Terrain Vague

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Shawn Edrington
MFA Thesis Exhibition
Department of Art
Neri Gallery
Fine Arts Building
April 2-5
Oral Defense April 3rd, 11:45-12:45
Closing Reception
Thursday April 5, 5-7pm
An exploration of nature, natural phenomena, and the forms and patterns of geological processes have always influenced my artistic practice. More recently I have begun making work addressing the interrelations between land use, extraction, consumption, infrastructure, and ecology. I wanted to consider my own involvement in these systems; knowingly and unknowingly, directly and indirectly. I wanted to localize my investigative impulse, to reference something that had a proximity. An inquiry specific to a particular site provided a way of thinking about bigger ideas through something more discreet. Last year I was invited as an artist to tour the Idaho National Laboratory’s (INL) nuclear waste processing plant and adjoining facilities as part of an anticipated group exhibition addressing the theme of storage of nuclear waste in Idaho. Though I was familiar with the INL’s presence, having lifelong ties to eastern Idaho I had been mostly unaware of its specific nature. The more I learned, the more I realized I was already caught up in the matter. While my intention was originally to create a single piece on the topic, I have since found it necessary to pursue a larger and ongoing body of work. My attempts to evaluate my encounters are presented in this exhibition as a kind of “noir narrative,” wherein a protagonist investigating a suspicious case, unknowingly enters into a kind of loop, somehow already implicated in what they had been pursuing. The qualities of noir are transgressive, bereft of optimism, dark, and full of mystery and danger, and seemed appropriate to how I was thinking about the subject of nuclear waste. I have since returned several times to the site and surrounding area, collecting images and artifacts, sounds and smells, faded memories and stitched together fabulations, attempting to contemplate the idea of what I am calling “forever contamination,” the spans under which nuclear waste products remain harmful. This document, in support of the thesis exhibition, aims to establish a motivation and context for this work. In it I will describe the individual elements within the installation, tying them back to the introductory ideas and theorizing how they operate more broadly within historical and contemporary art practice.
The INL’s boundaries enclose a half million acres in the sagebrush steppe of southern Butte County along Highway 20 between Craters of the Moon National Monument and the small town of Arco in Eastern Idaho. Originally a military proving ground, the site was established in 1949 as one of the nation’s governmental laboratories heading nuclear research; the first in the world to power a city with nuclear energy.¹ Beginning in the early 1950s, extensive waste water disposal from nuclear reactor operations, spent fuel reprocessing, and other fuel separations processes took place at what was then known as the National Reactor Testing Station.² These operations introduced radiologic and chemical contaminants into the Snake River Plain Aquifer which supplies drinking and irrigation water to much of the southern portion of the state. Irradiated wastes were also buried above the aquifer with inadequate means of containment. Despite US Geological Survey monitoring since 1949, the aquifer was seen as an economical disposal solution for years. Evolving regulatory standards at the time and the secrecy surrounding nuclear research had created a system that only intermittently monitored contaminants, sometimes decades after waste was introduced. Even when contaminants were monitored, findings about the spread of the aquifer contamination down stream from the site were not disclosed to the public until much later.³ 

It was bewildering to think that the water my grandfather irrigated fields with, the well water we enjoyed and touted as naturally purified by porous volcanic basalt, and the interconnected rivers and reservoirs frequented throughout my life had been potentially contaminated. These new realities disrupted my conceptualization of words like “natural” and “environment;” they seem to alter the past, compromise memory, and threaten to impact unforeseeable future generations of beings.

