

2023 Benjamin Menschel Fellowship Exhibition

ON AIR

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Director's Note

“On Air,” the exhibition of the 2023 Benjamin Menschel Fellowship at Cooper Union, showcases four diverse projects, each manifesting the fellowship’s spirit of interdisciplinary exploration and cultural enrichment.

Though each project was completed independently from the others, the fellows identified “On Air” as a title that illuminated a common thread in their work.

Clark’s project on media production in Burkina Faso revolves around the intricacies of television production, centering the act of collaboration and discussion in the behind-the-scenes activities of a commercial broadcaster. This research examines the balance between cultural production and social interaction within the media landscape.

Martone, Ross, and Langevin’s research focuses on rebuilding a connection with nature and responding to urban climate concerns. Their project seeks to integrate the rhythms of the natural into urban life, emphasizing the connection between environmental and sensory awareness, an integration found in the act of breathing.

Buck Wanner

Bein’s investigation into American Prison Museums, including undercover participation in a paranormal convention, deals with themes of visibility, performance, and the unseen aspects of societal systems. The project evokes the broadcasting of hidden truths, and invisible layers of society being brought to light.

Raeder’s exploration of the sublime in landscape painting and internal visual phenomena contends with how perceptions and experiences are projected and represented. The desert and its atmosphere serve as a stark backdrop to an internal investigation of the subjectivity of sensing.

Beyond these highlights, many other themes and ideas can be found in this year’s projects — I invite you to explore them in this catalog and in the exhibit. Collectively, these projects embody the innovative spirit of the Menschel Fellowship, weaving a tapestry of inquiry and creativity, enriching cultural and academic dialogues within Cooper Union and beyond.

PROGRAMME DES EMISSIONS DE LA SEMAINE DU 24 AU 30 JUILLET 2023

DATES	HEURES	EMISSIONS	REALISATEURS	CHARGÉE PROD.	CADREURS	OP. SON	STUDIOS	PRESENTATI
Lundi 24	12h-13h 30	Le 13h00	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA		Siko	Hermann	2	M.KABOF
	15h-18h	Le Loft	ROGATIEN/YASMINE	A SANON	Belem-Sanon	Hermann		S ZONG
	18h 30-20h	Le 19h 30	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA		Moctar	Toussaint	2	A. TRAOI
	20h-20h 30	Kibaye Waakato	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA		Moctar	Toussaint	2	S. ZOUGO
	20h30-22h	Sport time	ROGATIEN/YASMINE		Moctar-Siko	Toussaint	1	ARSENE
Mardi 25	12h-13h 30	Le 13h00	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA		Eric	Hermann	2	M.KABOF
	14h-18h	Id Wum Neere	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA	S TOE	Siko Mathias	Hermann		E SOUDF
	15h-18h	Le Loft	ROGATIEN/YASMINE	A SANON	Belem-Sanon	Hermann		S ZONG
	18h 30-20h	Le 19h 30	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA		Zongo	Jonas	2	A. TRAOI
	20h-20h 30	Kibaye Waakato	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA		Zongo	Jonas	2	S. ZOUGO
	20h-23h 30	Vivre Ensemble	IRENEE NANAN	G KABORE	Zongo-Souley	Jonas	2	ALICE C
Mercredi 26	11H 00 : CONFÉRENCE DE PRODUCTION							
	12h-13h 30	Le 13h00	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA		Mathias	Hermann		M.KABOF
	15h-17h	Surface de Vérité	IRENEE NANA	S. ZONGO	Moctar-Siko	Hermann	1	A GUEBF
	18h30-20h	Le 19h 30	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA		Eric	Toussaint	2	A. TRAOI
	20h-20h 30	Kibaye Waakato	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA		Eric	Toussaint	2	S. ZOUGO
Jeudi 27	10h-13h	Reem wakato	ROGATIEN/YASMINE/PDG		Moctar Sanon Zongo Souley	Toussaint	2	M.KABOF
	12h-13h 30	Le 13h00	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA		Eric	Hermann	2	M.KABOF
	18h 30-20h	Le 19h 30	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA		Belem	Toussaint	2	A. TRAOI
	20h-20h 30	Kibaye Waakato	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA		Belem	Toussaint	2	S. ZOUGO
Vendredi 28	09h-11h	D wum neere	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA	S. TOE	Mathias Souley	Jonas	1	E. SOUDI
	10h30-13h	La télé s'amuz	ROGATIEN/YASMINE/PDG		Mathias Souley Souley Siko	Jonas	1	G.SERG
	12h-13h 30	Le 13h00	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA		SanonMoctar	Hermann	2	M.KABOF
	14h-16h	Surface de vérité	IRENEE NANA	S. ZONGO	Sanon-Zongo	Hermann	1	A. GUEBI
	18h 30-20h	Le 19h 30	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA		Sanon	Jonas	2	A. TRAOI
	20h-20h 30	Kibaye Waakato	ILBOUDO/ROUAMBA		Sanon	Jonas	2	S. ZOUGO
	20h30-22h	Au Coeur du sport	IRENEE NANA	S. TOE	Sanon-Belem	Jonas	1	MADI.Z

