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Author

Keever, Justin

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The Televised Apocalypse

Justin Kever

On the evening of April 4, 1962, between 10:30 and 11:00 p.m., “The End of the World” was broadcast on NBC. Not the real end of the world, of course—we are all still here, for the time being—but a kind of parodic representation of postwar apocalyptic imaginaries that took the form of several machines, made of junk and consumer objects collected in and around Las Vegas, annihilating themselves. All the while, David Brinkley narrated the spectacle, his voice inflected with a dry irony to match the absurdity of the self-immolating junk sculptures. This is the scene of Jean Tinguely’s *Study for an End of the World No. 2*, a kinetic artwork whose auto-destruction at Jean Dry Lake in the Mojave Desert was recorded by cameramen on March 21, 1962, and broadcast as an episode of the NBC program *David Brinkley’s Journal*, titled “The End of the World,” two weeks later. The entire program did not simply consist of the destruction of the artwork, however: the episode followed the creation and destruction of the piece, documenting the work of Tinguely and his partner, the artist Niki de Saint-Phalle, as they gathered discarded objects from dumping sites around Las Vegas and purchased objects from shops in the city itself. These objects would be used to construct self-destructive machines, which were transported to the desert to meet their explosive end in front of a camera-wielding audience. The assemblage of junk consisted of a water tank from which a stick would protrude and retract in an overtly sexual fashion, a spinning sign made to look like the horn of plenty, an air conditioner attached by wire to a wagon loaded with dynamite, a refrigerator loaded with feathers, a toilet seat, an armchair, and more. All of these bits of junk were assembled into small individual towers, which, when filmed at a distance and from the perspective from

which they were filmed for the television episode, heavily resemble the appearance of radio towers aside a radio telescope (Fig. 1). NBC commissioned Tinguely to produce one of his “suicide machines” for television—the artist had produced and destroyed two other such devices prior to *Study No. 2*.¹ *Study No. 2* is not an artwork on television; rather, it is an artwork produced *for* television. Broadcast television, specifically, is an irreducible component of the artwork’s totality, for it is a format embedded in the material form of the transient machine. We could say that *Study No. 2* is site-specific, as long as *David Brinkley’s Journal* is as much a part of that site as Jean Dry Lake in the Mojave Desert. Perhaps it would be even more accurate to suggest that NBC and Brinkley are as much authors of *Study for an End of the World No. 2* as Tinguely. The goal of the present essay is to treat *Study No. 2* as a broadcast, to understand what the transient textuality of television is doing in this work’s critique of nuclear spectacle. As such, my aim is to approach *Study No. 2* as a work of combined authorship at multiple sites. The goal here is not to add Brinkley to Tinguely, but to understand *Study for an End of the World No. 2* as both artwork and television episode, simultaneously. As such, the work is site-specific in the sense that it was specific to both Jean Dry Lake and to NBC Network, from 10:30 to 11 p.m. on April 4, 1962.

Pamela Lee has written about *Study for an End of the World No. 2* as an allegory for the broadcast network, and Emily Eliza Scott has responded to that reading by emphasizing the sculpture’s site-specificity. The aim of this essay is to hold both of these arguments together and to understand how the properties of the television medium—properties that Lee’s analysis actually elides—do not detract from the work’s meditation on the effects of nuclear testing on the American Southwest but actually *enhance it*. It is through the transient textuality of television, a kind of textuality characterized by a lack of closure, that the lingering effects of nuclear radiation are expressed. Together, Tinguely and Brinkley stage a drama of kinesis and residue, seizing on television’s transience as a way to represent the invisibility of the lingering effects of nuclear detonation: that the only sort of text which can accurately represent the persistence of nuclear destruction is a text which lacks closure.

This essay turns first to an art-historical understanding of television, in Lee’s analysis of *Study No. 2*. Her analysis is wholly based on the work’s context as a televised event, but it does so with no small amount of disdain for the program on which the work is featured and for the medium of television itself. Her skepticism of television is not unjustified or unique within the discipline of art history.² Lee’s disdain informs the tone and content of her analysis, following Martin Heidegger’s fears concerning the way in which television facilitates the “abolition of every possibility of remoteness.”³ This preoccupation sets immediate limits on

what Tinguely's *Study No. 2* can mean: television's apparent capacity to annihilate distances in space and time is the totalizing paradigm for Lee's reading of Tinguely's televised apocalypse. Lee's analysis locates the apocalyptic in what she puts forward as the essential qualities of the television medium, and does so by way of the transience of Tinguely's suicide machine. Transience and the apocalyptic anxieties undergirding the medium of television are superficially where this essay's analysis will land, but *how* we get there will leave us with a very different understanding of the terms *transient* and *apocalyptic*, as well as their interrelation. The task of this essay is to locate the meaning that emerges if television is treated as a conversational partner in a dialogic creation of meaning, rather than a malevolent network that absorbs its content and orients it toward a single dominant operation of collapsing the world into a single instantaneous system, that is to say, to think of television as a potential "site" for a site-specific artwork. The aim here is to think of what emerges through the synthesis of television studies and art history, the synthesis of Tinguely and Brinkley.

