widespread destruction, a beloved trend of several decades in our pop culture. The weather goes mad, the oceans rise, the aliens/zombies/mutants/North Koreans attack, then an earthquake destroys us all. While waiting for this 21st century Sublime, we mostly are too fatigued to move.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Lately, Dale. "Hacking the Planet: What Could Go Wrong?" *The Baffler Blog* 24 November 2014. Online. <http://thebaffler.com/blog/hacking-planet-go-wrong>

<sup>72</sup> That is the story, though usually it is the hook to get you to listen while someone tries to sell you something. Pein, Corey. "Cyborg Soothsayers of the High-Tech Hogwash Emporia." *The Baffler* no. 28 (2015). Online. <http://thebaffler.com/salvos/cyborg-soothsayers>

<sup>73</sup> Anthropologist David Graeber calls this "despair fatigue," a general inability to sink any lower when faced with the depths to which politics have sunk. While he focuses on the British context, he picks out steampunk as a parallel to this apocalyptic bent: "The Victorian era was the last time when most people in this country genuinely believed in a technologically-driven future that was going to lead to a world not only more prosperous and equal, but actually more fun and exciting than their own. Then, of course, came the Great War, and we discovered what the twentieth century was really going to be like, with its monotonous alternation of terror and boredom in the trenches. Was not Steampunk a way of saying, can't we just go back, write off the entire last century as a bad dream, and start over?" "Despair Fatigue: How Hopelessness Grew Boring." *The Baffler* no. 30 (2016). Online. <http://thebaffler.com/salvos/despair-fatigue-david-graeber>

## 9. Bodies, Disembodies.

Making this film split me in two. On the one hand, I was out with the sun and clouds, carrying a not-inconsiderable camera rig with tripod, matte box, and filters. While the camera ran, usually in a locked-down tripod shot, I looked at the scene with my own eyes rather than through the viewfinder, hoping to find the next shot. After shooting days, I felt spent, with old bones and sore muscles. On the other hand, editing, color correcting, stabilizing, and mixing the final product saw me hunched over a laptop screen with a cup of coffee. As I learned new software and workflows for this project, I pored through manuals and tutorials. Afterwards I felt crumpled like a wad of paper. The most physical thing I did during this phase was move my foot into a new position because it had fallen asleep. The former job of work was one of making decisions with my body in space, while the latter saw the body reduced to a clicking mouse while my mind and eyes did all the hard labor.

This split reflects both a condition of our contemporary world, as well as a problem within my art in particular and art in general. Now more than ever before, we live much of our lives disembodied. We receive news of the world not through hands, ears, nose, and the tiny hairs on our skin, but through the foveal range of vision: we see just what is right before our eyes, on increasingly tiny screens.<sup>74</sup> This split of our minds from the world outside did not begin with the smartphone or the television, of course: these are just the most recent iterations of a longstanding

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<sup>74</sup> Those screens went from televisions to personal computers to smartphones. The latter device, just ten years old, has so infiltrated our daily lives that it incites op-eds on why bending over to look at it damages our bodily and emotional health: Cuddy, Amy. "How iPhones Ruin Your Posture and Your Mood." *New York Times* 12 Dec 2015, p. SR3.

alienation from our own bodies.<sup>75</sup> Helpfully, our recent obsession with digital images puts this alienation into bold, pervasive relief. I believe this condition leads us to less and less empirical understanding of the world. Considering how many more facts we know about the world as the cost to move facts from there to here becomes ever cheaper, this is no small paradox. Yet facts about the world are not the world. Instead of embodied, empirical understanding, we take in information and form ideologies. Information alone lacks fullness. It leaves us with abstract, disembodied frameworks.

This condition poses a question for artists like me who work with filmed images. My work comes through screens, or ideally appears projected in a room. Even my ideal viewers will watch it sitting down. It may emphasize its material, as experimental filmmakers working in 16mm tend to do. It may attempt, like Andrei Tarkovsky and Bela Tarr, to present a rude physicality which renews our connection with the world outside our heads. Yet in both cases it remains a disembodied image: the material ghost is still a ghost. Should the artwork hope to reflect for the viewer the world anew, it complicates things considerably when the artwork disappears like morning mist.