Like much of Idaho, the American west is often characterized by its expanse and monumentality. Butte County in many ways typifies this sentiment, yet throughout the west, less visible histories fraught with industrial ruin and environmental contamination have lurked. This work considers how the vastness of landscape and the timescale of radioactive materials move us
to create a false sense of away from the bi-products of the systems we participate in. The relatively young volcanism of eastern Idaho and half lives of tens of thousands of years reveal this “away” to be untenable. The term “waste” itself seems inadequate to what it describes, as if what is waste were able to simply be reincorporated back into nature or safely incarcerated for all time. In an article for Third Text entitled, Mutations and Misunderstandings, author Sven Lütticken asserts “the ‘natural world’ continues to be ideologized as an essentially unchanging realm” adding, “pollution, fallout, the destruction of habitats and global warming are seen as encroachments on this realm from the outside.” The problem is that until our immediate environment becomes impacted these realities remain safely out there. So often the places we never hear about are those most directly effected. In her book, Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West, Lucy Lippard outlines how “in the deserts of the West and in Washington DC, a war still rages to find the one place in America that no one cares about.” With its arid climate, harsh winters, sparse vegetation, and outstretching fields of jagged lava rock, given names like Hell’s Half Acre and Devils Orchard; the choice of the INL’s location is at least in part exposed.

Artists since the seventies have engaged with these themes, from the work of land artists Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Nancy Holt to the photographers of the 1975 exhibition New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape. Similar motivation addressing human impact on the land have since been documented through the lenses of Edward Burtynsky and Richard Misrach in sometimes mundane but also highly aesthetic portrayals of the Anthropocene; the aggregated trace of human intervention on the land, ecosystems, and climate. Lippard in Undermining again, insists “It may seem we have long since moved on from the pits and gravel piles, the towering erections disrupting social gravity, but they are still out there, standing for the blurred boundaries between what we call the natural and the human made.”
These histories continue to permeate our contemporary landscapes. They stand as signs of failure, providing lessons we ignore at our own peril.

As I developed this work, Rob Nixon’s book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* helped give voice to the underlying motivations of this project and prompted me to ask myself how art might bring to light threats that never materialize in one cataclysmic event or unforgettable instant, but stretch outward through time wreaking their havoc (the residual effects unbracketed by casualty counts and media coverage). The ongoing legacy of industrial ruin remains in so many cases, out of sight. It stays far enough out of the way so as not to register on our collective psyche, disproportionately impinging upon the marginal and underprivileged; our most toxic byproducts often exported to poorer nations. Today, the ubiquitous diffusion of man-made materials has created distinct markers in the strata of geologic time, dispersed through the world’s oceans, becoming concentrated upwards through food chains. They make their way into “pristine” watersheds and even human bodies. In this light, thinking about future coexistence brings with it a kind of claustrophobia, an abjection, an always already present other. Rationally we understand that waste goes somewhere yet we to keep it out of sight; we dissociate from its presence and accumulation. The longest withstanding testament to humanity’s presence upon the earth will likely be raised greenhouse gas levels, plastic, foam, and finally radioactive fallout. The era of climate change involves a disruption of systems beyond twentieth century anthropocentric models. The reality of the Anthropocene is not that we are merely “all in it together,” we are in it to the same extent that it is in us. Our senses need to be re-calibrated now to account for, catastrophe, contradiction, and ecological volatility borne of human activities.

Learning to think with and become with these uncanny manifestations is not some fatalistic endeavor but a vital openness to what Donna Haraway has referred to as *staying with the trouble*, remaining somehow exposed, responsive to their influence and agency. We have come to a state in which ecological awareness must begin with the premise that there is no *Nature*, no division
between us and our *dark products*. The romanticization of nature has distanced us from any responsibility to our collective effects on it. What does it mean to look upon landscape, ingrained with associations of freedom, promise, and beauty, and to confront the damage rendered, the visible and invisible threats that impend? In Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, the titular term is employed to refer to the non local and upper dimensional qualities of these kinds of objects which makes for difficulty in conceptualizing them. Concomitant with things such as fallout, global warming and the geophysical processes of earth itself, hyperobjects abolish space as we know it. Morton adds “place is no longer a nice human-scaled, cozy concept, everything has place, radioactive material has place, the biosphere is a place, just not a ‘made for human’ place.”

