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WSMR

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Art

by

Jason Russell Gowans

Thesis Committee:
Professor Miles Coolidge, Chair
Professor Rhea Anastas
Professor Kevin Appel
Professor Simon Leung
Professor Monica Majoli

2017

DEDICATION

To

My Parents

Brody Albert

Simon Benedict

Shawn Downey

Niloufar Emamifar

Amy Mackay

Ewa Słapa

Lisa Sitko

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

WSMR

By

Jason Russell Gowans

Master of Fine Arts in Art

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Professor Miles Coolidge, Irvine, Chair

This paper explores the artworks in Jason Gowans' exhibition thesis WSMR. Preliminarily, I will focus my research on the historic details the White Sands Missile Testing Range; paying special attention to the first photographs of nuclear testing as a transition moment from traditional Kantian notions of the sublime to a continuous progression from nature to artifice. Lastly I will focus on specific works within the show, detailing them as works related to the political experience as opposed to a political language or statement. I will show that they bring different aspects of language and representation together to create the anticipation of a determinate conclusion. Ultimately, I intend highlight these works as contradictory. They negate their original intention of clarity and determination the moment the forms meet.

In the summer of 2016, I had received a small travel grant and drove to New Mexico with the inclination that the state might hold something conceptually interesting for my next exhibition. I had never been to New Mexico but it seemed to embody a set of tensions that I wanted to explore. First, traces of the state's colonialist past are still felt in its present incarnation. Like California, New Mexico had been a part of Mexico until the mid-1800s, but unlike California, the indigenous population remains significant, as does their culture. The effects of colonization are present and the question of cultural land use is an important issue within the state. Secondly, New Mexico's history of nuclear and energy-testing is unlike any other in the United States, having been the site of nuclear development during World War II. Los Alamos National Laboratory, the site of the Manhattan Project, remains active and continues to be the largest employer in the state.

The initial trip was preliminary research but as I progressed, most of these interests became less relevant to the overall project but I kept returning to New Mexico nonetheless. As I gathered more information about the state and these sites of interest, it seemed I'd come back with less knowledge of what I was looking for. I would go from place to place, set up my camera, take photos, and leave. My markers were usually historical sites and places that might have been part of the military history within the state. The White Sand Missile Range (WSMR) was at first one of these places among many. However, there was something significantly different about the WSMR in that it was groomed for the public and made to be experienced. This was different from other sites I had visited. For example, Project Gnome (New Mexico's second nuclear test) was little more than a concrete marker found on an off-road journey to what felt like someone's backyard.

WSMR was still in the middle of nowhere but it is situated right next to the White Sands National Park, however, it is a significantly less popular tourist destination and visitors are sporadic. The entire base stretches 600,000 acres across a wall of mountain ranges in the Tularosa Basin. Though it is impressive as the largest active military installation in the United States, its notoriety lies in the fact that it is the location in which Trinity, the first atomic bomb, was detonated. WSMR was not my original destination and I assumed it was not open to the public but by chance I happened upon a small museum open to tourists who can pass a background check to visit. The museum is mostly outdoors because the main focus is military equipment. As you walk through the sand you are privileged to the viewing of almost every bomb used throughout US history, accompanied by details about how they were used, in which wars, and for how long. The rest of the museum is an archive of the colonial and indigenous history as well as technology used throughout various wars and missions from muskets to NASA telescopes, 4x5 cameras, and computers for drones surprisingly dated as far back as the 1960s.

When visitors arrive at the base they are instructed that photos are only allowed in two situations: you can either take photographs of the bombs and the various technologies on display in the museum or the mountain range. As I stood taking photos of mountains and bombs I realized I was allowed to take photographs of two different systems and two different experiences. I was given permission to document the aesthetic experience I was having in the desert at the foot of an enormous mountain range—a sublime natural phenomenon. On the other hand, I was also allowed to document a very different phenomenon—the experience of being among the technological infinitudes of man. I stood there and experienced both drawing my attention, sensing their similarity and difference.

