

UNKNOWN KNOWNS

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BY



WILEY AKER

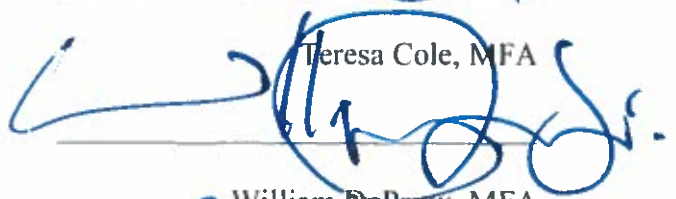
APPROVED:



Kevin H. Jones, MFA, Advisor



Teresa Cole, MFA



William DePauw, MFA



Richard Snow, PHD

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In March 2003, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously opined on variations of the relationship between the known and the unknown. Shortly afterwards, writing in the leftist magazine “In These Times”, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek described a crucial fourth permutation. “Unknown Knowns, the things that we don’t know that we know, are the disavowed beliefs, suppositions, and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values”.

“Unknown Knowns” explore the psychological landscapes of this phenomenon, collapsing footage from news broadcasts, Defense Department archives, political rallies, and other sources into undulating landscapes. Axes of time and space indexed in the source materials are here collapsed into simultaneous and continuous planes. The viewer is placed on the precipice of knowing and unknowing in a way that echoes the background noise of American life; even when you seem to grasp a whole, the specificity and context of any given image remains elusive.

The overwhelming stream of images we receive from the news media, mass media, advertising, and the government is the main site of investigation of my work. Mass media constantly imprints itself upon us with or without permission. Every shopping center, waiting room, or telephone call line has a soundtrack; almost every road in America is plastered with countless advertisements. Images in the news media, particularly those relating to America’s foreign policy and conflicts, arise from a deep media ecology that is often overlooked even as it imposes an ideological frame on our perception of reality. By working with footage sourced from a variety of archives I hope to break this frame and expose the meaning-making processes that are always at work in the increasingly networked and connected world.

Media Ecology, a theoretical framework emerging from media studies starting in the 1960s, has served as a foundation for the work that makes up “Unknown Knowns”. At its core, Media Ecology is concerned with how communication mediums and technologies frame our perception and understanding of reality by creating “an environment that surrounds the individual and models their perception and cognition”¹. Marshall McLuhan, one of the early figures in the development of this field, believes that this process occurs on a subconscious level writing that “the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter [...] patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance”². Emerging mediums of communication “classify the world for us, sequence it, enlarge it, reduce it, color it, [and] argue a case for what the world is like”³. My work is a manifestation of the underlying psychological processes described here, representing a state of flux as the mind grapples with an overwhelming flow of images enabled by contemporary communication systems.

Thy Glad Beams, a looping video work projected on a large wall in the exhibition, is constructed largely from FLIR (forward looking infrared radiometer) footage recorded during recent conflicts. The footage is drawn from a mixture of sources including government media agencies, social media posts, online video repositories, and unsanctioned leaks. Once these files were accessed, they were downloaded and catalogued based on formal considerations, in the process largely stripping them of their specificity to any given combat theater.

¹ Scolari, Carlos A. "Media Ecology: Exploring the Metaphor to Expand the Theory." *Communication Theory* 22.2 (2012): 204.

² McLuhan, M. (2003). *Understanding me: Lectures & interviews*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

³ Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing ourselves to death*. New York, NY: Penguin.

In constructing this work I isolated discrete elements from many videos, stabilized them to account for camera movement or rotation, and looped them. For this piece, I chose to collect mostly natural elements such as trees and other plants. I then reconstructed a landscape from these disparate elements, forming a varied scene that collapses the archive into one plane. This is meant to echo the way the era of the Global War on Terror constructs its reality through a simultaneous flood of information and lack of context. The implications of this media ecology creep closer to home as the US-Mexico border becomes militarized, domestic law enforcement agencies acquire unmanned aerial vehicles, and American citizens are killed by air strikes under a shadowy targeted killing program⁴. These issues are part of a complex web of policies the viewer is uncomfortably implicated in when viewing the piece. Undergirding the work is a droning soundscape produced with various resonant filters and audio field recordings. Along with the sound component of another video piece, *Cataract*, this forms the soundscape for the exhibition. The subtly shifting drone lulls the viewer into a familiar yet slightly uncomfortable mental space as they move throughout the exhibition.