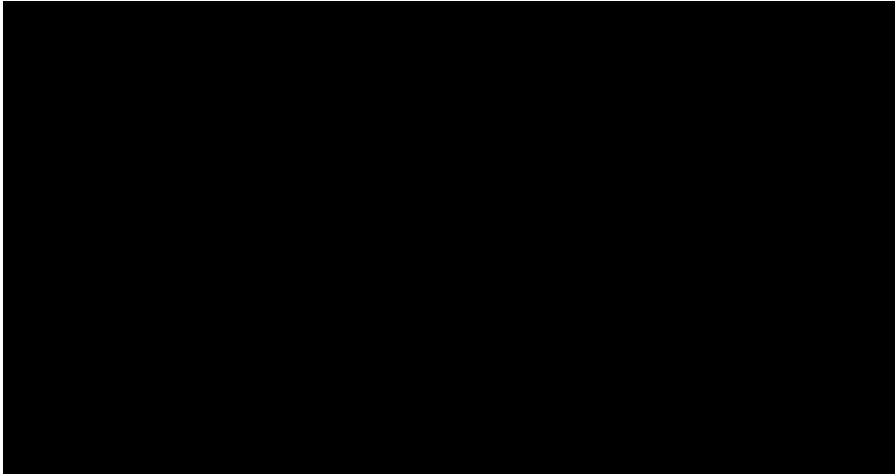
*Artist's work –
Lead in Le travail de
l'artiste –
Discours
d'introduction*

Dylan
Clark

Produced in association with
BF1 Burkina Faso, Hamadou Traoré
& Lila Ann Wong

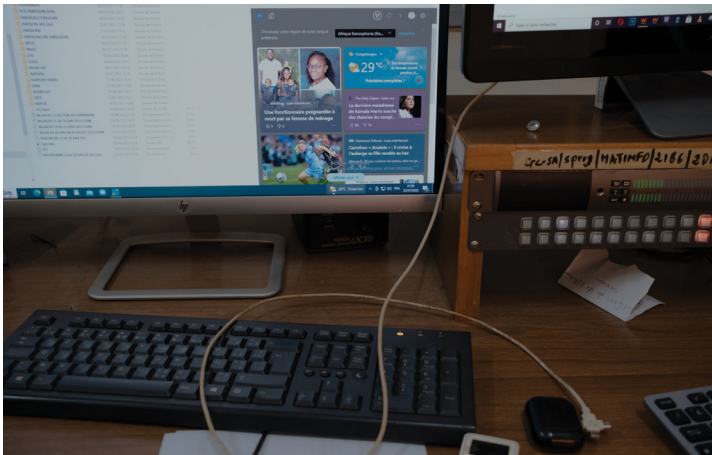
Initiated through research on media production in Burkina Faso, this project is the result of collaborative artistic labor and study, involving behind-the-scenes work on theater and film, meetings and conversations with journalists and officials, and on-set experience as onlookers and participants at BF1 studios.

The logistics of television production serve as a model for ways of socializing, learning, and communicating that shift the role of the cultural producer from that of an insulated administrator towards an organizer participating in an open circuit of communication. Employing this model, the private environments that allow for television production within national and commercial interests are situated in a broader sphere of cultural debate and conversation.



Over 10 minutes on July 27th, the pre-show countdown is dictated from the nearby broadcast studio into the production booth of Le 13H, an hour-long midday news bulletin. Technicians and journalists banter, moving through doors in between the soundstage as they prepare for the beginning of the program. Sounds of the clicking and touching of cameras, buzz of electrical equipment, and brushing and rustling of moving crew and onlookers occupy the acoustic space of the production booth, alongside the noises, conversations, and interactions of crew and others. Graphics are loaded onto a broadcast monitor as the sound engineer reviews and adjusts a small mixing board. Over a talkback speaker, the broadcast technicians narrate the countdown; as it nears completion, the rhythm of backstage procedures slows and voices become quiet before conversation ends.