To borrow an Althusserian line of thought, behind the word *transience* lies multiple possible concepts, and while Lee is interested in "speed," this essay lands on "impermanence." To explain the significance of that subtle shift, we must begin with a brief summary of Lee's argument. Lee begins by situating Tinguely within the broader movement of postwar kinetic art. Kinetic art, or kineticism, was an artistic practice that coalesced in the midfifties and ended in the latter half of the 1960s and can be broadly summarized as abstract, nonrepresentational art that was either literally or virtually in motion: it was technological art that encouraged a sense of play and humor, and in doing so "seemed to crystallize the phenomenal experience of viewing art as material and embodied."⁴ As noted by Lynn Spigel, this participatory ethos in art developed contemporaneously with broadcast television, which itself put forth an aesthetic of kinetic liveness and participatory address.⁵

Kineticism was ultimately a rather brief and loosely organized movement, and the briefness of this movement of movement, this sense of kineticism being resolutely "of its time," leads Lee to argue, via the work of the social critic Alvin Toffler, that transience was kinetic art's fundamental quality.⁶ In 1970 Toffler argues that information in the latter half of the twentieth century is a "kinetic image" moving with blinding speed in and out of consciousness . . . the transience of late twentieth century life as presented by ephemeral images of instant food, instant communication, and instant cities," which all underscore "the speed with which cultural information was reproduced, distributed, internalized, and rendered obsolete."⁷ Toffler argues that the kinetic artwork allegorizes this condition of speed

and ephemerality by creating maximum variability, and thus maximum transience, in its form.⁸

Building on this assessment of kineticism in general, Lee then walks her readers through Tinguely's case: one of her first focuses is Tinguely's 1959 work/performance *Manifesto for Statics*, in which the artist hired a small airplane to fly him over Düsseldorf. From the plane, Tinguely dropped 150,000 leaflets on which the manifesto was printed:

For Statics: Everything moves continuously. Immobility does not exist. Don't be subject to the influence of out-of-date concepts of time. Forget hours, seconds and minutes. Accept instability. LIVE IN TIME. BE STATIC—WITH MOVEMENT. For a static of the present moment. Resist the anxious fear to fix the instantaneous, to kill that which is living. Stop insisting on "values" which cannot but break down. Stop evoking movement and gesture. You are movement and gesture. Stop building cathedrals and pyramids which are doomed to fall into ruin. Live in the present; live once more in Time and by Time—for a wonderful and absolute reality. March 1959⁹

Lee reads these words as being "a reformulation of the classic Heraclitean dictum that the only thing that remains constant is change," then notes that air currents blew the leaflets away from their targeted city and out toward the countryside.¹⁰ Lee reads this work/performance in terms of the kinetic image, arguing that the mass dissemination of pamphlets that Tinguely attempts evokes the phenomenon of information processing, and marks a turn in Tinguely's oeuvre that Lee frames as being entirely about automation.¹¹

Automation, in Lee's story, is a synthesis of mechanical process, particularly machine manufacture, with computer-based processes. According to Lee, automation accelerates production beyond human capability, collapsing the time of labor into something so quick it resembles instantaneity.¹² Lee cites Marshall McLuhan on the effects of this collapsing of labor under automation: the collapse of labor time under automation is followed by a collapse in culture and technology, art and commerce, work and leisure.¹³ Lee locates this total cultural collapse in the television medium, analyzing the framing of Tinguely's suicide machine in *Study for the End of the World No. 2* against the backdrop of the vast wasteland of the desert as "the world reduced to the flatness of the television image itself" (Fig. 2), a visual embodiment of Samuel Weber's analysis of television as literally "distance seeing": that TV "is not an actual overcoming of distance and time but the illusion of

making that collapse immediate and available to a general audience.”¹⁴ For Lee, this quality of television is what gives the medium its apocalyptic valence: “In Tinguely’s study, the at once implosive and explosive force of the bomb was allegorized by the radical compression of time and space that is television.”¹⁵

Lee reads *Study No. 2* in straightforwardly oppositional terms, as an apocalyptic unveiling of the world-truth of a global network that disseminates information at such a speed as to facilitate the collapse of the space of the globe (as well as apocalyptic global collapse). In Lee’s story, Tinguely’s televisual artifact is determined by the medium of broadcast television while also taking that medium as its object of critique. *Study No. 2* is not televised art per se; it is art about television (and the globalized, automated societal condition that television represents). Two kinds of meaningful specificity are lost in this reading. The first is the erasure of the site of the sculpture itself. This erasure has been accounted for in the literature: Emily Eliza Scott examines the work in an attempt to relocate the site of Jean Dry Lake in an article that I discuss later. The second is, ironically, the televisual text.

Lee’s analysis implicitly relies on a phenomenology of television experience that is not unlike that of Herbert Zettl’s, a vision of television that “lives off the instantaneousness and uncertainty of the moment.”¹⁶ Zettl’s phenomenology posits that the use of a scanning beam rather than a projector to create the television image means that the television image is always in motion (even when it appears static), and as such the television image is “event dependent,” “a reflection of the living, constantly changing present.”¹⁷ While Lee’s televisual analysis is not based in the materiality of the television image itself as Zettl’s is, and is therefore a more measured and far less ideologically infected analysis, they share a focus on instantaneity as being the fundamental quality of the television medium. Lee treats televisual images as “flashes,” as bursts of light lacking content: the “quick cuts” of the episode create a “popping and flashing of images,” the information society is marked by “televisions flashing the news of the world in real time.”¹⁸ The visuality of television is buried in the rhetoric of the flash, the medium reduced to an assaulting form sans content: TV is, for Lee, pure spatiotemporal collapse, pure speed.

The quality of transience that Lee associates with kineticism and postwar information society is buried in this dynamic of speed. Lee builds off Toffler’s notion of transience, which is essentially synonymous with instantaneity. Transient information “moves with blinding speed in and out of consciousness.”¹⁹ I do not mean to contest the speed of information society: things have only accelerated since Toffler’s writing. My goal, rather, is to shift our view of the word *transience*, to reveal a different aspect of that term that is not reducible to instantaneous speed. We can take transience to mean “impermanence,” a subtle shift that nonetheless

effectively captures a quality of the television medium as it once was: a medium characterized by a mode of exhibition in which texts march forward with time, where discrete texts exist but are lost in the steady progression of the schedule, where preservation *as a text* is never a given. This is the condition of the television medium prior to home media, prior to comprehensive internet archivization. This condition of spectatorship is conversant with the auto-destructive capabilities of Tinguely's *Study No. 2*: this is the exhibition experience of the broadcast schedule, which does not compress time but structures it; it makes a particular sort of normative clock time *felt*. I argue that Tinguely's *Study No. 2* and *David Brinkley's Journal* seize on the forward motion and implied transience of the television broadcast to allegorize not the radical spatiotemporal compression of the bomb but the ways in which the nuclear bomb's effects *linger*.