The two globe pieces in the front room express the same idea. *Globe (no_image)* takes snippets from the same collection of footage as *Thy Glad Beams* and wraps them around several rotating spheres, allowing images to emerge from one another in complex ways. *Globe (election_year)* takes footage from political events over the course of 2016 and isolates stage and film lighting as television cameras pan across rallies, debates, and other forums. It is responding to a sense of spectacle and the way that has come to stand in for public discourse. *Cataract* obfuscates this footage through a cascading series of

⁴ Miller, Greg. "Long-sought Memo on Lethal Drone Strike Is Released." The Washington Post, 23 June 2014. Web. 22 Apr. 2016.

lines and a low drone, referencing a repeating film reel. The association is amplified by the inclusion of a filtered recording of a reel-to-reel tape player that is used as part of the audio for the piece.

A significant source of inspiration for this work were early video art practitioners Dara Birnbaum and Nam June Paik, who were exploring the ideological frames of mass media from the early 1970s onward. Dara Birnbaum's *Hostage* utilized archival footage to similarly implicate the audience and question their role as passive viewer. Here the archive accessed to create the work consists of footage related to the Red Army Faction's kidnapping and murder of Hans Martin Schleyer in 1977. Before being killed, Schleyer had been coerced into reading statements prepared by the RAF; Baudrillard subsequently wrote that the minute the footage of this was televised Schleyer became devalued; through the medium of broadcast he had been used for all he was worth⁵. Most of the members of the first generation of the RAF were captured shortly after this incident and were famously found dead in their cells in apparent suicides.

The medium of television also became a tool used by the West German government. In describing the incident, media theorist Dot Tuer writes that "through the filtering of information, television became an arena of simulated negotiation with the kidnappers that masked the lack of political will to achieve a resolution to the crisis[;] the television screen served to sensationalize the drama of the situation rather than delineate the issues that lay behind the kidnapping"⁶. This framing encouraged politicians to

⁵ Kelley, Karren, and Barbara Schroder. "Dara Birnbaum." BOMB June 2008: 70. Print

⁶ Tuer, Dot. "Mining the Media Archive: When History Meets Simulation in the Work of Dara Birnbaum and Stan Douglas." *Mining the Media Archive: Essays on Art, Technology, and Cultural Resistance*. Toronto: YYZ, 2005. 47. Print

refrain from criticizing the judiciary and police which subsequently caused many artists and commentators to be concerned about the development of a police state.

Birnbaum represents this series of events in a six-channel video installation. Six monitors are mounted from the ceiling of the gallery in a straight line, playing video from the cells of the RAF members, hostage tapes, and news clips relating to the incident. Hung in front of each monitor is a black silhouette of a human torso with a series of concentric circles approximating a shooting range target. When viewed head on, the piece reminds one of looking down a shooting gallery and seeing paper targets hung along a track. A laser shines from the back of the installation, landing on the body of the spectator and physically implicating them in the piece to other observers present in the room. Birnbaum wanted the viewer to question where their responsibility towards such things begins and ends⁷.

The medium of television, like the state-sponsored media from which the body of work in *Unknown Knowns* draws, is largely intended to be one-directional. It imposes an ideological frame with which it encourages its audience to interpret the broader world. Tuer notes that Birnbaum creates a “blueprint for the future in which it is not the television or computer screen that dematerializes identity and destabilizes experience, but the lived experience of ideological confrontation that haunts an ordered hierarchy of representation”⁸. By transforming the media archive through artistic intervention one can expose the ideological function of the medium and free reality from a prescribed interpretation that is promulgated through a largely one directional media ecosystem.

⁷Karren, and Schroder 70

⁸Tuer 50

The specific nature of a given archive has a great impact on the form and content of the information it contains. Media Theorist Domietta Torlasco quotes Derrida as saying “the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archive-able content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event”⁹. For Birnbaum the footage was all stored in a format designed to be reproduced on a commercial television set. This influenced the aspect ratio, resolution, color balance, audio, and formal composition of the content she reproduced. In addition, the archive selectively immortalizes a narrative of the German Autumn from one perspective in this way “producing the event” as noted above.