Recorded during June and July of 2023, this footage was filmed at BF1 headquarters in the Ouaga 2000 district of Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. Additional footage was previously recorded at the station's regional branch in the Accart-Ville district of Bobo-Dioulasso.



BF1 is the leading commercial television channel in Burkina Faso, and the second-largest television broadcaster overall, following La Radiodiffusion Télévision du Burkina, a state-run public broadcaster. Part of the Global Communications Media Group, based in South Africa, the channel is available domestically via cable and internationally via internet livestream.

BF1 broadcasts predominantly in French. Its programming focuses on social issues, Burkinabe arts and culture, and regional politics. News bulletins *Le 7 Infos*, *Le 13H*, and *Le 19H30* provide live updates on topics of the day, constructed around short video stories introduced by a single anchor. These informational broadcasts are supplemented by shows like *Presse Echos* and *Surface de Vérité* that feature discourse between relevant figures, focusing on analysis of public affairs issues.

The channel airs three additional programs in *Mooré*: *D Wum Neere*, *Kibaye Wakato*, and *Laafi Roogo*; and one in Julakan: *Faso Siguidiya*. These programs have a more localized audience, with *Mooré* being spoken primarily in the central regions of the country surrounding Ouagadougou, and *Jula* being spoken primarily in Bobo-Dioulasso.

During major events outside the scope of its regular programming, BF1 incorporates special broadcasts into its standard schedule. In the case of the biennial *Festival Panafricain du Cinéma et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou*, or *FESPACO*, these special broadcasts take the form of hour-long panel discussions with film directors, producers, actors, and festival organizers. Excluding special programming, empty slots in the channel's schedule are filled with *Music Box*: a series that hosts and promotes contemporary African music videos.



A broadcast and internet livestream program developed for presentation on the network is forthcoming, in collaboration with Hamadou Traorè and BF1. Airing intermittently, the program will be staged in between BF1 sets and production offices, and in public spaces of Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso.

This program will feature discussions between television workers, along with figures from related industries that support television production economically or socially. These include cultural workers and organizations who rely on television coverage for promotion and legitimization, camera and audio equipment suppliers who supply technology necessary for video journalism, live audiences selected for panel discussions and talk shows, and television viewers. This discussion format will be used as a vehicle for social interaction, providing visibility to the mechanisms of the Burkinabe media industry.

Alongside these exchanges will be short video documents produced in conversation with discussion members, expanding on the “everyday” labor of television workers through detailed descriptions of processes of television production, their education, workplace social environments and hierarchy, and interaction with the city’s public spaces.

Special thanks to Hamadou Traorè and Lila Ann Wong for their continuing collaboration and assistance.

Thanks to the entire BF1 team, and to Issoufou Sare, Pierre A. Bado, Michelle Diawara, Jacob Zongo, Raphaël Nikiema, Thomas Yao Kouka, & Gilbert Bana.

Thanks to Centre Siraba & Souleymane Koumare, Maïmouna Compaore, Bako Sanou, Lucy Raven, Fia Backstrom, Zach Poff, Buck Wanner, Ángel Espinoza-Bergins, Zaid Arshad, Mom & Dad.



Two Spoon Carvers and a Dancer

Stella Martone
Eva Rodríguez
Langevin
Rita Ross

Two Spoon Carvers and a Dancer is a multimedia research project born out of the collaboration between Stella Martone, Eva Rodríguez Langevin, and Rita Ross, artists currently working in New York, alongside Rick Thomas of the Wendell Berry Farming program. Initiated as a response to a sense of urban climate doom that pervaded their social environment in New York, the group connected with Rick as a starting place for thinking of ways to resensitize themselves (rather than enter the dominant culture of numbing) in the face of climate doom. Crawling from their tender bodies and aching minds to Kentucky, the group wondered what sort of remedies, medicines, and practices could be a part of reorienting their doom driven relationship to the city as earth. Rick, a farmer and educator introduced through a friend of a friend, offered another positionality when it came to the

human earth relationship. As a teacher of woodland skills and draft animal farm work, Rick approached his own work with a great sensitivity to where objects came from and how they were used, blurring the line between the natural and built environment, explicitly acknowledging the potential for creating in collaboration with the earth environment. After a phone call correspondence, the group traveled to visit Rick at the Wendell Berry Farm and Forest Institute. There the group learned how to fell trees, carve spoons, and use chainsaws. In his imparting of knowledge Rick showed them how he lived and his way of tying his valuing of the natural into what he does for a living. In his way of understanding, connecting, and collaborating with his environment, they found some important practices to translate into the urban space. The group regained a sense of sensing, with all its redundancies...