The material ghost, however, is not just a ghost. It is also material. While Perez meant the material of light, we do not view the world solely through our eyes. The material can go straight to our bodies; in a way, it is our bodies. As anthropologist and filmmaker David MacDougall has argued, viewing film is a visceral process, not just a visual one: “our minds and our bodies are not the passive receptors of art, they are the targets of it.”<sup>76</sup> The way a work of filmed art, with its images floating on a screen, engages the body-and-mind depends on the way the filmed image intensifies what it represents. In part this may be a question of style, or even just scale—Lav Diaz

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<sup>75</sup> Some trace this back to the Cartesian project, positing a mind derived from abstract logic rather than existing together with the body and its sensations. Jaak Panksepp wrote, “Descartes’ faith in his assertion ‘I think, therefore I am’ may be superseded by a more primitive affirmation that is part of the genetic makeup of all mammals: ‘I feel, therefore I am.’” Qtd. in McGilchrist, Iain. *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2009. P. 185. For his part, McGilchrist dismantles Descartes throughout the book, denouncing “Cartesian rigidity” (p. 11) while noting that Descartes “was wrong... to think of mind and body as two separate substances (two ‘whats’)” rather than two becomings (p. 20).

<sup>76</sup> MacDougall, David. *The Corporeal Image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2006. P. 13.

on the smartphone pales before action films blaring in 70mm—but more likely it is a question of *photogénie*. MacDougall borrows this term from the French avant-garde, who used it to describe the way the film apparatus does not “transmi[t] reality but...creat[es] a new mechanical image of reality. If we simply wanted to see reality, it is all around us, but seeing a film presents us with a strange apparition, a photochemical imprint of the world. ... The surrealism of the film image lies precisely in making us aware of a reality beyond our knowledge.”<sup>77</sup> The invocation of surrealism is apt, as the best Surrealists, like Magritte, Delvaux, and Svankmajer, have been the ones most in touch with the mundane physical world.<sup>78</sup> So reality is heightened, and taking it in may make the heart race at the anticipation of seeing that which is otherwise unobtainable. This has long been the promise of commercial cinema: getting close to the stars, whether out in space or over in Hollywood.

MacDougall works out his argument noting how films, especially those of Hollywood in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, have focused most of all on the last unclothed part of the body, the face. Seen in close-up, faces appear with such intimacy that we almost “explore their faces with our fingertips... becoming especially alive to the liquidity of the eyes and mouth.” This same phenomenon extends to objects as well, “allow[ing] us to grasp the corporeality of inanimate objects with what might be called a ‘prehensile’ vision.”<sup>79</sup> André Bazin called it a “privileged technique of surrealist creation,” in which the film artist creates a “hallucination that is true.”<sup>80</sup> That truth is the key difference from a mere hallucination, and from the effervescence of dreams. It is a truth even if it is not an objectively and verifiably “true” fact because it creates within our bodies a

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>78</sup> Magritte’s achievement as a painter is to make his strange visions bluntly mundane, so that it sure looks like a pipe, whereas Delvaux’s female nudes work best when contrasted with perfectly mundane settings. Svankmajer, especially in his features like *Conspirators of Pleasure* (1996), works almost entirely through objects as though these objects had souls.

<sup>79</sup> MacDougall, p. 22.

<sup>80</sup> Qtd. in Perez, Gilberto. *The Material Ghost: Films and their Medium*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998. P. 28.

series of sensations mirroring what we see on-screen.<sup>81</sup> It is also true because it enters our memory and from then on inhabits our past. I remember films and works of art. I only rarely remember dreams, and almost never facts.

But as in dreams, in films we cannot act.<sup>82</sup> We become spectators, deeply involved but still frozen out, incapable of piercing the fourth wall. MacDougall contrasts our powerlessness with the power of film, following Alfred Gell in claiming “art [is] more a matter of agency than aesthetics, of power than of meaning. Art operates in a field of desires and conventions, as a technology of influence and ‘enchantment.’ ... It draws those around it—to its own body.” The body of the film, enchanting the spectator, goes past notions like communication, for “beyond anything, films are made to become objects in the world.”<sup>83</sup> In other words, films are made to become bodies in the world. MacDougall suggests that a film, often seen as a “symbolic bod[y]” like Dziga Vertov’s *kino glaz*<sup>84</sup> or an artist’s “body” of work, could be not just the body of filmmaker, spectator, or subject, but also “an ‘open’ body capable of receiving all of these,”<sup>85</sup> a reunification that seeks to repair the split in body and ghost.