Today we are instantly able to gaze upon every square mile of the Earth’s surface, this ability to survey the landscape has historically operated as promotion, a promise of exploitable wealth and resource, yet this capacity for viewing has now come to reinforce the idea of the planet as an object within which we are all bound. To think of things in space is akin to thinking an *away*, things are not *in space*, but tied to a place.

Within this installation, a grouping of images lining both walls of the hallway introduce an investigation and orientation within a locale and set of ideas. Photographs, topographic renderings and water sampling data portray an attempt to define, frame, and connect the investigative process that fueled this work. Included in these images are a series of photographed *homo-liths*; man made heaps of geologic character or scale; evoking a sense of excavation, upheaval, or internment but also imbuing a sense of being left without a place. The result is a kind of mutant compost heap, burial mound, or quarantined lot of soil. At the same time they echo formally, the volcanic buttes situated on INL land, highly visible landmarks signaling the area’s tumultuous geologic history, acting as windows backward through time, boding uncertain futures. Other photographs sample an exploration of the site, and surrounding area. While the images signal an attempt to assume a tone of objectivity, the image has long since been exposed as always motivated, framed by what is
unseen, a choice to omit always made. In this case we are never seeing nuclear material itself but traces of its presence; images of the processing plant, in some photographs hidden in fog or wildfire haze. In dialogue with the gestures of artists like Trevor Paglen who points a lens on infrastructures and governmental entities whose presence often elude the public eye, these photographs seek to bring into view a facility at a site; obscured, somehow strangely withdrawn, juxtaposed by more ambiguous scenes of outreaching entanglements that problematize a sense of validity. While they recall a history of the idealization of landscape, the tenebrous settings and subtle cues and markers throughout foreshadow a kind of lurking or enduring hazard, ultimately portraying a paradox of things not as they appear. My aim with these photographs is to bring the viewer to a threshold of understanding but not further.

Through this research and documentation I came to think of the entangled ecologies of the site and surrounding area as a kind of charnel ground; a place marked by desperation, hopelessness, and terrors; traditionally a place where the dead are left to decompose, exposed to the environment. The charnel ground is a place where worldly aspirations are devastated by grim realities, archetypal zones of life and death, of living in dying and dying in living; a place of specters, mutants and roaming spirits. Contemplative traditions practiced at these types of sites aimed at accepting the certainty of death, beset on all sides and riven through by it, to realize the hopelessness in thinking a way out. In Fatal Strategies, Baudrillard makes clear that there is simply no reason to assume that the psychosocial faculties of the human species are capable of enduring the aggregated outcomes of human activity. Thinking nuclear ecology and more broadly, coexistence in the Anthropocene in terms of the charnel ground may be a starting point to deeply accepting our boundedness while disavowing the throes of fatalism.

Within the exhibition space, a subtle rumbling pulsates. Piles of rubble and debris inundate the gallery accompanied by an array of hovering black steel drums, several of which have collapsed in on themselves. Other drums in the space support topographical models of the three
buttes depicted in the photographs, cast in cement yet inverted to take the form of craters; a gesture re-contextualizing and upending place and scale. They appear naturalistic yet reveal traces of an intermediary, automated process, problematizing the *naturalness* of the form. Like the work of artist Ruben Ochoa, who employs everyday objects in ways that turn the pedestrian uncanny, this work sets out to blur the truth of what is being seen. Through this device, these works become more than what they are; opened up to interpretation. The matter-of-factness of the barrels, in dialogue with the concrete forms, reference materials of containment and barrier. The irradiated debris that lies in soil above the Snake River Aquifer is slated to eventually be covered by giant concrete platforms, in the hopes of forestalling rainfall from driving radiologic substances down into the water table. I am portraying landscape in response as a kind of ghost, entombed yet still possessing potential for influence. The other drums in the space appear filled to capacity with a reflective black fluid. Grid-like sinusoidal wave patterns intermittently form on then disappear from the surface. Their contents foreboding yet suspending characterization, their mass and density indeterminate. Though they appear full, the truth is a shallow layer of water and ink.