Recollection

In October, we drove in Stella's car from Stony Creek to Henry County (Connecticut to Kentucky). We drove down to Stella's house first and her dad, Al, helped us pack up. We stopped at her mom's farm. Stella's mama sat on a stool and Stella's sister was there too. Stella's mama gave us cotton satchels of lavender. Smell it when you're overwhelmed! Rita huffed it in the back seat.

First stop on the trip was in Virginia at TRAINER'S MIDWAY DINER AND FAMILY RESTAURANT.

Breakfast Menu one hot cake - 2.60

Later in the day we crossed under a mountain with two tunnels at its very base. It looked like the mountain had two heavy hooded eyes. The mountain also had a sign. It read (across the bottom):

BLUE MOUNTAIN

That night we slept in Virginia. Rita thought you could measure a map with your eyes and we ended up far off the highway with no map, no internet and no gas, standing on the tallest hill to try and get one bar of service to tell Al that we are okay. We weren't sure if we were okay. Eventually we found our camp site. A whole field. Stella slept with a knife, Eva slept with a bat, Rita slept with nothing.

It took two more days and one inaugural trip to Waffle House before we reached Henry County.

When we got to Henry County we met Rick. Rick gave us axes to warm up. We lifted them over our head and twirled them in a series of exercises. Blood moved out of all its weird pent up city crannies. It feels good to move. Then we stood in Rick's workshop. We each had a chainsaw. We took each apart and made sure it's in good condition. We tighten the chain and watch its teeth move. Everyone had to wear chaps and good ear protection. We geared up. Standing on the lawn field outside the garage we practiced turning our chainsaws on and off. Hopped in the back of the truck. Bucked a little wood. Then we were in the forest. Rick pointed the trees out to us, this is how I choose them, this is how cutting down a tree can be an act of care or destruction. Rick is a stunning teacher. We each cut down a tree.

We eat lunch together. Rick says there should be a few things people learn: how to keep warm with an ax, how to build a simple shelter, how to start a fire without matches, and how to forage. Kentucky is a wounded landscape. Rick explains where the forest went. He is a man of the trees. He explains how the fields took the trees, how the forests have become marginal spaces.



Back: New York



We went to Kentucky to try to build our senses. During the summer we salivated. We teethed on our questions:

- 1 What is the character of urban apocalyptic doom? What is its antidote?
- 2 How can a transference between the natural, craft, and the urban help our communities regain entanglement with each other?
- 3 How can these sharings together form a more sustainable future?

We had expected to carry our thinking into Kentucky this summer, in Stella's car with our axes, knives, and dancing clothes. Rick reminded us that this would not do, we would have to wait till October, when the forest was right for felling trees, and the horses ready to haul the wood, so that spoon carving could really take place. With the summer's sweet flesh in between our baby teeth, we pursued our question in waiting. In our thinking we have oriented ourselves to the present. We noticed that the future focus of urban context often just begets a focus on the "I" but shift into the future moves us into thinking about a "we."

A reflection in the summer heat

As I returned to my home in Puerto Rico over the summer, I was able to reconnect with nature and the textured meeting of the urbanscape and the natural landscape. Meeting this after spending cold months in the skyscraper infected streets of New York set my mind ablaze. As the mover (dancer) of the group I sensed the dramatic shift in my body. Suddenly, I found myself attuned and connected to my surroundings. My movement shifted and each motion came out differently than it would have in the city. I was reading about the Judson dance company and their endeavors all across the continental US. The project that most resonated with me was Anna and Lawrence Halprin's Dance Deck in California. Writing about the experience, they say:

Since there is ever changing form and texture and light around you, a certain drive develops toward constant experimentation and change in dance itself. In a sense one becomes less introverted, less dependent on sheer invention, and more outgoing and receptive to environmental change. There develops a certain sense of exchange between oneself and one's environment and movement develops which must be organic or it seems false... Space explodes and becomes mobile. Movement within a moving space, I have found, is different than movement in a static cube.

These words beneath my hands made me crawl to wonder, what would an authentic response to our surroundings

look like? How can we move authentically in a space where artificially fast movement has become a constant norm? Is the type of moving we do in this city authentic to the place but not to ourselves? In *These Wilds Beyond Our Fences: Letters to my Daughter on Humanity's Search for Home*, Bayo Akomolafe discusses the modern obsession with sweeping up dust and brokenness without first learning from it. Akomolafe's commentary suggests that dust and brokenness is the remnant of our collective history and we must look at it for a reckoning to occur. This type of dismissal of the dust doesn't happen everywhere because there aren't the resources to be able to get rid of it so easily but the mentality of it needing to be eliminated does contaminate a lot of the countries that are being pushed to "develop" (in a way westernize). In New York City this condition of removal of the broken (the dust) is extremely apparent.