While the ideal of the cinema places moving images bigger than life on a screen illuminating a darkened theater, *Methane Ghosts* was installed in the gallery. As part of a group show, I chose to project it on a white wall in a darkened section of the gallery. Nonetheless, one well-lit painting

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<sup>81</sup> “Representations of experience immediately create new experiences in their own right.” MacDougall, p. 16; he also notes that the presence of people and objects in films invokes “the involuntary mimicry in seeing others’ bodies, a mimicry that may even extend to inanimate objects.” He notes the ways infants imitate their mothers, and that Merleau-Ponty calls this mimicry an “impregnation.” P. 23.

<sup>82</sup> In viewing films, we see from an “oneiric” vantage, in anthropologist Edgar Morin’s term. MacDougall notes this is “a private perspective somewhere between privilege and paralysis, with all the power to see but an incapacity to act.” *The Corporeal Image*, p. 17.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>84</sup> “Cinema eye.”

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-30.

was just a dozen feet away, and light spilled from the projection and bounced off the white walls.

I share with Benning a skepticism of the “white cube” gallery for cinematic works, which presents a “transfer problem” for cinematic space.<sup>86</sup> Many cinematic works installed in the gallery suffer from less than ideal conditions. Viewers may cast a glance, but few offer even shorter works their full span of attention. Some artists attempt to solve the transfer problem, though in various ways: some build an enclosed theater with rows of seats and a proscenium, as with Cameron Jamie’s documentary *Kranky Klaus* at the 2006 Whitney Biennale; others render cinematic space as a sculptural or architectural part of the work, as with my colleague Kyle Downs’ installation in our thesis show, in which a white wooden triptych served as a screen. Some reduce cinematic work to fit on a standard flatscreen television with a pair of headphones, though usually the curator, not the artist, makes this choice. This last one happens too often to count.

Fortunately, our final show in the Urban Arts Space gallery in downtown Columbus allowed for a large-scale projection. The final image stretched to about 15 ½ wide and 8 ⅔ feet tall, with a diagonal of 17 ⅔ feet. The benches for viewing sat only about ten feet from the projection wall. At this size and distance, the body became dwarfed in relation to the image. It replicated, if just in a minor way, the feeling of being dwarfed before the mountain and the sky.

This transformed a work I only knew on the laptop screen. Images easily apprehended in my foveal range of vision suddenly required movement of the head and eyes; scenes that before merely signified suddenly became present. Rather than excess “waste,” a fact touted by environmentalists to the point it has become completely abstract, the vast tracts of garbage lived in physical relationship to the body whose needs created them. Certainly, seen in this context at this scale,

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<sup>86</sup> Slanar, Claudia. “‘I’ll sneak in through the back door.’ Installations in the Art World 1978-1985.” In *James Benning*. Eds. Pichler, Barbara, and Slanar, Claudia. Vienna: Synema, 2007. 68-74. P. 69. Slanar notes that “Benning’s work clearly eludes reception in an art or exhibition space. The complex relationship of sound and image as well as his concept of ‘spherical space’ makes the possibility of installation relatively absurd. His films follow a fixed, time-based dramaturgy. A quick stepping in and out of exhibition space where one of his works is installed is hardly imaginable. At the same time, contemporary film installations, in particular, include the distancing of what is shown, self-reflexive modes of representation, and require the audience to fill in gaps of meaning.”

the piece recalled Alfred Gell's comment about art wanting power.

But what power? I hope the piece's desire, as well as the response to it, is open. In part this means it should be free of constraining categories. In conversations, some viewers have invoked personal responsibility. I find this, however, to be an unfortunate response derived from a capitulation to free-market notions of individual choice, especially since no one person among us can effect any change on the processes involved. One comment from a viewer during a curator's walk-through called the images sad, responding as though it were an environmentalist tract. I noted that I find the site particularly well-run, responsible, and sometimes lovely, even though I think none of us would choose to make the thing *ex nihilo*. Perhaps what is sad is that we do not choose, collectively, to understand every step in the process and make changes in the chain. More helpfully, in a conversation with the visiting artist Dana Hoey, she referred to it like "watching an open-casket funeral."<sup>87</sup> I think her view gets more to the point: we feel a general sense of sorrow at this thing we have made which we never chose to make. We also feel the trash not as a category, but as a body. When people died, we used to spend time together taking care of the body before the burial.<sup>88</sup> Now we outsource it, just as we outsource our waste disposal, our gardening, and our sense of self.

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<sup>87</sup> Conversation on 4 March 2016.

<sup>88</sup> I learned this phrase from Ann Hamilton during a critique of glass artist Jon Capps' work during the fall of 2013.