Act I: Laboring in the “Wasteland”

With these stakes in mind we can finally turn to the episode itself. The first act of the episode of *David Brinkley's Journal* follows Tinguely and de Saint-Phalle as they scavenge junkyards and Las Vegas stores for the materials for the suicide machine (Figs. 3–5). Scott reads *Study No. 2* as being engaged with the specificity of the Nevada desert: she argues that the program establishes its relationship to the land in its opening moments. Scott notes that these two settings establish the work's structuring geographic dialectic, wherein “the desert is depicted as a wasteland of American consumerism both in terms of being a literal dumping ground for out-cast objects and in terms of Las Vegas's shimmering vacuousness as an engine and end product of capitalism.”²⁰ This dialectic is emphasized by Brinkley's narration, in which he notes that the “gaudy newness” of the Las Vegas cityscape inspired Tinguely to enter a toy store and purchase new toys as material for his sculpture.²¹ The consumer goods to be found in Vegas are already refuse. This wasteland of American consumerism of course also acts as the literalization of Newton Minow's characterization of television as a “vast wasteland” of cultural detritus: the staging ground of Tinguely's *Study No. 2* is a wasteland in a yet another dual sense, both geographic and televisual, material and imagined.²² The wasteland of American consumerism is built into the “ground” of the land itself and the “ground” of the television form that supports the content of the episode itself.

Moreover, in the opening minutes of the first act we witness a representation of human labor and curation that directly contradicts Lee's thesis about the centrality of automation and acceleration. The opening scenes of Tinguely scouring a junkyard for his sculpture's material do not occur merely, as Lee says, in “the

first frames of the broadcast”; rather, we spend roughly three minutes of the twenty-two-minute episode watching Tinguely pick pieces of trash from the refuse scattered through desert, walking the chosen refuse back to the truck where de Saint-Phalle waits patiently, observing Tinguely with a barely discernible grin. The pace is deliberate, the camera tracking Tinguely’s movement of the material from junkyard to the truck in a manner that emphasizes the physical and mental effort of Tinguely’s curation: he and the truck are framed in long shots that emphasize the enormity of the space in which the artists work, and the camera’s movements are utilitarian, tracing the movement of metal and porcelain objects from the desert to the truck.

The desert looms large in the background in these initial scenes, reminding us that, of course, *Study for an End of the World No. 2* did not simply take place on television: the broadcast was a recording of an event that demands reflection on its conjoining to and separation from its broadcast, an event that took place two weeks prior in the Nevada desert, in Jean Dry Lake. Scott notes that in 1962, the landscape of the Nevada desert was a politically charged geography; that the dry lakebed which served as the location for *Study No. 2* was a double for Yucca flat, “a nearly-identical looking playa on the NTS [Nevada Test Site] some ninety miles north that had served as ground zero for dozens of atomic tests, many of which were relayed to the public via the mass media . . . throughout the 1950s.”²³ Tinguely’s *Study No. 2* does not simply call on the image of the nuclear bomb to meditate on the speed of information processing on the global tensions that emerge as a result. It is, rather, a meditation on the nuclear-political discourse that surrounds the specific site of the Nevada Desert, as well as the mass media’s relationship to that site within that nuclear discourse. Scott points to the way in which Tinguely’s choice of Las Vegas trash that would constitute his self-destructive sculpture—particularly his scavenging of a ruined doll, a choice that is emphasized just before the show travels to Las Vegas proper—allows his sculpture to evoke the “doom towns,” simulacral towns populated by mannequins, that were obliterated during the highly publicized atomic bomb tests of the 1950s.²⁴

Act II: The Dry Lake, the AEC’s Representational Strategies, and the Violent Production of Laboratory Space

The second act of the episode begins with the initial construction of the various components of the sculpture in the parking lot of the Flamingo Hotel, the absolute secrecy of which leads Scott to liken Brinkley’s coverage in this sequence to the “profiling of an artistic Manhattan Project.” This second act begins with a negative

repetition of the labor that opens the episode, with a sequence where Tinguely empties the truck alone, throwing the collected trash into the parking lot. The heavy metallic thud with which most of the materials land in the asphalt emphasizes the manual physicality of Tinguely and de Saint-Phalles's work. This emphasis on manual labor is further emphasized by a brief scene of Tinguely and other laborers unloading a massive water tank covered in a blue tarp, and a sequence in which Tinguely builds a motorized pulley. The latter sequence is especially noteworthy because here, the episode contrasts the automaticity of Tinguely's suicide machine with the manual labor required to achieve that automaticity. This is not to say that there is a coherent subtopic of labor being addressed by Tinguely and Brinkley; however, the attention to the human labor of production undercuts Lee's story of spatiotemporal compression and automation: there is a human slowness to the episode, which is emphasized by Brinkley's narration that Tinguely works from 6 a.m. to midnight over the course of four days.²⁵

