

The World Needs Forms

Curator's Essay introducing LEA Digital Media Exhibition
"E-escapes: Artistic Explorations of Nature and Science" featuring
Paul Catanese & Jane Prophet.

Leonardo Electronic Almanac's digital media exhibition platform was inaugurated by a pair of projects developed by two established artists who throughout their respective careers have produced works that respond in highly personalised ways to the interdisciplinary potential afforded by creative technologies. In deciding to present Paul Catanese and Jane Prophet together during the autumn of 2010, LEA's curatoriate had hoped that some connections might be drawn from their respective artistic projects and that these resulting insights would be more than fortuitous. While the serendipitous relationships that did eventuate cannot be claimed fully by design on the curators' part, it is wholly welcomed nonetheless.

I find myself writing these initial observations from an exaggerated perspective... At this moment, the trajectory of a flight path is being traced over a small pixilated screen set into the chair-back facing me. This graphic representation is contrasted by the abstraction provided by my aerial vantage, looking out the window to my right, high above Western Australia. While jagged raster lines demarcate territories and trace trajectories, below, the terrain is scored by scales and fine tracks that mark currents (of wind and possibly water, long evaporated) that have coursed across the surface of the land and define the contours and shifting materialities of surface (sand, scrub, bush and brush). Fine grained, dusty and vaguely defined expanses form into colour fields of puce and orange. Green tinged shadows are unexpectedly interrupted by the localized shimmer of light bouncing off a small cluster of built structures; presumably steel or aluminium clad.

Viewed in juxtaposition, Paul Catanese's "Visible from Space" and Jane Prophet's "Explorations of Structure" are related by an apparent contradiction: different but same, same but different. Their distinctively different artistic and aesthetic motivations are exercised by a common sense of curiosity. Catanese's vision is magnetically attracted to the desert; first down to its dry, scratched earthiness, then up to its cold, clear light. While Prophet is drawn to the pastoral, green and rich with the promise of moisture. Both artists, similarly, apply imaginative projection to propose future scenarios, while communicating different expressive qualities. Each fuels their individual artistic program from the layering and comingling of different systems, whether natural or human. In searching for orders that may extend beyond the natural sciences, might their projects even be deemed *psycho-climactic*? Both are intrigued by the widest range of human, cultural, scientific and technological interventions of the land and how these propagate different ecologies, landscape traditions, belief systems and boundaries. In order to communicate something about this, their art draws upon a variety of cultures of visual language (diagrammatic, graphic, perspectival and photographic). Designed initially in direct response to the particular opportunity presented by the online exhibition structure of LEA's social media platforms, Catanese and Prophet made use of the building blocks of word and picture to compose meaning and explication, using this amalgamated format as tool to systematically interrogate as well as weave a form of allusive poetry.

The relation between their individual projects might be figured paradoxically as parallel lines of enquiry that converge and intersect before continuing along their distinct courses. Over the month of September 2010, Paul Catanese presented a formative project developed during a residency in Death Valley. The resulting portfolio of images is a portent to further potentialities by acting literally (and figuratively) as groundwork. Proceeding from a different direction, Prophet's exhibition the following month took the opportunity to undertake a process of reflective analysis. As the images selected unfolded sequentially throughout October, the rich seams and resilient threads that connect an artist's creative production over a number of years are retrospectively unearthed.

A quality that is shared by both artists and sustains their different creative practices is their sense of astonishment. In analyzing art as a social and perceptual system, Niklas Luhmann (2000) writes how astonishment:

affects not only the observer of art but also the artist. The observer may be struck by the work's success and then embark on a step-by-step reconstruction of how it came about. But the artist is equally struck by the order that emerges from his own hands in the course of a rapidly changing relationship between provocation and possible response, problem and solution, irritation and escape. This is how order emerges from self-irritation, which, however, requires the prior differentiation of a medium of art to decide that this order differs in its stakes from what occurs elsewhere in reality. (p.146-7)

Two dusty tracks run off side by side towards the horizon. No water, nor even the promise of any down there... While up here, viewed at eye level through my window there spans a layer of stratospheric

haze that in its own formless way demarcates the terrestrial from ultramarine blue sky. When I shift my focus to the surface plane of the airplane's window, I notice that it is marked by finely etched filaments of condensing ice.

The otherness of the desert below presents itself to me as strangely familiar, reminding me of the ridges than run across the pads of my fingertips. As I tap out these words at the speed of 500mph from the abstracted altitude of 36,000ft, my recollection of the works produced by Paul Catanese and Jane Prophet make me think about humanness –theirs as much as mine, and any other viewer of their work –and how the structure of exploration underlies our very being.

Vince Dziekan

NOTE

The title of this essay and quoted reference are drawn from Niklas Luhmann's *Art as a social system*. See Luhmann, N. 2000. *Art as a social system*. Transl. E.M. Knodt. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

LEA International Curatoriate:

Curator: Vince Dziekan, (Monash University and FACT Associate).
Senior Curators: Lanfranco Aceti (Goldsmiths College and Sabanci University) and Christiane Paul (The New School and Whitney Museum of American Art).

Vince Dziekan

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