Immanuel Kant divided the experience of the sublime into two parts. Firstly, there was the mathematical sublime. This dealt with a feeling of magnitude in the face of nature that seemed overwhelmingly vast. For Kant, this was the moment in which things seemed immeasurable or beyond the mind's reach. The ocean, the night sky, a mountain range, all led to a feeling of insignificance on the part of the viewer before what, in the mind, represents infinity. However, ultimately this experience culminates in a feeling of one's own grandeur because the human mind is able to conceive of something so seemingly infinite. This experience was put directly within the mind and did not represent the quality of the objects. For logically, what is considered to be vast, open, or infinite is not inherent in the object but relative to the perception of the viewer.

Kant's second category, the dynamic sublime, is more related to a perceived sense of danger from a relative point of safety. Kant gives the examples of volcanoes, steep cliffs, and hurricanes. Like the mathematical sublime there is an obvious feeling of insignificance when faced with the violent dangers of nature. However, the distinction within the dynamic sublime is the viewer's relation to danger from their point of relative safety. "Attracted by their aspect the more fearful they are, when we are in a state of security; and we at once pronounce them sublime, because they call out unwonted strength of soul and reveal in us a power of resistance of an entirely different kind, which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent omnipotence of nature" (Watson 499).

These traditional Kantian notions of the sublime are worth investigating in relationship to technology. As nature is continually more measurable, navigable, and groomed for our aesthetic

experiences the tools that we use to measure (or represent?) nature take on their own kind of sublimity. From the Internet to atomic bombs there is a progression from nature to artifice within the notion of the sublime. This category is often referred to as the technological sublime.* But unlike Kant's theory of the mathematical and dynamic sublime, the technological sublime does not deal with nature but science, information, and technological apparatuses. John Goldthwait notes that for Kant the "sublime makes man conscious of his destination, that is, his moral worth. For the feeling of the sublime is really the feeling of our own inner powers which can outreach the external objects that overwhelm our senses" (Nye 8). In the technological sublime we examine our inner weaknesses in relation to external objects that we create.

Information and technology can be thought of in relation to the sublime because their acceleration and progression seem immeasurable and beyond the scope of ordinary reasoning. Science is constantly discovering new limits of the universe; the Internet (which is vast and somewhat un-locatable) plays a larger role in everything we use. Specialists are needed to repair even our most common machines, e.g. cars and computers, and the latter are often obsolete within three years. Technology and science have infiltrated almost every aspect of our lives and as Graham Harman notes, they now also stretch our faith and belief in the unknown.

What science really does is multiply our gullibility beyond all known levels. Think about the stuff that's on the web that you can find out about. Think of all the things we believe in now. All these strange undersea creatures that we will never see, all the microbes we have discovered, all the vast number of celestial bodies that have been discovered by the Hubble telescope and by radio telescope. It seems to me that we are now more gullible than any humans in the history of human society. We believe in more things than

* Peter Miller and various philosophers originally used the Technological Sublime. I use the term based upon loosely on pre existing ideas, however, most of the ideas surrounding the technological sublime are my own.

primitive religions did Gods and spirits. We may think we have more scientific evidence for it but the root fact remains that we believe in a lot more. (Harman 9:20 – 9:50)

Much like Kant's notion of the mathematical sublime, there is a distinct feeling of insignificance in the face of such overwhelming amounts of information. It is as vast as a mountain range. Furthermore, like the dynamic sublime there is a sense of fear that is coupled with a relative sense of safety. Although we are currently not in present danger, an atomic bomb now has the potential to destroy a city and hackers can use systems of information against us. Moreover, like Kant's sublime, the technological sublime creates a feeling of insignificance that is coupled with a sense of human achievement. However, the technological sublime is a measure of ourselves not against nature, but against technological and scientific innovation. We hold humanity's intellectual abilities against humanity's own abilities of empathy, our desires for power, and capacities for greed. In the technological sublime our inner powers are always held in contrast to our weaknesses.