Everything is being replaced for something that's considered newer and better. This makes me wonder if the brokenness of things aren't being honored but replaced, what does that mean for our broken bodies and minds? How can our project honor the brokenness of our urban community's senses?

Exercise for Urban Sensing: pt. 1/Wake pee

During the trip, we seemed to move as one larger organism. One set of arms carried the map that had to communicate it to our driving brain that had to be fed by a third separate set of hands. All together, we made it through. Even when learning with Rick, piping in with different questions, getting and not getting it in our own ways, we in some ways coalesced into one student of Rick. Our group's differentiation came when we left our car exo-skeleton and entered our daily lives. We got back to New York City with ample material and agency to make some transcendent changes to our and our communities routines of transit and entanglement with our surroundings. The attention to the protection of our bodies that was taught by Rick was translated

into the urban space. We realized with Rick's lecture on chainsaw safety that the noise that we are exposed to in the Metro is extremely detrimental to our hearing. And what's the remedy for most people? Replacing it with more sound up the ear and numbing themselves from the exterior. We found that having some sort of ear protection that reduces the decibel level one hears, which makes transit a calmer experience and protects our ears. Also, before any physical activity we did stretches with the resources we had at hand, sledgehammers. Now in the city, having a morning routine of stretching prepares the body for a more fluid navigating of the oppressive urban space.



*Catching
Orbital Debris
(The Ohio Suite)*

Jackson
Bein

For the Benjamin Menschel Fellowship, I continued a long-term investigation into American Prison Museums. This time, going undercover within an ex-industrial-Ohio-townscape during the Ohio State Reformatory's annual Paranormal Psychic Convention. Exploring questions of invisibility, performance, and spectacles of the sub-human, much of the project is a representation of what I refer to as "informational-edging". This *edging* is the nexus which unites *What's more terrifying than what you can't know?* and *What's more erotic than what you can't have?*

When I wanted to punish a lover who treated me poorly, I would seduce them until they wanted me back, and then not let them have me; inducing their lack. The horror genre relies on this same idea, using *black* and *unsee-ability* to signal something barbaric lurking within. When in research all routes lead to an Althusserian apparatus, I feel this dreadful lack that my punished lovers feel. "Ideology has a material existence" (Althusser) — mainly one of restriction — and it takes the shape of my sexy tight body and the Ohio State Reformatory.

The first iteration focused on the Angola Museum, one of various public-facing narrative-bodies constructed by the Louisiana State Penitentiary:

The Angola Museum was the first time I heard a vacuum in exhibition space. A man who was identified as Morris was repairing, cleaning, and brewing coffee for the director. When I asked, the director revealed that Morris is classified as a *Class A Trusty*, granting him *the privilege to perform his state-mandated labor in the museum rather than out on the fields*. The frozen-ness of the museum was functioning properly; this man was just as much a part of the display as the inmate-made vitrines holding confiscated makeshift weapons, or shoes worn by George Clooney in 1998 *Out Of Sight*, or props from the 2012 film *Hate Crime*; a film where I made my cinematic debut as a man's childhood memories before his execution in Louisiana. (*At the time, those \$200 made me rich.*) A moving sculpture, a living exhibit, a human zoo.

— *Officiation*, 2024, Bein

The third centered around a tour for the blind of the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia:

Each person walks with uncertainty. The tour guide looks at me and his eyebrows twitch slightly upward, as if cueing to me that he sees my fake blindness. I initially felt guilty about my performance but that iniquity subsided once I realized how easy it was to deceive the blind. We pass the penitentiary's security module, originally consisting of two men taking turns sleeping armed with guns. Now, it's just a pathetic excuse for a metal detector barring any gift shop sticky fingers. When asked why everyone had come to the tour, most replied that they were blind, lived in Philly, and this was something to do. When it comes my turn to share, I twitch my eyebrows slightly upward at the guide, seemingly our new-found language, and thus my performance includes becoming an unknown surveyor, having infiltrated not only inconspicuously, but also entirely unaccounted for. Standing in the central guard zone, I refrain from taking a photograph of a woman who has a guide dog and wears a shirt reading: *The Seeing Eye*.