Eventually, the walls concealing the construction project come down, and the episode shifts focus to the reactions of bystanders who have come to observe. In this portion of the program, an onlooker relays what we may take to be Tinguely's ethos: "Everything in motion eventually will destroy itself."²⁶ In this statement we can hear echoes of Tinguely's *Manifesto for Plastics* that links the manifesto explicitly to the notion of transience: the artist's earlier imperative that people take on the quality of movement and gesture is given a teleology: all that moves will destroy itself. Transience here is presented as a condition of life—to an extent, all that exists are suicide machines, marching toward death or dissolution under the weight of time. The second act concludes with the initial construction of the device and the transferral of the sculpture to the Jean Dry Lake. Here is another moment wherein the land is defiantly reinserted into televised spectacle. Brinkley narrates the journey, describing how "finally the whole vast, clanking, rattling work of art was loaded into a flotilla of trucks and hauled out into the desert, close to yucca flats where the atomic energy commission is testing nuclear bombs underground" (Fig. 6).²⁷ Brinkley's narration performs several functions here. Most noticeably, he draws attention to the significance of the site of destruction in a way that makes its role in the nuclear-industrial context clear, despite the invisibility of underground tests. Brinkley's narration thus contextualizes Tinguely's sculpture as an act of making visible the ongoing nuclear experimentation occurring at the site, experimentation that persists beyond the spectacle of publicized testing. Moreover, the program makes evident the tremendous importance of the specific site to the work through the spectacle of labor undergone in moving the machine from the city to the desert. The movement of the convoy is a major event in the program, an image of collective effort on the part of the artist and television crew to transfer

the artwork to its intended site. This effort is emphasized as being beyond the artist: Brinkley narrates, listing the full cargo of the convoy: “loaded trucks, the sculptor, his assistant, a generator to make electricity to run the motors and set off the explosions, an electrician, 7 maintenance men from the motel, and the sheriff.”²⁸ Spectacle for Tinguely and Brinkley becomes a way to narrativize the return to the site, of deploying the television program’s form to emphasize the significance of the site that nuclear tests did their best to expunge.

The specificity of the Nevada desert is in turn an evocation of *publicized* nuclear testing, that is, the above-ground nuclear tests that took place in the NTS, which were made open to the press by the US Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). As argued by the political geographer Scott Kirsch, the representation of these tests by the mass media was part of the AEC’s public relations campaign, whose goal was to normalize the atom bomb in the minds of the continental American public, to insert its spectacularity into the everyday and make nuclear weapons routine.²⁹ The role of the mass media in this PR campaign was to circulate images of nuclear explosions to perform the dual action of aestheticizing their power and in doing so disconnect the nuclear tests from the geography on which they take place. We can situate these photographs within the AEC’s larger strategy of isolating testing sites, a strategy that Elizabeth DeLoughrey critiques in an article on the ways in which the AEC suppressed knowledge of the extensive damage done to the natural ecosystem and indigenous population of the Marshall Islands during the United States’ Pacific nuclear tests. The AEC conceptualized Pacific Islands as closed ecological systems that could be made to function as isolated laboratories; such conceptualization hinged on the erasure of the islands’ indigenous population and local ecosystem, an erasure achieved via curated aerial surveillance films that were produced after the islanders had already been displaced.³⁰ The conceptualization of these islands as isolated, distant ecosystems provided an ideological justification for using the islands as a laboratory space and for the horrific violence that ensued under Pacific nuclear testing: the erasure of the islands’ indigenous population concealed the intent of the AEC to use the indigenous populations as test subjects, intentionally exposing the Rongelapese population to radiation without their knowledge. The effects of this exposure were, of course, disastrous, leading to intense radiation burns and severe birth defects, as well as accumulation of lethal levels of radioactive isotopes in local food sources.³¹

The AEC’s strategies of normalizing the bomb which Kirsch identifies involve capturing the bomb in fixed, isolated images which elide the persistent effects of nuclear radiation. These photographic reproductions of nuclear tests as static images of explosions create what Kirsch calls “the imagined bomb: perpetually frozen as an object to be observed, investigated, and (thus) experienced.”³²

The effect of freezing the bomb in an image is, for Kirsch, the elision of the atom bomb's afterlife. A "timeless, two-dimensional snapshot" fails to acknowledge the lasting impacts of radioactive agents that spread through and linger in environments and bodies long after the bomb has gone off. The freezing of the bomb in a photograph is a strategy of erasure, which elides the bomb's lingering effects on the geography. Kirsch argues that the integration of photography with telegraphy and the mass media heighten the objectification of the world (which had already occurred in the enframing action of photography), widening the gulf between the viewer and the "real world" by geographically separating the photographed spectacle from its local context.³³ The contradiction of distance and visual availability that Kirsch identifies in the AEC's photographs is mirrored in the aforementioned aerial surveillance footage of the Marshall Islands, which DeLoughrey argues produces a paradoxical area that is both "distant and primitive" but also touched by modernity in a way that makes the islands conceivable as testing sites.

Moreover, when Kirsch notes that the practice of Western landscape is tied up in imperial and scientific processes of organizing the world by enframing, he is identifying another way in which the AEC perpetuates the "myth of isolates," which DeLoughrey is critiquing.³⁴ By reading the AEC's photographs of nuclear detonation through the analytic lens of "enframing" (i.e., "the overlapping imperial and scientific processes of organizing the world into objects which could be observed, represented, and objectively known"³⁵), Kirsch reveals how the AEC's attempt to normalize the nuclear bomb is being attempted via a move to isolate the moment of the bomb's detonation as a single event with a definite end. Kirsch writes that in the medium of photography, "the observer/producer was so detached from the object-world as to be seemingly erased from its landscape," and as such photographic representations bore a false, ideological neutrality.³⁶ This detachment of the producer of the photographic image from the photograph produced exacerbates the aforementioned reification of the event of the nuclear bomb's detonation. The literal enframing of the mushroom cloud by the objective lens of the camera ascribes a unity to the event of the bomb's detonation that belies the persistence of radiation at the site of the detonation and in the bodies of those present for the detonation. The goal of the AEC's photography is to erase the avial from nuclear detonation, to deny the presence of the invisible waves that penetrate the spectator of the detonation: to deny that the nuclear detonation makes spectators into victims.