Throughout the exhibition, this wavering verity is at play, acting as an analog for the concealed truths of governmental research programs and common, subsequently claimant “unintended consequences.” This device; portraying things, not as they appear, touches on our contemporary symptomatic of “climate denial,” “post truth” and “alternative fact,” underscoring a broader theme of instability, and *dark* ecology. The term *cymatics* describes a visualization of sound’s harmonic structure. The act of revealing normally invisible forces was a way to mimic the nature of radiologic material. These kinds of macroscopic analogies are often useful for understanding the world’s processes in broader contexts. The steel drums are at once brooding figures and contingent vessels whose ambiguous contents seem almost to want to escape. They blur the distinction between found object and sculpture. Wired with infrared sensors, the responsiveness of these pieces work to implicate the viewer in what they are seeing, their bodily
presence and movement setting something into motion, therefore the viewer becomes somehow responsible, inextricable, and necessitated. This is our product, what alternative do we have but to care for it? With language always in a state of change, how do we communicate to future generations what lies here? Since the 1990’s the Department of Energy has charged the Human Interference Task Force; a group of scientists, linguists, and scholars to develop a deterrent system for sites of transuranic, radioactive materials. Some of the proposed designs are forests of concrete thorns and claws, lightning shaped steel spires, massive holes or monolithic pieces of rubble that encircle these places of peril.22

My decision to incorporate found objects; rubble, debris, and steel barrels in this installation was in part to take on a kind of burden, to consign myself to carry them for a while, to intervene in a process of production and disposal, use, and exchange. As found objects, they have a sense of a former place, their lack of marking making uncertain what they once held. This work considers where these materials are to go when their use is exhausted, who or what might they encounter in their next life. I am thinking of these materials as part of the geologic strata, presented as artifacts intercepted on their way to the land of the dead. I was drawn to rubble in part due to what I saw as its inherent unraisable quality, its form contradictory to its original purpose. Once shaping and manufacturing space, now in its dissemblance, merely able to bluntly occupy it. Often termed “clean fill,” the future of the this flotsam and jetsam, is often a return to the company of earth and stone, disfigured or transmuted from its original state. The juxtaposition of these mutant forms abandoned amidst the wilderness spurred my decision to incorporate them, heaped and scattered about, as revenants, burial markers or perhaps guideposts through the terrain vague. My materials were sourced from both an abandoned cement factory, itself now in a present state of disuse, and city sidewalks as they were being replaced. With this I developed a kind of noir narrative; a fictional yet plausible interrogation of a cycle of production, tracing a materiality back to its source and encountering the remnants of an infrastructural apparatus. The cement factory is
imagined as the site where extracted minerals became transformed into the material that forms the ground on which I find footing and navigate my environment and at the same time the megalithic vaults into which radioactive materials are interred.

The presence of ruin fluctuates in our vision as built environments are weathered, repaired and replaced, disrupting our sense of a smooth functioning order of things. Our landscapes of concrete and asphalt give rise to a sense of a seamlessness of our surroundings and conceal a cultural devotion to maintaining and monumentalizing the identity of constantly disintegrating parts. If a traditional monument is meant to stand outside of time, and to stand for all time; ruins can act as “non-ument” pointing to the impossibility of such aims. The forms that inhabit this exhibition also raise questions as to the directionality of ruin. Do the remains of something once considered part of productive space still hold potential? In *The Mushroom at the End of the World* Anna Tsing remarks, “ruins are now our gardens, degraded and blasted landscapes now produce our livelihoods, and even the most promising oases of natural plenty require massive interventions in order to be maintained.” I am creating a potentially furtive yet still questionable, or ruin-like experience by probing the materials’ complex and contradictory relationships and significations.