Lastly, the technological sublime can be a space of contemplation as opposed to an event or place. Much of our interaction with technology is unseen, routine, and as Heidegger puts it "ready to hand." What this means is that we are using them as tools or extensions of our body to complete a task without theorizing them or contemplating their function. However, simply contemplating technology does not equate an experience with something that looks like Kant's sublime. For example, if a person is to stop using the technology as a tool and think about its inner workings, history, or uses, they are simply contemplating the technology as an object. An encounter with the technological sublime involves contemplation with the structure and network of the apparatuses in which they exist.

It is important to make a distinction here: technologies such as cameras, computers, phones are all referred to as apparatuses. However, an apparatus, in the Foucaultian sense refers to networks and systems of power relations. Giorgio Agamben notes that for Foucault an apparatus is “not simply this or that police measure, this or that technology of power, not even the generality obtained by their abstraction. Instead, as he claims in the interview from 1977, an apparatus is the network [le réseau] that can be established in between those elements. (Agamben 7)”

An encounter with the technological sublime is an encounter with the network of systems that appears infinite or overwhelming. In other words, it seems beyond rational comprehension, and moves past a contemplation with the technology as an object or system of objects. For example, a person is thinking about a series of networked computers and realizes that a building full of ten thousand computers are all networked on the same server. That person might be amazed at the technological fortitude of human beings to invent such a process. They might contemplate the history of filing systems and organization that has brought this network into existence. But if this person simply stops with a general sense of amazement they have not reached a place that resembles the Kantian sublime.

But if this same person was to continue this line of thinking they might realize that their building is networked through a particular networking system and then recall a news article about the ease in which these systems are hacked. And if the person then remembers that the department of water and power is also networked through this same system, they might come to understand that if the department of water and power is hacked, an entire city could potentially be turned off.

This is the moment of contemplation where a sense of overwhelming danger and personal insignificance factor into the equation. In the technological sublime we are thinking of potentialities that are not manifest in any particular object; it is the mind contemplating the networks in which these objects exist. Some of these objects, like the atomic bomb, do not require such an elaborate contemplation to feel their weight. A nuclear weapon is inherently an object of contemplation and will never be “ready to hand” because it’s very purpose represents a moral incertitude and the death and destruction of human life. Moreover, it represents a network of systems or an apparatus in which they exist. The use of a nuclear weapon is inherently linked to the network of state apparatuses and systems of power that would retaliate against each other. Furthermore, to contemplate an atomic bomb is to be fearful of their purpose. The thought process inherently turns inward and a person examines their own mortality and position within the state apparatus.

When I arrived at the White Sands Missile Range I attempted to take a photograph of the entrance gates. Immediately I was instructed to delete the image from my phone and was informed that there were no photos except of the museum and the mountain range. As a non-US citizen, I was not going to put up much of a fuss on a military base and I kept my images focused on the museum and the panoramic view of the mountains. As I stood taking photos of mountains and bombs I realized this instruction could be put in another way. I was allowed to take photographs of two different systems and two different experiences.

I may have been on an active military base but the overwhelming sense of quiet and infinitude of the desert was still apparent. It was late fall so the sun was comfortable in the higher altitude and I was content to be outdoors for long periods. I've always felt that the desert was much more solitary and dangerous than my home in the Pacific Northwest. In Western Canada, the dense forests are groomed with trails and points of entry and departure. You cannot simply drive into a wall of trees or walk into brush unless you are experienced and have the proper tools. The desert, on the other hand, is endless. You can easily walk for half an hour and lose your sense of direction or any other human being. My feeling of being in the desert at the base of the mountain range was akin to the traditional Kantian idea of the mathematical sublime. But I was also standing on a military base and I was looking at bombs, at the place where the first atomic bomb was detonated. This experience was squarely within the realm of the technological sublime. I stood in the desert landscape (a place that predates humans) while simultaneously in a museum (a place that archives and displays our written and imaged history) looking at technology, which causes us to contemplate human potential and futurity). At the risk of sounding overwrought, my experience in the desert folded together the history and potential end of humankind.