Scott's writing on Tinguely's sculpture performs some reparative work on this front, emphasizing the site-specificity of the sculpture as a way to address how the use of the Nevada desert for nuclear testing is based in the American frontier myth of colonizing its western landscape.³⁷ The rationalization of land in

the case of nuclear weapons is almost parodic: in nuclear testing, the land itself is bombed into submission, the heat and radiation of the repeated explosions causing the horizontal expanses of the Nevada desert “to look more and more like a laboratory—clinical, bleached, and synthetic. The obliteration of any life forms in the vicinity of ground zero ironically lent an air of hygiene.”³⁸ The atom bomb transforms the natural ecosystem of the desert into a sanitized, scientific space.³⁹ Trevor Paglan would call the production of scientific landscape the production and reproduction of oblivion, that the state was producing a “nowhere.”⁴⁰ Here, again, we see the strategies that DeLoughrey takes note of in the Marshall Islands: the production of a laboratory space in nature, with Paglan’s nowhere resembling the craters, the “anti-islands” that the AEC produced in the Pacific.⁴¹ This production of a scientific landscape—the open-air laboratory of nuclear testing—can in retrospect be understood as a construction of a “zone” or geography of sacrifice: what Valerie Kuletz describes as landscape that has been deemed expendable and set aside for “weapons testing and development, uranium mining, and military training” as part of a pattern dubbed “nuclear colonialism.”⁴² The designation of zones of sacrifice for nuclear testing are part of the ongoing and active processes of “expropriation of native lands and the displacement of North America’s indigenous population” that characterize the United States’ longer history of internal colonialism.⁴³ In nuclear testing we can see the way in which the technology itself is involved in the ideological project of erasure—erasure of both the indigenous population and the desert ecosystem. The nuclear bomb produces its own laboratory in the space that has been predesignated as its laboratory: the loss of life (or loss of capacity to sustain life) that the bomb causes is named in advance of the bomb’s detonation as a condition of the landscape in which the bomb will be tested. As Kuletz notes, this designation of zones of sacrifice occurs via the reinstatement of settler discourse within environmental science discourse, as bioregions are placed within hierarchies of value based on their productive capacity: deserts are designated relatively unproductive, within this schema, a designation that then permits their sacrificial status.⁴⁴ The nuclear bomb, in its testing, creates the laboratory that has been erected rhetorically to justify the testing of said bomb. The nuclear bomb serves a tautological, ideological function that is an extension of the mechanics of settler colonialism: the creation of a wasteland that colonists claim has always been there.

In all these descriptions of the AEC’s treatment of the land for nuclear testing, we can hear echoes of televisual discourse: the separation of the event from its geographic specificity. What Kirsch refers to as the transformation of “a place to a spectacle or exhibition” occurs through the very global collapse permitted by the speed of the kinetic image that concerns Pamela Lee.⁴⁵ Lee’s focus on the

global network of mass media leads her to conclude that Tinguely is *only* reproducing the tactics of the AEC: that by circulating images, he is erasing the site his work takes place on, re-presenting it as placeless spectacle. I argue that while Lee is correct to associate Tinguely's sculpture with the despatializing force of the nuclear bomb, in limiting her analysis of the medium of broadcast television to its ideological immediacy, she misses a critical aspect of Tinguely's (and Brinkley's) critique. Though Lee does not cite Zettl, in her focus on the speed and spatiotemporal compression of television, she implicitly takes Zettl's ontology of television-as-immediacy to be the only possible aesthetic function of the broadcast medium. Writing in 1985, the television scholar Jane Feuer critiqued Zettl's ontology as an industrial fiction rather than a material essence of the broadcast medium.⁴⁶ Feuer goes on to critique the idea of televisual "flow," a notion of television's liveness described by Raymond Williams, who argues that the immediacy of television results in the broadcast becoming a never-ending sequence where separating out individual texts is impossible.⁴⁷ Feuer amends this idea, arguing that fragmentation is central to television, that the televisual text is best described not by the immediacy of "flow" but by "segmentation without closure." The reification of the bomb in photography as described by Kirsch and the isolation of closed ecosystems as described by DeLoughrey is an ideological effect reproduced by the television broadcast, if we take television's aesthetic of ideological liveness to be the sum total of what the broadcast image is or can be. That is, if the television image of the nuclear bomb is event-based, immediate like Zettl claims, then the televised explosion is another kind of isolation, reducing the bomb's detonation to the closed-off temporality of the event. The reduction of nuclear detonation to an isolated event is an intentional rhetorical strategy to erase the avisual consequences of the atom bomb: the ways in which the United States' Nevada nuclear tests left the region's indigenous population to suffer from an increase in cancer deaths, miscarriages, radioactive contamination of plant and animal life, and the potentially disastrous aggravation of earthquake faults.⁴⁸ This is to say nothing of the spread of irradiated material through the atmosphere, which would disseminate as rainfall across the United States, causing extensive agricultural damage.⁴⁹ As DeLoughrey notes, "The body of every human on the planet now contains strontium, a man-made byproduct of nuclear detonations."⁵⁰ The extensiveness and the invisibility of the lingering traces of nuclear detonation are deliberately erased in the enframing of the AEC's public representation. What I argue is that *Study for an End of the World No. 2* / "The End of the World" does not enframe nuclear detonation. Rather, the episode and the artwork seize on the lack of closure in the broadcast television text as identified by Feuer in an attempt to conceive of a representation

of nuclear detonation that does not freeze the detonation into a single, isolated event, to overcome the AEC's representational logic.