The archives accessed to construct this body of work have their own set of processes structuring the media they store. Defense Video and Imagery Distribution System (DVIDS), one of the major sources of material, is designed by the U.S. Government to facilitate requests for “video, audio, still imagery and print products, coordinate interviews with soldiers in commanders in a combat zone, and provide an archive for ongoing operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain”¹⁰. Here the archive is explicitly designed to spread information about conflicts in which the U.S. government is embroiled and promote the state’s mission abroad. Video clips are organized as B-roll or as packaged footage with an imposed narrative. While this system is set up with the appearance of transparency, it quickly becomes clear that it is designed to promote a reading of the events it describes. In a glaring example, we can see from its

⁹ Torlasco, Domietta. "Archiving Disappearance: From Michelangelo Antonioni to New Media." *The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2013. 76. Print.

¹⁰ "About DMA/DVIDS." Defense Media Activity. Web. 22 Apr. 2016.

mission statement that it is explicitly designed to archive information from only a handful of the combat zones the military is engaged in, excluding operations in Syria, Pakistan, Yemen, the Horn of Africa region, the Trans Sahara region and others. By juxtaposing footage from a multitude of combat theaters into a partially abstracted tableau, my work, pushes back against the narrative intent of the archive and promotes sustained critical consideration of the events depicted and similar ones occurring around the globe.

In contrast to the archive of news footage that Birnbaum explored, the footage collected in DVIDS and elsewhere had less of its formal qualities prescribed by the archive itself. Because footage in a variety of aspect ratios and resolutions is available, the formal qualities of the video serve as an indexical mark of the time the video was produced. Earlier footage, generally starting from 2003, is lower resolution and framed in a wider variety of aspect ratios. Prior to the widespread adoption of HD formats, footage intended for broadcast was generally constrained to a 4:3 ratio and internet video was constrained to lower quality as internet connections were much slower than at present. At that time the ‘embedded journalist’ was also a widespread phenomenon which allowed the government to outsource the image production of the Defense Media Activity. Newer footage is archived in an aspect ratio closer to the HD standard 16:9 and is encoded at a considerably higher resolution. Many of my works retain this indexical mark through the interplay between images of varying resolutions in the finished work, even as the layering of content flattens time and space while forcing a sense of simultaneity.

The idea of challenging the hierarchical organization of reality presented by television is something that many video artists have taken up. Nam June Paik brought the

television into the gallery in a variety of sculptural and evocative ways. His installation *Electronic Superhighway* was constructed out of 336 televisions, 50 DVD players, 3,750 feet of cable and 575 feet of neon tubing¹¹. The neon tubes in the foreground trace a map of the United States in a rainbow of colors. Behind this television are stacked on top of each other playing clips gathered from film and television along with audio from *The Wizard of Oz*, *Oklahoma* and other classics. The piece is a portrait of America that shows how media shapes our understanding of ourselves. By juxtaposing these mediated views of American national identity with the map, Paik is challenging television's organization of experience.

In an article on the origins of video art, Art Historian John Hanhardt notes that "by violating the social and cultural frames of reference we use to organize everyday life [Paik] broke the frame. [He] undermined the law of television by employing collage to make us uneasily aware of how television functions as a medium shaping our worldviews"¹². By transforming the source material in my work through layering, filters, and juxtaposition the work similarly comments on the way our view of foreign policy and modern warfare is shaped by a media ecology that is largely overlooked.

These aesthetic techniques were pioneered through collage in the early 20th century. As Picasso and Braque used collage on paper to respond to the explosion of advertising and other media in the public urban space; collage today has expanded to include the video content which increasingly permeates contemporary society. Museum

¹¹ "Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii by Nam June Paik". Smithsonian American Art Museum Renwick Gallery. Web. 22 Apr. 2016.

¹² Hanhardt, John G. "Dé-collage/Collage: Notes Toward a Reexamination of the Origins of Video Art." *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*. Ed. Sally Jo. Fifer and Doug Hall. New York, NY: Aperture in Association with the Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990. 73. Print.

of Modern Art curator Laura Hoptman notes that collage can create a “horizontal cloud of information” and provide a way to “experience information simultaneously” which may be truer to our real-time experiences of people, places, and information¹³. Collage has an ability to collapse time and space allowing us to reach beyond our immediate surroundings¹⁴.

Through this function, collage is often used as a critical commentary on politics and culture; the technique is formally linked to “disparity, upheaval and rupture”¹⁵.

Martha Rosler’s *Bringing the War Home* series is emblematic of this. The series of collages juxtaposes images of “the Vietnam war with photographs of domestic interiors clipped from popular magazines”¹⁶. The works suggest a continuous space between the two and prods us to consider the interconnectedness of America’s home life with its combat operations abroad.