This was not a place where I experienced grandeur, potential, or a sense of awe. I felt insignificant, small, and trapped within a state apparatus that I had no control. In this place, I understood technological and state power systems as abstractions and engaged with a moment of self-reflection realizing my own position within these systems. I have not experienced the atrocities of war but as I stood with my camera phone attempting to document, read, and intellectualize the military base I realized that these tools were inadequate systems of measurement and representation to convey what I was currently feeling. I was able to move beyond a state of simply intellectualizing trauma. I shifted back and forth from a personal experience for which I had no name and immediately attempting to intellectualize it. I wondered what an artwork might look like that held both these states in account: The personal emotive experience and my own inability to represent, measure, or quantify such an experience.

THE MATERIEL TEST

THROUGH FIELD LABORATORY AND

FOREIGN SPACE

THROUGHOUT HISTORY

AMONG THESE ARE AIR

SYSTEMS

AND

VARIANTS

SYSTEMS

UNMANNED

COMPLEX

SYSTEMS

AT EACH STEP

FINALLY

A CORE

IS FORMED

We expect Conceptual art (especially its linguistic variety) to tell us something....absence of explanation produces a strong paradox

Jörg Heiser on romantic Conceptualism

To think or write about experience implies a distance from it. Emotions are not rational and therefore would cloud our judgments of the situation. Paradoxically, it is precisely this irrationality that implies a lived experience. The closer one is to the state of emotion the more they can speak to it. The WSMR is a site of deep emotional resonance. This is the site where nuclear weapons were first tested during World War II that led to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. WSMR is also a very large and active military base that contributes to the enormity of the US military industrial complex. Even as I write this the tensions of war and fear have become more divisive with a new president who brings constant volatility. To approach these subjects as a place for art making is difficult simply because the viewer has a heightened awareness of the subject matter. The viewer brings a lot to the table when the subject is so divisive.

Upon entering the gallery one encounters a dry conceptual approach that implies an analytical methodology, a didactic point, and a conclusion. However, this exhibition almost arrogantly avoids specifics. There is an aesthetic of science but clearly no scientific method. The artworks and titles give no indication of their reference to the military site. Yet, the show is titled WSMR and the press release provides specific information and a first-person narrative about the site. The artworks seem to be at odds with the show's subject. There is no indication of substantial research of the site and there isn't any reference to the aforementioned emotional resonance of its subject. Nothing in the exhibition stands as a memorial or political statement. So, if the artworks

do not directly address the WSMR then why use it as a subject at all? Why use such an emotionally divisive subject to seemingly complicate the artwork?

This exhibition recognizes my own inability to rationalize, empathize, or experience trauma outside of the place of lived experience. I choose WSMR because *it is* emotionally divisive and complicated. It is larger than my solipsistic experience and it is a place that I feel small and insignificant. However, as I move from individual experience to an analytical experience, my methods of rationality seem inapplicable here. Even so, WSMR is the subject that I am looking at and the artworks examine the tools through which I view this subject and try to understand it. To put it plainly, I can look at the military site in person and read about its history. I can take photographs of the subject to provide context for the site but these ultimately fail me. They are inaccurate systems of measurement for my experience within the site and moreover do little to help convey this experience to others. The works in WSMR imply a state of “not knowing.” They use systems of language, viewing, and imaging but fail to provide a logical conclusion to their utilitarian purpose. When these tools fail to tell us something, I use romanticism, poetry, and lyricism to take the place of explanation as a means to reference the incomprehensible qualities of an apparatus so large.

Jason Gowans
WSMR

*Image of Organ Mountains, New Mexico / Stock 3D Model Crater Terrain, file name
SUPER TERRAIN_mb*
Inkjet print
90" x 139"

*Image of Organ Mountains, New Mexico / Stock 3D Model Snowy Terrain, file name
SUPER TERRAIN_mb*
Inkjet print
75" x 112"

The Materiel Test
LED signage
36.25" x 100"

The Argument (The Moment That Two Methods of Observation Meet)
Steel, aluminum, surveyor's tripods, flashlights, 35mm cameras
dimensions deployable