Act III: Ambiguity at the End

To discover how the artwork and episode accomplish this, I turn to the program's third act, which contains the actual placement and destruction of the sculpture. We witness the arrival of the police, who come to oversee the explosion, and Brinkley narrates the arrival of reporters from "the biggest collection of reporters since they held the atomic bomb tests out here 15 years ago."⁵¹ The accrual of officials and reporters for the *Study*'s destruction becomes an integral part of the parodic replication of the nuclear tests. Brinkley goes on to narrate the already overt symbolism of the work's components: "The horn of plenty was to symbolize the destruction of the world's plenty, and the big overstuffed chairs symbolize comfort and ease. It was to catch fire."⁵² The "cheap symbolism" (to borrow Lee's word choice) of details such as this one melts away when the destruction of the work begins: the specificities of what is in the sculpture get lost in the form of the work overall, which, as was mentioned at the beginning of this essay, resembles that of radio broadcast equipment. And, of course, this form exists only in the context of its transience, its existence always contextualized by its eventual destruction by dynamite and fire. The destruction of the *Study* (Fig. 7) is the climax of Tinguely's critique of the AEC's "mediated atomic tests": for Scott, Tinguely seems to lay bare the spectacularization of past nuclear tests through the "double absurdity" of staging his own slapdash reproduction of a televised nuclear test.⁵³ A media spectacle packaged as neutral public information is reproduced overtly as spectacle, pointing to how prior televised tests themselves functioned as fictions, whose mass distribution removed their geographic specificity, which Tinguely and Brinkley attempt to reinsert.

Scott's analysis, however excellent, does not acknowledge the common transience shared between the *Study* and the television program on which it is broadcast, a link made overt in the broadcast's closing moments. Brinkley's narration anchors the whole story of the construction and destruction of *Study No. 2* until the very end, after Tinguely's machine is destroyed. Brinkley narrates one final time: "The artist strode happily in to admire his work, hot smoking scraps of metal in a scene of triumph, lying under an odor of gunpowder."⁵⁴ After this final line follows roughly thirty-seven more seconds of broadcast, which end with Tinguely walking away from the scene into the sunset, carrying bits of junk collected from ground zero (Fig. 8). After the staging of the end of the world, the program's

fixity of meaning, supplied by Brinkley, gives way to ambiguity, to uncertainty. This ambiguity lays bare the quality of “segmentation without closure” that constitutes Feuer’s revision of Williams’s televisual “flow,” in a manner that finds its double in Tinguely’s sculpture. The self-immolation of *Study No. 2* dramatizes a new kind of textuality that imagines art objects not as fixed and permanent but as transient things, moving toward the ether as surely as humans are marching toward death, and as surely as broadcast television episodes will fade into the next segment on the network’s schedule. Transience in this episode of *David Brinkley’s Journal* is the subjection of art to time, a rejection of permanence. The apocalypse being staged here is also an apocalyptic loss of static textuality, the recognition of an epistemological shift that is registered in the television spectatorship.

Traces of Violence: Permanence and the Nuclear Epoch

Lee’s notion of apocalypse is defined by the collapse through speed. The instantaneity of the worldwide distribution of information, generated through the acceleration of automation, is an apocalypstics of proximity, the foreclosure of the distance supposedly necessary for criticality that threatens art and life itself. There is always much to fear in the dominance of networks, and so I do not wish to question the political relevance of Lee’s claim. However, while we remain tirelessly skeptical of networks and the hierarchies that remain within them, it is imperative that we not valorize configurations of subjectivity that are themselves instantiations of domination. There is an epistemological shift that is not reducible to speed at work in the particularities of the television text “The End of the World” / *Study for an End of the World No. 2*. Rather, the work is seizing on the textual specificity of broadcast television to reveal the limits of closed textuality, the limits of objecthood in art. A nuclear detonation cannot be contained, and Tinguely and Brinkley’s intervention in the representation of nuclear detonation is to not try to.

Tinguely’s *Manifesto for Statics* suggests such an interest in openness. Upon examining the text of the *Manifesto* more closely, there are a few lines that seem remarkably televisual: “Immobility does not exist . . . accept instability. Live in time. Be static—with movement.”⁵⁵ The imperative to “be static with movement” is not simply a playful contradiction of stasis and motion: it also calls to mind televisual static: the persistent movement of the visual noise of a TV tuned to a dead channel. There is a certain optimism to Tinguely’s manifesto, an imperative to embrace movement in a way that mirrors the rhetoric and enthusiasm of Zettl. My claim is that Tinguely’s text has to do less with instantaneity—as Lee argues—and more to do with fixity: less to do with *speed* and more to do with *capture*. That

is, the anxiety over the potential inability of humans or technology to capture, to enclose things, is the anxiety Tinguely is grappling with. Moreover, Tinguely's position on that anxiety is not to be anxious about it but to *embrace* the inability of humans to capture all that is. His imperative is to forego monuments and homogeneous clock time in favor of an ontology of becoming.

In his discussion of the radical destructive potentiality of the nuclear epoch, Jacques Derrida places nuclear war within the domains of rhetoric and literature.⁵⁶ Nuclear war, says Derrida, is a mode of warfare that only exists as a signified referent, a kind of war that has no precedent, has never occurred, is a non-event—and if it ever occurred, it would occur only in the name of a name—the bombs would be dropped in service to a concept that would not survive the usage of those bombs.⁵⁷ Moreover, the nuclear capability that is the ground of the Cold War generates a logic of deterrence which makes the Cold War fundamentally a war of rhetoric: both sides attempting to dissuade the other from direct violence via the stockpiling of apocalyptic munitions. Adopting the language of militaristic accumulation, Derrida notes further that implicit in the constitution of what we call “literature” is the building of an archive, a “stockpiling” of texts and a positive law of authors, names, titles, and so on.⁵⁸ What is completely new in the nuclear epoch is that this archive of literature, in its totality, is now under threat:

Now what allows us perhaps to think the uniqueness of nuclear war, its being-for-the-first-time-and-perhaps-for-the-last-time, its absolute inventiveness, what it prompts us to think even if it remains a decoy, a belief, a phantasmatic projection, is obviously the possibility of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces, of the juridico-literary archive—that is, total destruction of the basis of literature and criticism.⁵⁹

The nuclear epoch is, then, the “historical and ahistorical horizon” to which literature belongs, the epoch that in its threat of total destruction reveals the radical precarity and historicity of literature.⁶⁰ It is this exact historicity that *individual texts* so frequently elide. The ahistoricity of individual texts is visible in the images of nuclear detonation that Kirsch critiques. The central crime of the PR spectacle of nuclear testing was the way in which atemporal images of the bomb erase the lingering effects of fallout: the extended temporality of invisible destruction that is removed from public consciousness by representing the bomb as an event, given its unity through the enframing lens of the camera.