## 10. The Flower Pyre

When I was a child, at least still young enough not to drive, my family worked not just on the farm but also on a cemetery. In summers we were the caretakers of the cemetery where most of my relatives are buried, and where many of those who remain will be. It was not the family cemetery per se, but the story held that one of my ancestors had built the stone shed on the grounds where we kept the lawnmowers and trash, mostly old plastic flowers. He had engraved "cemetery" in the plaster under the roof eave, fearfully, I suppose. After we took over the caretaker job from some college student who had done it badly, Kenny Reis approached us. He owned the neighboring property. He had also been my middle school art teacher, and taught me two-point perspective. His lake, far downhill from the shed, had a problem with plastic flowers, the grave decorations which popped up whenever someone died. Then the whole family came out to adorn the grave with fake roses, wreaths, and American flags. Grave decorating is high art in the foothills of Appalachia. After a few months we gathered the decorations in garbage bags, storing them in the shed until trash day. Before we took over the job, the caretakers had just thrown the old decorations into a pit down by the lake. They had heaped up to five or six feet deep. Mr. Reis complained that the heap was killing his lake, so we all got together to clean it.

Cleaning it meant digging out all the flowers by hand, me and my father, my brother, and my mother, along with Mr. Reis. We piled them into a great heap just above the pit, on a stretch of grass already sold for graves but not yet occupied. The pile was not small, and it grew. Soon we sprinkled it with lighter fluid and threw on a match.

I was perhaps twelve or thirteen years old, so I have little trust in the scale of memory. I know the fire felt unbelievably hot. I know we were all covered in sweat and continued to dig and

feed the fire with more and more flowers from what seemed like an endless vein. I supposed we chose fire because hiring Rumpke to come cart the flowers off to a landfill meant hiring Rumpke, and there was no money to pay the tipping fees. I now know that burnt plastic is unbelievably toxic, full of carcinogens called dioxins, because much later I lived downriver from an incinerator ash dump in Japan which Greenpeace singled out as one of the worst unremediated sites in the world. I also know that the memory of that pyre burned itself into my memory in such a way that my memory at least may not be true. I recall that the smoke rose from the flame in a thick dark column like the grease-smoke from burnt tires, and that the flames themselves rose to heights of twenty, even thirty feet. Surely those particular details are inventions of my child's mind. Perhaps it did not happen exactly that way. But it happened some way so it lives in my memory and therefore it might as well be true.

I also know that my father cut his shoulder deep with a chainsaw while removing gnarled roots from the pit, but I think it was a year later. He liked to work early in the mornings and I liked to work late in the day, so I was still in bed when it happened. He drove himself to the hospital. He still has the scar to prove it.

### Closing: The First House and the First Garden.

I have conceived of my film *Methane Ghosts* as a garden, focusing on a site between urban and rural, just far enough away from our homes, which might generate something unexpected like the first gardens. Those gardens could foster the unexpected because they were open habitats, biologically; my “garden” should be open, metaphorically.

If nothing else, what my new garden generates is landscape. We see it as a somewhat geometric landscape, flat on the sides and long top, dotted with methane wells, but full of life, like turkey vultures and grasses. Though engineered from inside to outside by human experts, to most of us it is a closed site, blocked off by fences and laws. It is, however, open to nonhuman influences. They have access to the site’s surface and they determine as much as any civil engineer or system of regulations what emerges there.<sup>89</sup> Like any classical work of landscape painting, or contemporary work of landscape filmmaking, we may view it, but from a remove. Landscape historically is framed, perhaps on either side by trees cupping the scene. If a landscape is not painted, it might be framed by a vast window in a country house through which the nobles could watch the peasants working.

Now most houses are not so vast and the frame is a television screen, showing the lifestyles of the famous or dramas or comedies. The processes which once were front and center in our lives have been handed over to experts: funerals and wakes go to morticians, animal slaughter to abattoirs, and trash to the trash man. While we may vote on an issue related to these things, we know little of what truly goes on. So *Methane Ghosts* opens a small window onto one such hidden

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<sup>89</sup> My guide informed me that the Audubon Society had asked to set up a birding station on the site’s edge. They were refused. Personal Interview. 18 November 2015.

process, and so also opens a window on our own labors and lives. This window presents, however, not an intellectual understanding. Nothing is explained by an omniscient narrator whose own viewpoint never comes into question. Instead, we are given images which elicit a bodily response, especially when seen at a bodily scale in the gallery. The activist's "call to action" never appears. Tied to an activist framework, the response can only be intellectual: either you agree or don't, and even if you do, most of us are too tired out by such calls to have much of a response. I hope for a more visceral understanding, because the question of waste persists no matter how we vote. I do not know what such a visceral understanding might generate. I don't have to know. I would like to be more open to what may come.



