Interview with Paul Catanese, “Visible From Space” by Lanfranco Aceti and Vince Dziekan

Interview with artist Paul Catanese initially conducted via Flickr and coinciding with second half of ‘Visible From Space’ –the inaugural online exhibition with Leonardo Electronic Almanac in September 2010.

Leonarda Electronic Almanac

We have just reached the half-way point in the release of Paul Catanese’s “Visible from Space”: the inaugural project of LEA’s new exhibition programme. If you’ve been following the progressive release of Paul’s images across our social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter and –of course– Flickr), you will no doubt have been struck by the work’s evolving character. To date, the release of an image-per-day has been accompanied by a very direct textual attribution, which reads as follows:

“Visible from Space” by Paul Catanese. Research and development for “Visible from Space” was supported by a month-long residency in June 2010 at the Goldwell Open Air Museum, just outside of Death Valley.

Over the remainder of the month, we will be using Flickr to host a conversation with Paul to tease out some of the ideas that are being alluded to through his images. Paul has provided the following artist statement –which, as one would expect, reads as intriguingly as his image-making –to initiate this process:

“The desert is a site of remote testing where paraconsistent logics are first considered feasible. Mistakenly construed as the opposite of the ocean, the desert teems with depth –it is also its own mirror.

I am conducting a thought experiment about the phrase ‘visible from space’ which erupted from a fanciful supposition to create drawings on the Earth so large they would be visible from the moon. For such a feat, the stroke width of the line would need to be close to 60 miles wide in order for barely a hairline to be visible from that distance. It is charming to think that the Great Wall of China is visible from space –but this is merely a popular mythology. It is difficult to resolve an image of the Great Wall even from the International Space Station with the naked eye –which orbits about 250 miles above the Earth, let alone from outer space or nearby celestial bodies. Of course, with military and even civilian imaging technologies, much greater resolution can be achieved as evidenced by what are now commonplace tools such as Google Earth.

Simultaneously –I have been thinking about the L’Arbre du Tenere –a lone tree that lived in the Saharan desert in Niger, the last of a stand of ancient acacias desperately isolated in an encroaching hostile landscape.
The ancient tree was well known as a caravan route marker and can be found as a single tree marked on maps in the middle of the vast desert. Oddly, this lone and ancient tree which shirked the reality of the desert met with its end after a truck driver ran into it in 1973. That lone tree of the desert, an odd single blip on the map –much like our geosynchronous satellites, occupies less than a pixels resolution worth of expanse when viewed from a distance.
While it is significant that we are able to achieve these feats, modern satellite imaging and a proposal to create a drawing on the Earth so large it that could be seen from the moon are similar in the fact that both actions require a wealth of engineering and a lack of humility. Viewed in this light, the requirements for surrogate vision depend on how we define visible, and where we define space. As I contemplate these requirements, I am reminded of L’Arbre Du Tenere, whose monument: a large metal sculpture of a tree –is not even the corpse of a tree”.

Vince Dziekan

Hi Paul –Firstly congratulations on the project and in being so amenable to participating in this inaugural launch. As such, your work has been a real “test site” for LEA’s new exhibition platform. I’m wondering if you might like to start by giving us a bit of background about the site that you are responding to in this work (namely, Death Valley and in particular the Goldwell Open Air Museum)?

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Paul Catanese

Thanks, Vince –this is definitely an interesting format; I was very intrigued when approached regarding how a series of 30 (or 28 or 31!) images would be released one-a-day, glad to be part of the inaugural launch...

In terms of the site of Death Valley, and the Goldwell Open Air Museum –its an interesting place with a lot of history. Goldwell sits at the head of the Amargosa Valley in western Nevada. Its at about 3000' in elevation, and the valley is several dozen miles long. From the residency site –a former mining barn– you can watch storms roll in for hours. There's a sculpture park, and its also the site of a few ghost towns: Rhyolite has a number of standing masonry structures and is just behind the barn, and the Barn itself is essentially right on top of the site of the town of Bullfrog (named for a spectacular green mineral all through the area) –the only things left of Bullfrog are half of a jail, 1/8 of an icehouse, and tens of thousands of rusting cans. Just behind the barn are a few very steep mountains, but they've all been open-pit mined... to the east and south are huge tailings. It gets incredibly dark –the milky way is clearly visible, and the glow from Vegas, about 90 miles away, is the only urban light pollution you'll find. Its also important to note that the Nevada Test site is about 20 miles east (also east, Area 51 about 50 miles as the crow flies), and Death Valley just over the western ridge-line –about 6 miles.