However, the final actions of Tinguely in *David Brinkley's Journal*, carrying scrap from the bomb site with no narration, suggests an extended temporality that

goes beyond the event time of the sculpture's destruction. The televised apocalypse as narrativized in these final moments of uncertainty is not simply loss, not apocalypse without revelation. What takes place in these closing moments calls on the unique openness of the broadcast image as a form of critique. The lack of resolution in the ending of the episode suggests that transience does not imply closure: debris from the bomb site lingers and is being moved from Jean Dry Lake to an unknown elsewhere. In its initial context, this image was inserted into the flow of the broadcast, integrated into a televisual becoming that points to the persistence of radiation in nuclear testing *via* the persistence of analog video signals that characterizes the method of broadcasting. The ambiguity of the end of the episode calls on Feuer's description of the televisual text as "segmentation without closure." What occurs in the parodic reimagining of the media spectacle of test detonations of nuclear devices in "The End of the World" / *Study for an End of the World No. 2* is the transfiguration of the waves of the broadcast into the waves of the bomb. The episode, the segment, cannot contain the full implications of the blast and does not attempt to, instead emphasizing the openness of the medium of broadcast television. Transient textuality, here, is not a textuality whose time simply ceases. Rather, it is a textuality subject to the forward march of time, where transient segments are embedded in the persistence of the invisible broadcast signal. This lack of closure in broadcast television is allegorized by Tinguely leaving the bomb site, guiding audiences toward an uncertain future point where the memories of *Study No. 2* are carried from the bomb site. Any superficial enframing of the *Study's* auto-destruction is undone by the dual force of the transience of the segment and the persistence of the broadcast. As such, what Tinguely and Brinkley stage is a medium-specific *failure to enframe*, a utilization of the broadcast wave as a metaphor for that which defies the limitations of the frame.

Tinguely's removal of debris from the bomb site to an unknown space allegorizes broadcast *as medium*, broadcast as a permeating transience that is necessarily conversant with the invisible traces of nuclear detonation. The irony of this reading of this episode of *David Brinkley's Journal* is, of course, that this original version of the text is no longer accessible as such: the episode has been archived, its contents can be cited with timestamps that relate only to the time of the video itself and bear no relation to any broadcast schedule. The episode is preserved on two DVDs at the Museum Tinguely in Basel, Switzerland, and the NBC News Archives in New York retain color and black-and-white copies of the episode.⁶¹ With both of those resources being inaccessible to me, I watched the episode as an embedded video on a Wordpress blog dedicated to Burning Man.⁶² The version I watched was in color, with an NBC News watermark splashed across the center of the frame for the entirety of the episode. I verified its legitimacy as the episode

in question by matching descriptions from Scott's and Lee's respective analyses to the MP4 file I had found. Perhaps this essay's attempt to shift the conversation around Tinguely's sculpture to center the medium of broadcast television emerges from this condition of illicit viewing, where the lack of access to Tinguely's work is felt not only as a consequence of its self-destructive nature but due to the self-destructive nature of broadcast television. The analysis undergone here is an analysis of a text that in its originary transience can only be traced: the episode "The End of the World" of *David Brinkley's Journal* exists now only as recorded, itemized text, its original form lost to time because it was specific to the medium of the televisual broadcast. The effort here has been to rediscover its relation to transience and to think through that relation as a potential site of criticality and a way of relating television to a site, *and to think of television as a site*, rather than taking for granted television's collapse of space-time. The transient textuality of television comes to allegorize what Derrida calls the "being-for-the-first-time-and-perhaps-for-the-last-time"⁶³ of nuclear war while also speaking to the *longue durée* of its radioactive aftermath through the persistence of the broadcast signal, a connection made clear through the synthesis of Brinkley's and Tinguely's respective practices. Transience as represented by Tinguely and Brinkley invites the possibility of seeing lingering effects of images that are no longer accessible, the suggestion that events which have "ended" continue to resonate in ways lost when the world is transformed into atemporal objects. *Study for an End of the World No. 2* suggests that everything in motion may destroy itself, but there will always be debris, material and mental.

The very inaccessibility of *David Brinkley's Journal* in its originary broadcast format attests to what continues to be at stake in considering representations of nuclear destruction, particularly in the context of nuclear testing: the question of historicity and effect. I posit that nuclear bombs are machines of erasure; that the ironically hygienic destruction affected by nuclear detonation—the eradication of local ecosystems to produce a flat "scientific space," as described by Paglan and Scott—gives nuclear weapons an explicitly antihistorical function that is imbricated with the practice of American internal colonialism, which similarly perpetuates itself via the strategic elision of cultures and ecosystems. Writing on the destructive avisuality of the nuclear bomb, Akira Lippit notes that the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki left behind dark stains of "seared organic and inorganic matter," atomic shadows, which are "more photographic than photographic images. . . . There can be no authentic photography of atomic war because the bombings were themselves a form of total photography that exceeded the economies of representation, testing the very visibility of the visual."⁶⁴ The site of nuclear detonation cannot be represented through photographic images because atomic blasts

are sites of two kinds of invisibility: the absolute visibility of the light of the blast itself, and the total transparency of the radiation that remains.⁶⁵ The inability of the nuclear blast to be represented, its fundamental avisuality, speaks to its logic of destructive erasure. All at once, the nuclear blast threatens the total destruction of literature (and therefore the total destruction of representation); it sanitizes land in a way that erases the traces of what was there, leaving only shadows; and it destroys in ways that cannot be located on a visual spectrum. Summarizing Derrida's notion of the trace, Lippit defines a trace as "an erasable sign and sign of erasure that erases as it signs and is in turn erased already."⁶⁶ The nuclear bomb, then, can be understood as a trace-machine: a mechanism that produces signs of erasure in the shadows it leaves behind, erasing life as it signs those shadows, erasing its own persistence in the form of radiation.