Most accounts of what may come are wholly negative. Locally, we have agricultural runoff in our drinking water, and Flint, Michigan has lead in theirs. Politically, schools are even more underfunded than they were and the pressure of debt on recent graduates more overpowering than it ever has been. One of my former professors amassed over a quarter million dollars getting his art degree, and many people in my community back home amass tens of thousands getting no degree at all. This is spare change when considered globally, where the sea levels rise and the weather grows more fierce and more unpredictable, and no one does a thing.

Here at the close of this essay, I should probably illustrate what my work on this project has taught me about my creative work going forward. I suspect that within this context such an illustration typically takes the form of, well, formal questions, such as the strictures of gallery projection or the demands of the short landscape film as a genre.<sup>90</sup> The questions may be material, concerned with the material of the shot or the materiality of light coming through a lens. They may consider the social, ethical, and political dimensions of what comes before the lens, or how

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<sup>90</sup> The "boring landscape film," as one member of my committee called it.

any of these questions have played out in my past works and how they may develop in the future. I find these questions immaterial next to questions of how the work forges connections to the wider world. I find as well that these connections grow ever-smaller as the concerns grow larger. Rather than a vast media-scale impact, a small personal connection seems more appropriate.

At any rate, my film has two parts. The first shows an idyllic landscape dotted with methane wells, collecting the gas emitted from the trash from which the landscape is made. The second shows the working face, a choreography of massive trucks and starlings, grinding down and picking from heaps of trash. Bracketing this second part are jets of flame.

The flame extends backwards, to the first house, in which a clearing in the woods held a fire. Around the fire the trees became columns and walls. The flame also extends forwards, to the dreads we know of factually but cannot feel in our bodies, like environmental degradation and global climate change. This forwards-flame takes all we have done, our accomplishments and civilization and loves and memories, and renders them ash.

In the gallery we can gather around both these flames for a moment, lost in the past or lost in the future, following dancing tongues of fire with our eyes. It is just a representation of a flame, light without heat, but I hope it has deep echoes in us. R. D. Dripps elegantly touches on these echoes in the ending of his book *The First House: Myth, Paradigm, and the Task of Architecture*:

Even amidst all of the pessimism that is so currently fashionable, I find it hard to resist imagining just what our world could be like in the next two millennia if the myth of origin we were to tell today did not proceed from the dying embers of a consuming fire, but instead engaged the complex and perhaps strange animating power of the forest as a more valued part of our paradigms.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

After the flame, the next shot cuts to a flock of starlings in the sky, then trash; or fades to darkness, then back to the beginning, and sky.

At the very least, neither of these cuts leads to something we have any control over. I may frame the shot of both, but the birds and clouds do what they will. Should we talk of paradigms, that seems to me the key to renewing ours. Our project as a culture for several hundred years has been one of control, of putting things in tidy rows and labelling them and predicting what comes up. At first this yielded plenty. Lately nothing good has come. But the first gardens were the ones that grew from the spots we went to void in shame, out on the edges of the flame and the edges of the forest. Our creativity was in response to what we found there some time later in the light of day. The “strange and animating power” is so often not our own.

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## Appendix.

This Appendix presents a redacted copy of the contract which the organization responsible for the landfill asked me to sign. There were two documents, in fact, but one was simply the standard-issue waiver required of all visitors (and workers, I assume) to sign before setting foot on the site. That document I did not include. The other was a custom-written contract, which follows. You'll have to trust me when I say I have redacted only the organization's identifying information, as per their request.

I have included this document as an evidence of the different measures required by the organization when faced with a reasonable request for site access. Admittedly, the site is quite dangerous: at some point the site workers grew a little bit annoyed that we were in their way, even though we were at least 100 feet away from the opening in the working face. One truck driver buzzed a little close to my tripod, perhaps to prove a point. However, the terms of the contract had little to do with site access and everything to do with establishing some degree of control by the organization over the later life of this work, restricting its future only to the predictable and predetermined. Make of that what you will.