Rather than thinking in terms of inevitabilities and assured outcomes, this work aims to prompt a notion of making and becoming with; what Donna Haraway, in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* refers to as *oddkin*; tapestries of non-human beings with whom we are inexorably connected, and yet whose agencies continue to be *othered* if ever even acknowledged. These interweaving connections, involving people and nonhumans entities, do not bring us into an all-encompassing harmony. Instead, they involve both social and natural disturbance, displacement and the disempowerment of life on troubled landscapes.

Enmeshed in the rubble and debris of once productive spaces, a doubling slowly reveals itself in the installation. The double is a product of an *excluded middle*; conflicting truths inhabiting the same space; a betweenness which enflames the strangely familiar. Plaster copies
taken from molds of neighboring fractured concrete and detritus serve to add to the mass and scale
of these conglomerations, their chromatic tonality is slightly muted and discontinuous with the rest
of the materials. I think of the pieces as akin to phantoms of the original, products of an ironic
gesture; casting the remnants of a material which made up the architecture that produced the
casting material. This doubling reflects an experience of crisis, privileging a postmodern sense of
identity as fractured and indeterminate. Such a gesture heightens the potentiality of these objects;
they are ruins and yet constructions. They act in concert with an overarching motif of instability
and an uncertainty about what is being seen, demonstrative of an ongoing process of change; as if
a flood of otherness had descended, engulfing stable identity. This isn't just ruin.

The terrain vague I have created represents the resistant interstices of otherwise productive
space, illustrated by rubble and debris and echoed in the lava flows that surround the INL site. Its
characteristics are at once sacred, alluring, and dangerous. It is a zone of liminal experience of the
existential sense of abandonment in the face of death or disaster. I have found this spectral quality
present in works of both Rachel Whiteread25 and Doris Salcedo26 who present things not as we
normally encounter them. In their work absences are made present, spaces associated with storage
or dwelling are entombed, their access or use is denied. In speculative terms, the real and therefore
“real objects” and their qualities, cannot ever be accessed or known directly. As Graham Harman,
illuminates “there is no direct relation but an absolute rift between knowledge of the real and the
real as such. The true chasm in ontology lies not between humans and the world, but between
objects and relations.”27 More to the point it suggests that these questionable materials effect how
imperceptible forces guide and shape us and influence our physical reality, giving validity to the
fact that everything that we perceive as fixed and stable, our own bodies included, are actually in a
continuous state of flux and somehow withdrawn. This idea drove me to incorporate infrasound
which inundates the installation with pressure waves created by a rotary subwoofer concealed from
view, housed within rubble. This sound, lower in frequency than can be detected by the human ear,
is normally emitted by vastly large objects; ocean currents, meteorites entering the atmosphere, tectonic shifts, and nuclear detonation. The monitoring of infrasound is used in earthquake and volcanic eruption detection and in warning systems. I wanted to incorporate something that communicated with the same voice as these phenomena, that could have a similar physical effect on a viewer, one who's presence could never be assigned to an object, something non directional and inaccessible. I felt that it was important for the viewer to experience something set in motion that they ultimately were not in control of; to become part of a mechanism that alters the space around it. Like the rotary subwoofer the mechanism of creating particular phenomena within the work is at times withheld from view yet its influence is still present. In other instances the mechanism is revealed while its purpose is left unclear.