I specifically wanted to work out there in the summer, in the hot month of June, when temperatures can soar –and did! What I was perhaps the most stunned by, more than the rugged geography, high temperatures, or vastness of the chemical desert –was the silence. I mean stretches of silence where you might hear a fly buzzing 10 or 12 meters away. For this thought experiment, it was critical to be located where my activities would be no more contradictory than any other activities in a desert –but the silence provided a dimension of retreat that I did not anticipate.

I am stunned by the natural beauty and vastness of the land. Immediately I noticed the silence; a quietness that I found intensely refreshing that allowed me to truly get into my head and observe the world and my thoughts in it. I often found my eyes stunned by the landscape –how quickly it could change, how dunes could disappear into haze, or mountains seemingly flattened, erupt with great sculptural form and drama under the shadow of clouds. Death Valley itself was much more varied than I anticipated; I began understanding the location less as a singularity, and more as a unique component of a larger system of valleys, of north/south mountain ranges, of rift after rift. in spite of a veneer of desolation, everything seems to have been tread upon, touched, turned, tunneled through.

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I learned about my companions: the Silver Cholla and the Desert Mallow, about how delicious the first morning light is on the valley, how my methods of collection and observation via the overhead projector were at home in the harsh environment, and how the exploration of space yields results that are puzzling. Goldwell was most definitely the correct location –of that, I am certain. Needless to say, it was a very good place to work.

Vince Dziekan

You speak of being struck by the incredible depth of darkness and the unexpected dimension of silence. These descriptions beautifully resonate with the opening passage of your artist's statement, where you mention paraconsistent logics (that being, to attempt to deal with contradictions in a logical and systematic way). I see this reflected in the images you've produced.

Paul Catanese

Yes –building systems is a large part of my work, and definitely a large part about how I approached working on this exhibition for LEA. As soon as I started thinking about the "30-ness" of the series, I wanted to determine what the best structures were that would resonate with the details in the images. In this work, I am exploring multiple open-ended visual narratives and there were questions about whether the 30 in the series would be linear, chronological, or as it ended up, structured in a less-definable manner. I kept thinking about series of 5 and series of 6, or twinned series –a series of 5 running through a series of 6, or perhaps if one was to imagine two rectangles partially intersecting, there might be an area where a series of 3 and a series of 4 could fit into a meta-series of 5, and another that fits into a meta-series of 6.

I was playing games with the alphabet and with altered alphabets to assist me with determining how to arrange time and space. This type of game-playing with structure is creative exercise; its a way to assist me in viewing the materials from the desert in new ways. Beyond the meta-structures, what guided me in creating this series of images were a number of considerations regarding the notion of directionality of time, bifurcation, optics and gravity, as well as less determinable concepts such as asemic writing, ceromancy, and Otto's notion of the numinous.

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Vince Dziekan

The desert has an incredibly long tradition as a subject which has lent itself to the widest range of interpretations. Mystical. Sacred. Allegorical. Moral. Romantic. In a sense, the depth, richness and variability of these different interpretations play themselves out in stark relief against the desert's unifying visual emptiness. While the aesthetics are markedly different, I'm drawn to compare your project with America photographer Richard Misrach's desert 'cantos' –which also employ rigorous structural principles. Through an ironic counterpoising of form and content, the impossibly beautiful mirage-like surface of Misrach's photographs contemplate the transformation of the desert from sublime into a site that reflects militarism and environmental violence. The desert offers itself as something of a blank canvas, a surface that we –individually or collectively– can project our imagination and fears, desires and paranoias onto. Through your process, I'm wondering what the desert has revealed to you?

Paul Catanese

The Revelation of the Desert. If one were to attribute agency to the land; the will of the desert could be encapsulated in its attempt to harm. The relentlessness of the land itself, the chemical desert, alluvial fans, calcrete, dust, desiccation, and solitude might first indicate a depth of fatality. But this is only a veneer. Rivers flow underground. Like the ocean, it teems with life; it is a site for contemplating the finite and the infinite.