## ACCESS AGREEMENT

This Agreement for Access ("Agreement"), made as of this 13 day of November 2015, by and between [REDACTED] solid waste [REDACTED] created [REDACTED] and Mr. William Randall ("Mr. Randall"), an individual, collectively referred to as the "Parties."

### WITNESSETH:

#### WHEREAS,

the

Landfill

WHEREAS, in accordance with the guiding principles [REDACTED] to promote public awareness and knowledge concerning [REDACTED] the [REDACTED] solid waste [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]

WHEREAS, Mr. Randall has requested the right to access the [REDACTED] property (hereinafter "Subject Property") in order to film [REDACTED] operations and produce material to be displayed as art for viewing by the public; and

NOW THEREFORE, in consideration of the mutual covenants contained herein and other good and valuable consideration, the receipt and sufficiency of which is hereby acknowledged, the Parties agree as follows:

**§1 Access.** [REDACTED] hereby gives permission to Mr. Randall (the "Authorized Party") to enter upon the Subject Property for the following activities:

- a. To film operations and materials [REDACTED] in order to produce imagery that will be displayed as video essay art for public viewing at the Urban Arts Space; and,
- b. Any other reason must be consented to by [REDACTED] in writing.

**§2 Permission.** This permission is effective immediately upon the execution of this Agreement by the Parties and shall be only for the activities specifically identified above in Section 1.

**§3 Duties.** In exchange for the right to access the Subject Property, Mr. Randall agrees to the following conditions:

- a. The Authorized Party may enter the Subject Property during normal business hours and may make special arrangements to enter the Subject Property at other times after agreement from [REDACTED] in writing.

- b. The Authorized Party shall give no less than twenty four (24) hours advance written notice to [REDACTED] confirming the intent to access the Subject Property.
- c. The Authorized Party shall enter the Subject Property at his own risk, and [REDACTED] shall not be held responsible or liable for injury, damage, or loss incurred by any Authorized Party or to the property of any Authorized Party arising out of or in connection with activities under this Agreement.
- d. The Authorized Party shall comply with any and all of [REDACTED]'s safety policies, procedures, applicable laws, and regulations, and shall be accompanied at all times by [REDACTED].
- e. The Authorized Party hereby fully indemnifies and holds [REDACTED] harmless [REDACTED]
- f. The Authorized Party shall not interfere or interrupt [REDACTED]'s use or enjoyment of the Premises or the common areas.
- g. [REDACTED]
- h. The Authorized Party shall provide [REDACTED] an opportunity to review and approve the final version of the materials produced and intended for viewing by the public prior to its release or display. No use of the name, titles, images, or other descriptions associated with [REDACTED] shall be used without prior permission by [REDACTED]

§4 [REDACTED]

§ 5 Termination. This Agreement shall terminate [REDACTED]

**§6 Miscellaneous:**

- a. Successors and Assigns. This Agreement and the matters contained herein shall inure to the benefit and be binding upon the respective successors and assigns of [REDACTED] and Mr. Randall.

b.

- c. Notices. All notices which are required for either party to serve upon the other shall be effectively served if personally delivered or sent by certified mail, return receipt requested, and addressed as follows:

If to Mr. Randall: Bill Randall  
258 Hopkins Hall, 128 N. Oval Mall  
Columbus, OH 43210  
[randall.188@osu.edu](mailto:randall.188@osu.edu)

If to

- d. Governing Law. This Agreement shall be governed by and construed in accordance with the laws of the State of Ohio without regard to principles of conflict of laws. The Parties hereto hereby submit to the jurisdiction of the courts of the State of Ohio in Franklin County with respect to the interpretation and enforcement of the provisions of this Agreement and hereby waive, and agree not to assert, any defense in any action, suit, or proceeding for the interpretation or enforcement of this Agreement, that they are not subject thereto or that such action, suit or proceeding may not be brought or is not maintainable in such courts or that this Agreement may not be enforced in or by such courts or that their property is exempt or immune from execution, that the suit, action or proceeding is brought in an inconvenient forum, or that the venue of the suit, action or proceeding is improper. Service of process with respect thereto may be made upon Mr. Randall by mailing a copy thereof by registered or certified mail, postage prepaid, to such Party at its address provided above in the Notices provision of this Section 6.



Agreement as of the date set forth under their respective signatures below:

M \_\_\_\_\_

D \_\_\_\_\_

By: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Approved as to Form:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Legal Counsel  
\_\_\_\_\_

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Legal Counsel

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████████████████████

11/11/2019