The print and transparency works in the exhibition respond to this history of collage. *Partition, Pastoral, October Skein, and Gray-Line* are attempts to represent how we experience information simultaneously. Like the video works they isolate discrete elements from the archival footage and reconfigure them into expressionist scenes aiming to capture the subconscious work of a particular media ecology. *War Rug (Vehicles)* and *War Rug (Apparitions)* achieve this in a different way, creating repeating patterns across the surfaces of a canvas fabric that brings this imagery into a domestic setting. The three transparency pieces, *Target Structures, Target, and Target Systems* aim to capture this

¹³ Wolff, Rachel. "Cut-and-Paste Culture: The New Collage." ARTNEWS, 12 Dec. 2013. Web. 02 Mar. 2016.

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ "Gladiators, from the "Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful" Series." Museum of Contemporary Photography. Columbia College Chicago. Web. 22 Apr. 2016.

subconscious work in progress. The two outside pieces isolate particular elements on a grid, only to have them meld into a unified abstracted form in *Target*, the center piece.

Thomas Brockelman draws a connection between the postmodern collage tradition and the sublime. Through teasing a definitive meaning collage provokes the same kind of open ended inquiry that interactions with the sublime do. He writes:

The sublime exists where the subject cannot find form, the result is a paradoxical painful pleasure. The subject is frustrated in its search for an identifiable form, the object proves too big or powerful for comprehension. The failure of the imagination to conceive of this object incites reason to conceive of the object which must transcend all presentation – the absolutely great or powerful.¹⁷

The frustration and failure of imagination in the face of the sublime tableau is one of the processes through which artworks can “break the frame” and expose how mass media shapes our worldview. In the face of the sublime “we may go on and on in fascinated horror in our perception of the sublime scene, but any meaning or pleasure that we derive from such a process does not represent the object”¹⁸.

The works in *Unknown Knowns* present a scene that hints at a greater understanding than it provides to the viewer. Signifiers suggest certain locations and

¹⁷ Brockelman, Thomas P. "Kant and Collage: Judgment, Avant-gardism, and the Sublime." *The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and the Postmodern*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2001. 96. Print.

¹⁸ Ibid 108.

times but offers no definitive or objective read. Remnants of the cockpit displays of aircraft hover on screen suggesting a specific place and moment without revealing it. This positions the viewer on the verge of understanding and encourages a sustained thought process.

For Brockelmann this oscillating condition promises a way forward for art after the high-conceptualism of the mid-late 20th century that he casts as a sustained interaction with the sublime that is ultimately reducible to an existential project that presents the fact that the unrepresentable exists¹⁹. If this stands in opposition to the earlier aesthetics of beauty, than this oscillating approach, typified by the collage tradition, is a dialectical synthesis of the two; “It lies between the sublime and the beautiful in offering a promise of cognition but refusing to promise limitless comprehensibility.”²⁰ He calls this the aesthetic of the tease which demands a process of interpretation that is not interrupted by the judgment of taste and is explicitly an art of open meaning⁽²¹.

Collage and the media archive are both rich sites for artistic intervention. Through accessing the archive one can draw upon the raw material that shapes the mediated view of reality. Formal qualities imposed by the archive itself become important and by accentuating and manipulating them an artwork can begin to puncture constructed ideological frames. The conventions governing how these images are normally received is upended, forcing a prolonged process of interpretation. The collage techniques of layering and juxtaposing enhance this effect. The axes of time and space that are meticulously indexed in the archive are collapsed into a simultaneous and

¹⁹ Ibid 97.

²⁰ Ibid 107.

²¹ Ibid 112.

continuous plane. *Unknown Knowns* places the viewer on the precipice of understanding, promoting an uneasy reckoning with the way they conceive of actions nominally carried out in their name.