— *Jumbotron*, 2023, Bein

The early instinct for discipline and control was spectacle. Then, as

Foucault described, watching a man torn apart alive started to lose its *umpte*, and so disciplinary control took a turn towards the un-spectacular/hidden, or self-spectacularized. *What's more terrifying than what you can't know? What's more erotic than what you can't have?* The carceral system's function is dependent on the unseeable-ness of its proceedings. Though our eyes *see* the skin of the prison, and we *feel* its "capillaries," the prison's innards are entirely obscured.

In this sequestering, the prison museum and the prison film emerge, to serve as surrogate for our eyes. In both, the "historic site" designates itself as *historic*, "(tense) used in the narration of past events" (Oxford), making itself a place exempt from multiplicity, continuation, and implication. There exists a doubling; the people who maintain the carceral institutions also construct their representations (for one of many examples — my favorite, because I couldn't make it up even if I tried — look into the duo Anne Butler and C. Murray Henderson). These narrativized *surrogates* are not created for us in our incapacity, but rather to fill the gap in cultural consciousness, pushing us away from fateful questioning of the domination that relies on its unsee-ness. David Levi Strauss writes in *The Body of Evidence*:

The word for "witness" in both Sanskrit and Greek means "the one who sees," or "the one who knows because they have seen." This priority of the visual has informed the practice of law from the beginning. A rule enunciated in the *Shatapatha Brahmana* holds, "If now two men dispute, one of them saying 'I have seen,' and the other 'I have heard,' the one who says 'I have seen' is the one whom we must believe."

A convention was bringing together the clairvoyant and alien abductees amongst the steel of the notoriously inhumane prison, and I worried that my high-and-mightiness would interfere with the EMF. So at first, I tried to assume the persona of a ghost hunter, communicating beyond the grave with a man who set himself aflame to escape his life sentence. In this persona, I was going to prove I was him resurrected. (Mind you, the self-immolated criminal/martyr's death coincides with my birthday, and also the date of this exhibition: February 6.) This first persona failed when I was too embarrassed to pretend that I believed *Satan has infiltrated the brains of criminals*. Fucking coward.

The lines on your palm can foresee whether your boyfriend is going to leave you or not: proof of "fate". "Fate" lets me lick my wounds after a breakup: "*There's nothing I could do to stop it!*" And just so, "fate" aids us in making sense of the horror of a man's life confined to a 3'x8' block of concrete: "There's nothing we could have done to stop it!" I choose to believe that when my Grandmother says *Satan has infiltrated the brains of criminals*, that she says this because empathizing would conjure up too much pain. I don't want my Grandmother in pain, so I let her believe Satan has infiltrated the brains of criminals. Equally, as I walk through the tallest cell block in the world with a group of Sasquatch-searchers, I join them in taking pictures to find orbs.

During my time in Ohio, I captured over 4,000 forensically-informed photographs. These images document 6 distinct sites: the *Motel*, the *Ohio State Reformatory*, the *Ohio Corrections Museum*, the *Para-Psychic Convention*, the *Shawshank Museum*, and the *North Central Ohio Industry Museum*. Forensics, "scientific tests or techniques used in connection with the detection of crime" (Oxford), seem to function in the instance of a predetermined what which has been committed (you don't wonder if the crime was a murder or mail-theft while you're capturing a dead body on film). I went to the dead body because I wanted forensics to do its job, I wanted an explanation for this tourist-trap representation of the carceral. Or, I wanted to know why Ohio depressed me so much.

The first night I arrived, I sat and ate steak quesadillas and had a salt-rimmed marg (this would be all of my meals in Ohio, as the Mexican restaurant was the only place next to the motel, and I refused to buy the overpriced terrible muffins from the convention catering). I was the only person there as I told myself *almost all of my pictures would have to be tightly-framed and like a shitty-craigslist-private-investigator's attempt at documenting a crime scene*. Rather than imaging the entirety of the space, I cared about fingerprints on glass, dirt left from past visitors, and the *orbs*. I still can't tell you if it was murder or mail-theft.



For exhibiting *Catching Orbital Debris (The Ohio Suite)*, a system which depends on the work being hidden replicates this phenomenon of “informational-edging.” Though the suite houses 114 images, only 6 are exposed each day. For me, the viewer not being able to grasp *what is happening* is much more important than a false sense of *ohhhh, I get it!* The dull anesthetizing gray of office carpeting brings the images back to the bureaucratic and Bernays-ian tourist trap. Just beyond the wall (*if you can scale it*), crystal is mutilated and left like a doubly dead thing. Lastly, a performance lecture springs directly out of psychic readings I had within the reformatory — one of which proclaimed a man and woman had cut my hair, buried it in a hole in the forest, and killed a chickie whose blood was poured in the hole. Luckily, I had \$500 left from the Benjamin Menschel Fellowship, and thus I was able to have the seer expel my curse.