What Tinguely and Brinkley bring us to, brought us to, could once bring us to but cannot any longer, is the latter form of erasure, the invisible persistence of the bomb in the site of its detonation. The medium of broadcast television, in its invisible persistence, was brought to bear on the subject of the nuclear bomb, the lingering radiation and its effect on zones of sacrifice in the American Southwest expressed through the becoming of the televisual image.

As a final note, though, it is worth thinking about speed. The speed of information has only increased since the publication of Pamela Lee's *Chronophobia* in 2004, and as information continues to accelerate, it is difficult not to see the relationship between speed and enframing. Both are tactics of forgetting, both resist the thinking of duration, of consequence. It is in the name of remembering that I put the argument in this essay forward. Television does not allow us to distance-see: television does not teleport us to distant places. The synthesis of the broadcast signal, the televisual image, the auto-destruction of Tinguely's sculpture, and the chosen backdrop of Jean Dry Lake does not allow the audience to see the lingering effects of nuclear radiation on a specific site. What it does is remind us that nothing ever really ends, that the consequences of state violence reverberate through time. Especially when it becomes harder to see.

* * *

Justin Keever is a PhD candidate in visual studies at the University of California, Irvine. His dissertation concerns the role of video games in the perpetuation and rejection of neoliberal subjectivity.

Notes

- ¹ Emily Eliza Scott, “Desert Ends,” in *Ends of the Earth: Art of the Land to 1974*, edited by Philipp Kaiser and Miwon Kwon (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art and Prestel, 2012), 68.
- ² For a demonstrative example of such skepticism, see David Joselit’s critique of broadcast television’s closed circuit as the “birth and rebirth of the commodity” in *Feedback: Television against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).
- ³ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 163.
- ⁴ Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 95.
- ⁵ Lynn Spigel, *TV by Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 174.
- ⁶ Lee, *Chronophobia*, 103.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.
- ⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 106.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 109–14.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 109.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 110.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.
- ¹⁶ Herbert Zettl, quoted in Jane Feuer, “The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology,” in *Regarding Television*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, MD: Greenwood, 1985), 13.
- ¹⁷ Zettl, quoted in Feuer, “Concept of Live Television,” 13.
- ¹⁸ Lee, *Chronophobia*, 141, 153.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.
- ²⁰ Scott, “Desert Ends,” 73.
- ²¹ “The End of the World,” *David Brinkley’s Journal*, New York, NBC, aired April 4, 1962, Television, 4:00.
- ²² Minow, Newton N. “Television and the Public Interest,” *Federal Communications Law Journal* 55, no. 3, Article 4. (2003). <https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/fclj/vol55/iss3/4>.
- ²³ Scott, “Desert Ends,” 76.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 72–73.
- ²⁵ “End of the World,” 7:33.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10:40.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11:09.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11:36.

- ²⁹ Scott Kirsch, “Watching the Bombs Go Off: Photography, Nuclear Landscapes, and Spectator Democracy,” *Antipode* 29, no. 3 (1997): 231, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00045>.
- ³⁰ Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, “The Myth of Isolates: Ecosystem Ecologies in the Nuclear Pacific,” *Cultural Geographies* 20, no. 2 (2012): 176. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474012463664>
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 178.
- ³² Kirsch, “Watching the Bombs Go Off,” 245.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 241.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ Scott, “Desert Ends,” 69–70.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 78–79.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ Trevor Paglan, quoted in Scott, “Desert Ends,” 79.
- ⁴¹ DeLoughrey, “Myth of Isolates,” 171.
- ⁴² Valerie Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert: Environmental and Social Ruin in the American West* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 5. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315538839>
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ⁴⁵ Kirsch, “Watching the Bombs Go Off,” 245.
- ⁴⁶ Feuer, “Concept of Live Television,” 14.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ⁴⁸ See Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*.
- ⁴⁹ See Keith Meyers, “In the Shadow of the Mushroom Cloud: Nuclear Testing, Radioactive Fallout, and Damage to U.S. Agriculture, 1945 to 1970,” *Journal of Economic History* 79, no. 1 (2019): 244–74, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s002205071800075x>
- ⁵⁰ DeLoughrey, “Myth of Isolates,” 179.
- ⁵¹ “End of the World,” 14:00.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 14:45.
- ⁵³ Scott, “Desert Ends,” 82.
- ⁵⁴ “End of the World,” 20:43.
- ⁵⁵ Jean Tinguely, quoted in Lee, “Study for an End of the World,” 106.
- ⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives),” *Diacritics* 14, no. 2 (1984): 24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464756>.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 30–31.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ⁶¹ As Scott notes, “Our window onto the piece is therefore limited to Brinkley’s episode, a handful of photographs and press accounts, several drawings Tinguely

made of his ephemeral sculpture, and a few correspondences he sent from Nevada to his contacts back in Europe” (“Desert Ends,” 68).

⁶² Whatsblem the Pro, “Burning Man, 1962: Jean Tinguely Blazes the Trail,” *Burners.Me: Me, Burners and The Man*, October 17, 2013. <https://burners.me/2013/10/17/burning-man-1962-jean-tinguely-blazes-the-trail/>

⁶³ Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now,” 26.

⁶⁴ Akira Lippit, *Atomic Light: Shadow Optics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 94–95.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.