The desert puzzles me. Every moment, the challenge of survival must be considered. It makes immediate the relation to the body, and therefore the mind. Synapses sizzle like ink on a brayer, the nervous system floods the ears with a high pitched whine that modulates the wind. Dust devils travel in packs, roam the valleys, rearranging bric-a-brac.

The desert can yawn for a thousand years.

We've talked of my experiences, and they remain distilled in me: Dry heat. Silence. Darkness. The Milky Way. Discerning the sound of a fly 30 feet away from me, crystal clear. Sunrise on the valley floor. Toads, rattlesnakes. Hydrating. Long, slow hikes through rubbish. Rabbits. Early Dawns. Rattling roof. Dust devils that chase me up into the barn and throw my supplies in a heap. The lingering odor of helium and latex. Time to think. Drawing for hours and hours until I passed out with my pen in my hand. Getting dizzy and telling myself to get out of the sun. Fighter jets buzzing by a few dozen feet above me as I drove north up the Panamint valley. Trona. Man-made rubies. The wind blowing from every direction at once. Mercury. The white scar on the rocks at the southern end of the valley just south of the Amargosa farming area turnoff towards Shoshone, gleaming from miles away. Searching for seafoam green chips of gravel for hours. Listening.

I appreciate the reference to Misrach; the canto is an appropriate structure to respond to the richness and paradox of the desert, which is hidden. It reminds me of the cowboys and ranchers that I met. Intimately engaged with the land, they do not willingly seek out the taxonomies of science. Desert nomenclature is colloquial; mountains have personalities, with names like Charley or Wayne, who are putting on grey hair when its cold, even in the summer; the valley is a familiar who wears a pretty spring dress.

Vince Dziekan

I really like the anecdote about desert colloquialism, so I might seize on this to take us back to the visual personality of the images you've crafted. Can you speak some more about their highly poetic vernacular and how asemic writing –which you mentioned earlier –relates to some of the concepts you are exploring in your work?

Paul Catanese

With regard to asemic writing, on the one hand, it was something I was most specifically thinking about with regard to the unique venue for the release of the image. I decided from the beginning that any of the images should be able to function as a starting point; and though there are certain irreversible concepts present, traversing the multiple visual narratives should be possible whether perusing forwards or backwards. So, partially, the poetics of the image you're responding to are my approach towards composition, space, and narrative –but also my decision to particularly consider the idea of two twinned series that might occasionally take place simultaneously. Bifurcation followed backwards; ballistics frozen; helium trapped in the membrane of an image. In several cases throughout the series, the images reference events and experiments I conducted during my stay in the desert, working with rockets, helium balloons, windsocks, smoke, dust, mirror, lasers, wireless and

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infrared cameras, as well as found objects: natural and manufactured. Some of these references are photographic; others are culled directly from my sketches and field notes. There is no division between notes describing planning, simulation of experiments, or field notes describing results. But perhaps more specifically, visual signifiers of scientific quantification or accumulation such as diagrams, graphs, and charts, detached from the context in which they were produced, begin to nod toward the asemic. These forms of message are a central feature in much of my work –both in the planning and performance. The rupture between communication encoded and message received provides a playful disruption in the language of narrative.
The colloquialism of the desert is omnipresent; between the detritus of human encampment, the violence of mining debris, overt military training stretched thin around forbidden Tarkovsky-esque zones, rangers struggling with tourists, scorpions, and crashed Cessna's, thirsty geologists, bordellos, experimental automotive test teams, ranchers –nothing is entirely familiar– and that which is recognizable, assumes new meanings, becomes less of a solid.

Lanfranco Aceti

I would like to actually continue along the line of this topic that you and Vince have been discussing –the relationship with the landscape as a complex interaction beyond the anthropocentric definition of psychogeography and traditional representations of alterity. I am curious to know how you framed your relationship to the 'intuitive' and 'aesthetic' colloquialism with the desert... Was it a planned structure –or something that you just let flourish inspired by the pre-existing discourse and already existing semiotic signs of the landscape?