Thank you to Lucy Raven, Avra Spector, Elias Claborn, Zaid Arshad, Corinna Ray, Buck Wanner, Jade Flint, Leyla Ba, Morris, my family, my dear friends who keep my heart from drowning in the bleakness, and anyone unnamed but imbedded.

Entoptic Phenomena and the Sublime: Research En Plein-Air

Mylean
Raeder

In the canon of western painting, the sublime is often represented by vast, complex landscapes and especially refers to a greatness beyond all possibility of calculation, measurement, or imitation. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke completes an exposition that attempts to separate the beautiful and the sublime into their own respective categories.

Burke wrote, “whatever is in any sort terrible or is conversant about terrible objects or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime.” He states that the *beautiful* is that which is well-formed and aesthetically pleasing, whereas the *sublime* is that which has the power to compel and destroy us.

I found it is possible to represent this interpretation of the sublime by “looking in,” or more specifically, by seeing ones internal terrain projected onto an external landscape. By superimposing representations of entoptic phenomena¹ onto landscape paintings, the human body (the viewer and their eye) is placed in between two infinities.² The infinitely large, existing outside of the body, and the infinitely small, occurring inside of the body. The surface of the eye acts as a window between these two locales — where the reflection of the internal space can be seen on the surface of the external space, and so both spaces can be viewed simultaneously. Because entoptic images are caused by phenomena within the observer’s own eye, they share one feature with optical illusions and hallucinations: the observer cannot share a direct and specific view of the phenomenon with others. Since it cannot be photographed, it must be painted.

White Sands is a newly incorporated American national park located in the state of New Mexico. The park’s primary feature is a large field of white sand dunes composed of gypsum crystals. This field of gypsum sand is the largest of its kind on Earth. Upon entering White Sands, park rangers recommend that visitors wear sunglasses to avoid causing injury to the eyes. The conditions of this place are such that, because of its brightness and the occurrence of the Ganzfeld effect, microscopic materials in the eye are illuminated, which cast visible shadows onto the retina. In Hermann Helmholtz’s³ words: “Under suitable conditions, light falling on the eye may render visible certain objects within the eye itself.” For example, myodesopsias⁴ or muscae-volitantes (in Latin, flying flies) are, “an ocular trouble consisting in the emergence in the visual field of grey dots, spots, threads or cobwebs of different shapes, that travel with eye movements. Floaters appear as a consequence of the emergence of opacities created within the vitreous, as this substance experiences natural changes over the time. Microscopic fibers within the vitreous tend to regroup and cast their shadow on the retina when light passes through.”⁵

- 1 Entoptic (adj) - (of visual images) occurring or originating inside the eye. Entoptic images have a physical basis in the image cast upon the retina. Hence, they are different from optical illusions, which are caused by the visual system and characterized by a visual perception that appears to differ from reality.
- 2 Human beings seem to be roughly half-way between the largest and smallest of things, that is, the observable universe, and the Planck Scale. A galaxy is to a person, what a person is to an atom.
- 3 Hermann Ludwig Ferdinand von Helmholtz (31 August 1821 – 8 September 1894) was a German physicist and physician who made significant contributions in the fields of physiology and psychology. Helmholtz is known for his mathematics concerning the eye, theories of vision, ideas on the visual perception of space, color vision research, etc.
- 4 myodesopsia - an entoptic phenomenon commonly known as eye floaters.
- 5 Jürgens, Dr. I. (2020, March 3). Eye floaters or myodesopsias. causes and treatment. ICR. <https://icrcat.com/en/eye-floaters>

The landscape in White Sands behaves like a mirror; it reflects all sunlight cast upon it and as a result, small details and textures in the sand become obscured. These light conditions produce the Ganzfeld effect, or perceptual deprivation. It is a perceptual phenomenon caused by exposure to an unstructured and uniform blank surface. “Staring at an undifferentiated and uniform field of color gives rise to hallucinations; geometrical patterns and transient sensations of light flashes or colors can, overtime, turn into complex scenes.”⁶ The Ganzfeld Effect currently functions as an umbrella term for a variety of testimonies made since ancient times: “The adepts of Pythagoras retreated to pitch-black caves to receive wisdom through their visions.”⁷ “Known as the prisoner’s cinema. Miners trapped by accidents in mines frequently reported hallucinations, visions and seeing ghosts when they were in the pitch dark for days. Arctic explorers seeing nothing but featureless landscapes of white snow for a long time also reported hallucinations and an altered state of mind.”⁸