A motion activated rotational casting machine occupies the smaller room of the gallery. It is designed to spin a mold on multiple axes to create a hollow cast. This machine provided the method to create the hollow replicas of collected detritus situated alongside solid counterparts, ghosts of their former selves. I wanted to reveal the machine that made the work to give insight into my process and act as a stand in for a system of connected moving parts but who’s combined function is not fully clear. Like a gyroscope, the rotocaster evokes a synchronous process; a continuous orienting of moving objects. The almost hypnotic orbit and speed of the machine works to establish a focus and pace for moving through the exhibition space. In *Dark Ecology: for a Logic of Future Coexistence*, Timothy Morton states, “without a recalibration of the senses, at the level of our global species-being, without a conversation aimed to understand, and then attenuate and nuance our desires and needs, we cannot conceive of another mode of production, another set of social relations, another ecology of coexistence with hyperobjects.” The rotocasting machine gestures an invitation to slow down and consider more closely a mode of production set into motion, literally and figuratively, adding to the ruin.
Within the larger ancillary space of the gallery a video extends and dramatizes the narrative of the photographs, contemplating the movement, distribution, and diffusion of materials processed within. Some objects that inhabit the space are echoed in the video, but in abstracted or unexpected ways, intended to heighten an uncertainty as to their potential. A single subject is depicted throughout, facing away from the viewer, shrouded atop a lava dome as snow flits by the screen. Inspired by Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*, this figure represents a kind of guide through a would-be treacherous landscape, or perhaps a speaker for the dead, thinly shrouded but confronting what lies ahead, a kind of *dark sublime*. This symbolizes an appeal to “remain exposed;” to endure our encounter with catastrophe by allowing ourselves to sense it, for if we move too quickly, even catastrophes become reduced like everything else to mere equivalents of exchange. There is no way to achieve escape velocity from our dark, ecological entanglements. To save any ruin from its own decay is essentially to deny its status as such. Not to save a ruin is to lose a memorandum from the past that may offer us a means to estimate our own lives. Nuclear ecology thus brings into focus a world without *Nature*, a dispassionate object, yet one in which potentialities will always face into the wind of staggering outcomes, a charnel ground made to live again.
7 Figure 1, Robert Smithson, Non-Site (Palisades-Edgewater, New Jersey), 1968, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation, Inc.
8 Figure 2, Photograph: Frank Gohlke, Irrigation Canal, Albuquerque, New Mexico (1974), George Eastman House Collections
9 Figure 3, Edward Burtynsky, Silver Lake Operations #14, Lake Lefroy, Western Australia, 2007, National Library of Australia
10 Figure 4, Richard Misrach, Flooded Marina (Gas Pumps), Salton Sea, California, 1983, Art Institute Chicago
15 Figure 5, Shawn Edrington, Terrain Vague, MFA Thesis Exhibition, Boise State, 2018
16 Figure 6, Trevor Paglen, NSA/GCHQ Surveillance Base, Bude, Cornwall, UK, 2014
19 Figure 7, Shawn Edrington, Terrain Vague, MFA Thesis Exhibition, Boise State, 2018
20 Figure 8, Ruben Ochoa, From the Ground Without Digging, 2011
21 Figure 9, Shawn Edrington, Terrain Vague, MFA Thesis Exhibition, Boise State, 2018
25 Figure 10, Rachel Whiteread, Untitled (Room 101), 2003, Tate Britain
26 Figure 11, Doris Salcedo, Untitled, 1998, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
29 Figure 12, Shawn Edrington, Terrain Vague, MFA Thesis Exhibition, Boise State, 2018
30 Figure 13, Shawn Edrington, Terrain Vague, MFA Thesis Exhibition, Boise State, 2018

Edward Burtynsky, Silver Lake Operations #14, Lake Lefroy, Western Australia, 2007, National Library of Australia

Richard Misrach, Flooded Marina (Gas Pumps), Salton Sea, California, 1983, Art Institute Chicago
Fig 5

Shawn Edrington, Terrain Vague, MFA Thesis Exhibition, Boise State, 2018

Fig 6

Treor Paglen, NSA/GCHQ Surveillance Base, Bude, Cornwall, UK, 2014
Shawn Edrington, Terrain Vague, MFA Thesis Exhibition, Boise State, 2018

Ruben Ochoa, From the Ground Without Digging, 2011
Fig. 9

Shawn Edrington, Terrain Vague, MFA Thesis Exhibition, Boise State, 2018
Fig. 10
Rachel Whiteread, Untitled (Room 101), 2003, Tate Britain

Fig. 11
Fig. 12

Shawn Edrington, Terrain Vague, MFA Thesis Exhibition, Boise State, 2018

Fig. 13

Shawn Edrington, Terrain Vague, MFA Thesis Exhibition, Boise State, 2018