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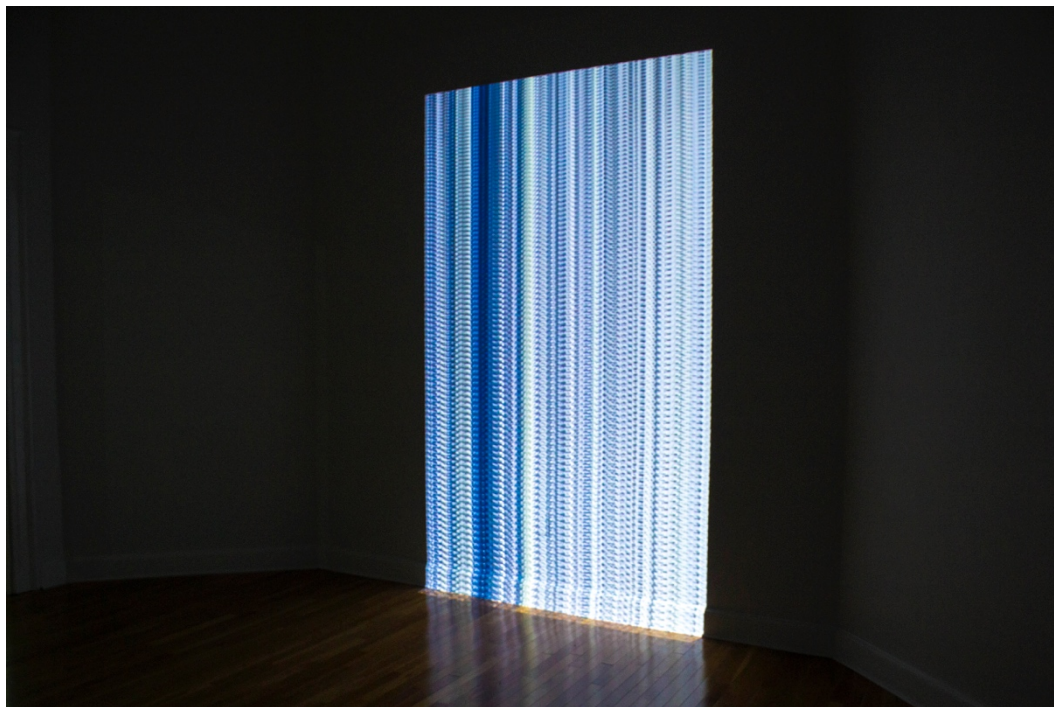