I wanted to explore all of these phenomena in an environment that possessed the physical attributes necessary in order to produce these byproducts of vision. Originally I had wanted to go to Svalbard, Norway, but after doing some research I felt that it would be better to conduct this first study period in a place that is more physically accessible and which has a more hospitable (if only slightly) external environment. For this reason I chose to travel to White Sands National Park in southern New Mexico, sixty miles from the Trinity Site.⁹

I’ll begin by describing my drive from Flagstaff, Arizona to Alamogordo, New Mexico, which was quite beautiful. There is really nothing like driving through the high desert during Monsoon season. I spent much of the 9 hour drive with the windows down and the radio off, occasionally rolling the windows up when the overcast clouds condensed into real precipitation. The air was cool, below seventy degrees for some time. I had forgotten how incredible it is to be able to see across an entire valley — how strange to see a dark thunder-storm on your left and bright blue sky on the right. I am haunted by images of dead grass and yellow flowers and lightning rods stretching across my windshield. How impossible it feels to describe the way sunshine looks moments after a storm in the southwestern high-desert. I counted nine rainbows between Flagstaff and Alamogordo.

My seclusion felt the most hopeful during my first two days of camping. Oliver Lee Memorial State Park is located at the foot of Dog Canyon in the Sacramento Mountains and overlooks the Tularosa Basin. For those two days I watched from up high as the monsoon I outran rolled across the Chihuahuan Desert. Then the storm passed.

The nature of this environment is such that I cannot distinguish between each day in my memory. As I am writing, I’m noticing myself getting frustrated at my inability to pull apart and organize any elements of my experience. It is the case that in my memory, those ten days exist only as a mass of upset — I’m not sure how to chronicle them on paper in any way that will make sense. I’ve realized that this mass of upset and my inability to separate the days or events was caused by a chorus of environmental constants. A droning of heat, nausea, and high wind speeds.

In the daytime I became sick while attempting to paint the entoptic phenomena I sought out. It is hard to avoid describing the phenomena using language that doesn’t immediately conjure psychedelia. Underneath the white of the sand, there appeared to be a faint strobing, a flashing of every color at an imperceptible opacity. Sustained looking also gave rise to a series of alternating dark and bright bands — interference patterns and fractal-esque imagery that didn’t abide by any logic to which they’re usually ascribed. They lacked evidence of mathematical reason or beauty. Their lack of symmetry conjured within me, an emptiness and creeping anger, the kind of anger that makes one feel claustrophobic underneath the skin.

6 Wackermann, J., Putz, P., & Allefeld, C. (2008). “Ganzfeld-induced hallucinatory experience, its phenomenology and cerebral electrophysiology”. *Cortex*, 44(10), 1364–1378. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2007.05.003>

7 Ustinova, Y. (2009). *Caves and the ancient greek mind: Descending underground in the search for Ultimate Truth*. Oxford University Press.

8 Geiger, J. (2009). *The Third Man Factor: True Stories of Survival in Extreme Environments*. Canongate.

9 Trinity was the code name of the first detonation of a nuclear weapon, conducted by the United States Army at 5:29 a.m. MWT[a] (11:29:21 GMT) on July 16, 1945, as part of the Manhattan Project.

I had underestimated the elements and was humiliated when my materials began to fail. After setting up my easel, I would prepare my acrylic paint, which would dry within minutes on the palette, and within seconds after brushing it onto the wooden substrate. I began to spray the palette with water in an attempt to prolong the working period, but the water would quickly evaporate and the paint became unusable still. I began spraying the wooden panels, these too would dry in minutes, warping the surface in the process. Many of my brushes were destroyed this way, and so, I did not complete any of the paintings I set out to make.

Following my stay, I felt that I had failed in my endeavor to picture the sublime. However, upon reflection, it has become clear to me that the physical and psychological trouble I encountered during the creation of these images, does not override the efficacy and accuracy of my original thesis. It was true that White Sands possessed all of the physical criteria necessary in order to construct new and powerful entoptic phenomena. But what I learned was that when all of the physical criteria are met in order to allow an individual to perceive two infinities simultaneously, the resulting environment is so inhospitable that there is no more cognitive bandwidth left over to translate the experience. In this way, I have come to understand that the impossibility of making these paintings in the way I had intended is evidence of a greatness beyond all possibility of imitation. "It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication."¹⁰

Program Note

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10 Merleau-Ponty, M. (1992). *The Visible and the Invisible* (A. Lingis, Trans., C. Lefort, Ed.). Northwestern University Press.



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