Paul Catanese

Hi Lanfranco –this is an interesting question. I've been thinking quite a bit about this, especially as I have come to find that residencies are an important part of my art practice, playing a valuable role, especially in providing time to insert oneself in a new context. It is often very tempting to plan, or even perhaps over-plan the experience. That being said, it has continually been the organic development of ideas that indeed flourish within a given space or location that are the most rewarding for me as an artist.
So, to a certain degree, I did spend a great deal of time planning for my experiments with rockets, balloons, cameras, etc. but I had not entirely considered the role that desert colloquialism would have. This is largely due to the fact that I wasn't entirely certain how much interaction with other individuals I would have. At first, I had visions of being entirely cut off from the world, but as it turned out, the human connections at the residency and at the town where I was staying began to play a pivotal role in providing a more tempered experience. I did imagine that there would be aspects of living in the desert that would be unexpected that would shift the focus or dimensions of experiments, but had not considered that would erupt from human interaction.
It is possible to consider the harshness of the chemical desert and then view that harshness amplified and compounded by secrecy, industrialism, and paranoia and expect that those characteristics to be the only fruit of the vastness. Earlier, when Vince referred to the notion of the desert as a blank canvas, a surface for projection (literally and conceptually), I recognized that attuning my body and mind to the rhythms of living at that location are as much a part of the work as the images themselves.
I was at Goldwell long enough to begin to acclimate to the remoteness of the location. There was a general store, gas station, a lunch counter, a saloon, and very little else. When the groceries ran out on Monday, you would have to wait until the truck showed up on Wednesday –or drive ninety miles to the next closest supplies. In attuning to these new rhythms, I began to find that there is a relativism to remoteness. On excursions from the home base of the residency into the wilderness of the Amargosa, Death and Panamint Valleys, which lie parallel to one another; the outline of familiar mountains and dunes provided much more than way-finding, but rather, an unexpected sentiment: comfort.
Perhaps it is the immediacy of mortal danger, where preparing for scenarios like a flat tire, or running low on water, that would otherwise be inconveniences, is what heightens the sense of ease that comes with approaching the familiar: a particular stand of bushes, riparian glade, or even a bundle of fencing, tailings, or shift from sand to gravel roads. After a while, it seems reasonable to provide these physical features with nicknames and epithet, since it is appealing to pretend that they are in some manner benevolent.

Lanfranco Aceti

My next question is on the importance of the traditional concept of residency and its relationship to space. One of the aspects of contemporary art (in new media or other platforms) is that of revealing new concepts and challenging old assumptions based on new interpretations and engagements with the space. Do you believe that there is a space for 'virtual residencies' and what could be the frameworks that are most suitable to contemporary artistic practices?

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Paul Catanese

My residency experiences have focused on a break from the everyday, while simultaneously engaging with new individuals, sites, and technologies. Embodiment of the unfamiliar coupled with a self-induced rupture from routines, and the subsequent reflection on my reaction to the reorganization of my working processes is at the core of what I am seeking from a residency experience. Immersion is key. I want to learn things that I had not planned to learn, and physical relocation intrinsically catalyzes these types of experiences.

I do believe that 'virtual residencies' have a role to play and are absolutely capable with regard to challenging assumptions of space and inducing ruptures that encourage meta-reflection. In terms of what frameworks are suitable –I wonder if one pre-requisite could be to invite individuals who are in transit/traveling to simultaneously be in a virtual residency. I've often thought it would be interesting to participate in a residency program that funds individuals to travel somewhere and report back on what they find. Perhaps if this were coupled with a virtual residency, the role of the resident shifts. Where the experience of the residency tends to solely be first-person, perhaps it could be used to additionally provide a third-person view for everyone else. Of course, at this point, I've essentially re-invented non-virtual residencies to take on virtual components –and it sounds suspiciously like a travelogue.

I find the conversation we're having contains elements of 'virtual residency' that are valuable. Participating in a discussion over an extended period of time with individuals who are in Australia and Turkey, while I'm here in Chicago has been rewarding, and in itself functions as a way of reflecting on the experiences of the desert. Our conversation is more critical and probing, since in the desert, it was mostly about experimentation, drawing, and survival, whereas we are almost entirely focused on the analyzing that experience. The framework reminds me somewhat of what is successful about the asynchronous discussions on Empyre. It could also be interesting to embrace the notion of conversation in dislocated space such as in 'this spartan life' or even 'sleep is death' –where virtual space functions as a location for conversation. That being said, I'll admit, I'd prefer if I also were able to walk around Istanbul or Melbourne as part of our conversation, where I might have the feeling of being out of my element, or was able to share a cup of tea with each of you.

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