Globe (election_year), video loop, 2017

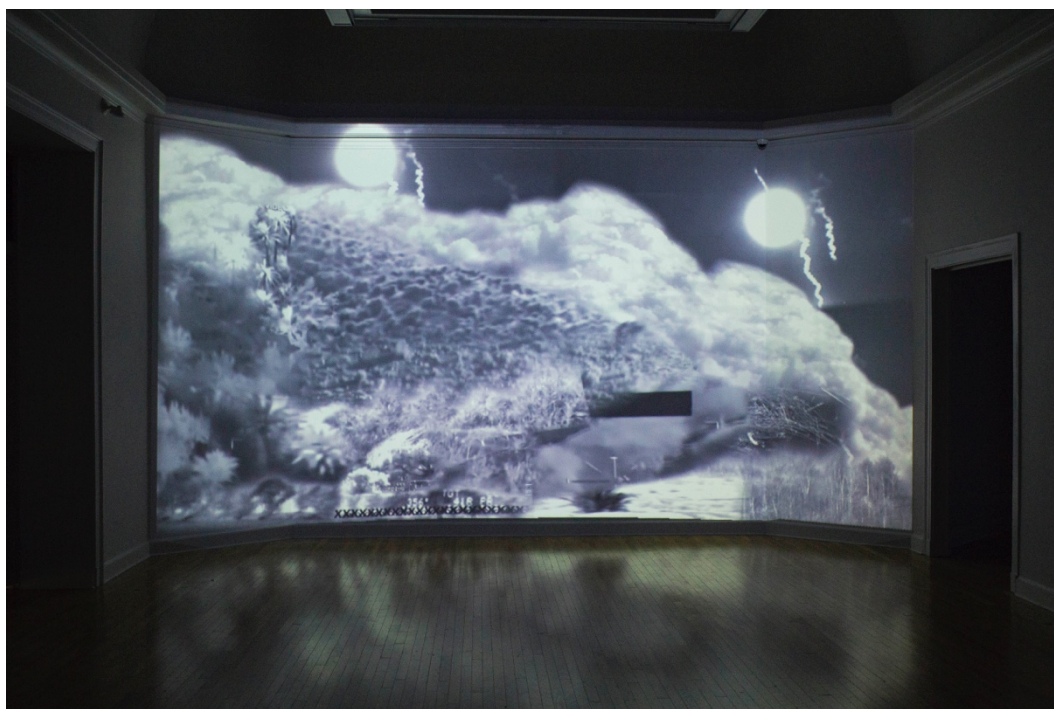


(Right) *Globe (election_year)*, video loop, 2017

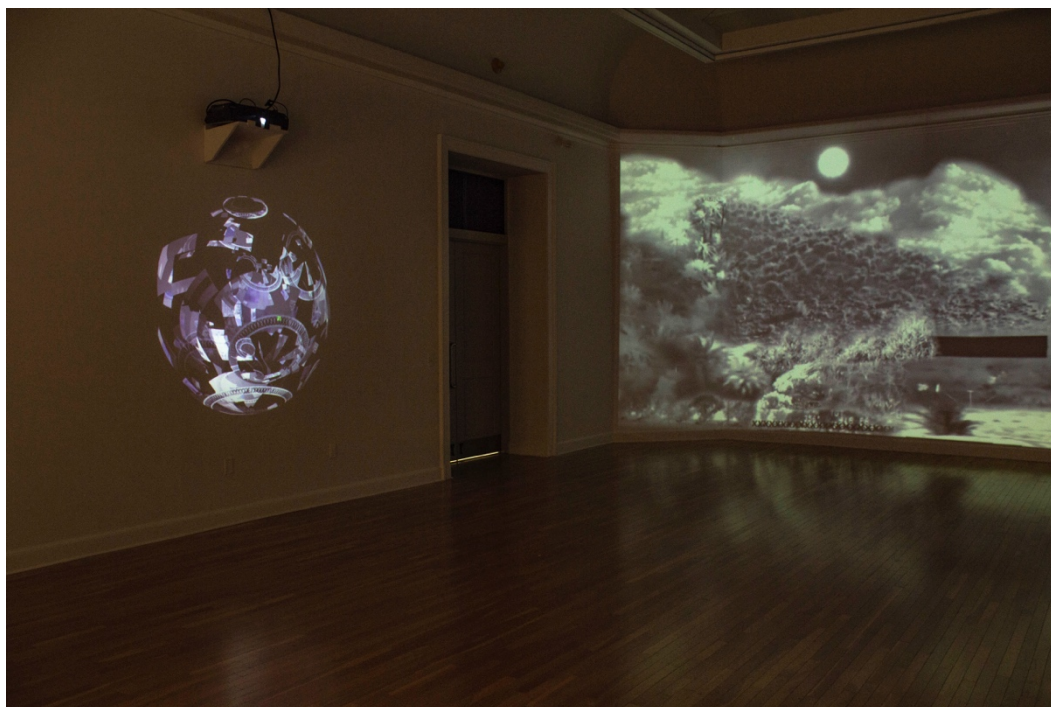
(Left) *Cataract*, video loop with sound, 2016



Cataract, video loop with sound, 2016



Thy Glad Beams, video loop with sound, 2016



(Left) *Globe (no_image)*, video loop, 2017.
(Right) *Thy Glad Beams*, video loop with sound, 2016.



Globe (no_image), video loop, 2017



(Left) *Target Structures*, digital print on acetate, overhead projector, 2017.
(Center) *Target Redacted*, digital print on acetate, overhead projector, 2017.
(Right) *Target Systems*, digital print on acetate, overhead projector, 2017.



Target Redacted, digital print on acetate, overhead projector, 2017.



Target Structures, digital print on acetate, overhead projector, 2017.



Target Systems, digital print on acetate, overhead projector, 2017.



(Left) *Partition*, 14" x 7^{5/8}", digital print, 2017. (Center) *Pastoral*, 18" x 14", digital print, 2017. (Right) *October Skein*, 25" x 15^{1/2}", digital print, 2017.



(Left) *Gray-line*, 32" x 18", digital print, 2017. (Center) *War Rug (Vehicles)*, 44" x 72", digital print on fabric, 2017. (Right) *Fog*, video loop, electronics, acrylic, 2016.



Detail of *War Rug (Vehicles)*.



Detail of *Fog*.



(Left) *War Rug Vehicles*. (Center) *Fog*. (Right) *War Rug (Apparitions)*, 44" x 72", digital print on fabric, 2017.



Detail of *War Rug (Apparitions)*.

Biography

Wiley Aker's work in video, sound, and new media explores the psychological landscapes that mediate reality in the networked world. A Pennsylvania native, he currently lives and works in New Orleans, Louisiana.