The most immediate works in the exhibition combine photographs of the Organ Mountain range behind WSMR and stock 3D models purchased from the Internet. *Image of Organ Mountains* are highly detailed and created partly from photographs of a specific geographical location. This photograph is brought into a 3D modeling program and combined with a grid structure of a landscape. These files, much like stock photography, are created for multiple uses. They purposefully avoid specific geographical location because they need to serve designers in video games, animation, still imagery, or any situation requiring a landscape. When the grid structure of the 3d model meets the photograph they fold into each other. They twist, warp, and leave apparent glitches that are immediately noticeable. However, in theory, they are both landscapes, so when the two meet they also seem strangely at home together. The form and structure of the images provide a space that is believable and yet fictional.

The unseen grid of the 3D model implies a structure and a system by literally shaping and forming the photograph that lies on top of it. However, it is this very system that also implies a virtual reality. The grid structure fictionalizes the original photograph leaving it devoid of objective representation of the Organ Mountain. As an image, the photograph seems to tell us nothing of the site. As I mentioned, when the photograph and model meet they make visual sense because they are both structurally landscapes, however, the moment the two touch a new space and structure are created. *Image of Organ Mountains* points to the systems of perception that dictate the ways in which we view and represent the world. In other words, it amplifies what we bring to the table as individuals when we view and represent a subject.

Lastly, the black and white images stretch, expand, and imply movement. Structurally they recall the most famous event at WSMR—the first test of the atomic bomb. These original images of the Trinity test elicit a complex response because they are both beautiful and terrifying. Terrifying because they represent a destruction and technology that, in the most devastating way, is larger than mankind. However, the tests also look simultaneously small, like unseen molecules under a microscope. In the black and white images, they showcase a formalism that is lacking in the red fire of color photographs. These photographs represent an unseen force that literally changed perception. The Trinity test and molecular photographs provide scientific evidence of structures that are imperceptible to most people but became important events through which we navigate the world.

Occupying the space between the two inkjet prints sit four black surveyor's tripods, each with a fabricated apparatus that cradles a flashlight directly in the center of a 35mm camera with an open back. Attached to the camera is a cable release that allows the shutter to remain open as the flashlight shines through. *The Argument (The Moment That Two Methods of Observation Meet)* is a strangely anthropomorphic encounter between two tools of examination. When the camera and the flashlight meet in the center of the surveyor's tripod each reveals their own inner workings. The flashlight illuminates the dark box and aperture of the camera while the lens of the camera focuses the light and projects an image of the flashlight's LED on the wall.

The camera and flashlight are tools of examination in that one illuminates its subject and the other records it. When these tools meet in *The Argument* they engulf and inspect each other. They reveal each other's methods and vulnerabilities. The two become a sort of Mobius strip circling in and out of each other. In the case of *The Argument* the process of examination changes the object of examination as well as the examiner. Similarly, when attempting to observe and document WSMR, there is a moment of self-examination. I am conscious of my own position as a viewer. I feel insignificant before such enormous power structures yet I am entirely aware of my own privilege. I have never experienced war, great trauma, or oppression. On the site of WSMR, I am looking at myself as much as my subject.

Finally, on the largest wall in the gallery, small LED lights are mounted in a sporadic grid. These lights came from a desire to reference the aesthetics of early screens and computer systems that became commonplace during the Cold War. However, the LEDs, when situated in a gallery space, read more like pocket-sized Jenny Holzer works. Holzer's conceptualist approach has

often provided a clear message that speaks to systems of power. In the case of *The Materiel Test*, no clear message is given.

The Materiel Test is comprised of redacted text from a WSMR field guide. The order and basic structure of the text were retained but enough words are missing to make the sentences devoid of clear meaning. Despite the limitations of this new formation, the sentences still imply a sense of authority and research. This sense is conveyed through and beyond the means of language. An aesthetic of science is also contributing to its authoritative tone. The reference to laboratories, history, space, systems, and variants create a scientific feel. Structurally and systematically the text sets the viewer up for an explanation or didactic take away. But in the end, “a core is formed” and a conclusion is implied, but nothing is given.

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