



Knowledge Circuit

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War as Architecture

by Tom Vanderbilt (excerpt)

One might reduce war to violence and art to aesthetics, but it is more useful, albeit more unsettling, to explore what happens when one removes those perceived oppositions. This was one of the underlying themes of the 'Future of War' conference, to 'challenge comfortable categories' as moderator Helen Nissenbaum phrased it at the outset of the opening panel, 'The Aesthetics and Politics of Technologized Warfare.' The first presenter, the artist **Joy Garnett**, spoke while behind her on the screen flashed images of her paintings drawn from the haunting imagery of the military complex, stark images of contrails streaking through a night sky ('Tracer Fire') or stealth bombers in patterned flight. Her paintings, which seek to use a more primal medium to wrest meaning out of an image saturated environment, evoked from one audience member a comparison to the recent use of 'satellite phones' by embedded correspondents in Iraq. Did the shaky, pixilated images, with literal and figurative gaps in their composition, obscure the 'reality' of what was happening or did their low-tech immediacy actually enhance the realism? We needed a McLuhan — was the sat phone a 'hot' or 'cool' medium?

Imagery is another condition shared by war and architecture: just as most of us do not experience war, we often do not experience architecture; rather, we 'know' a building (through its repeated transmission) via photography. But images do not just happen, they are created, and for a reason. Many of Garnett's paintings were drawn from weapons effects testing in the Nevada desert in the 1950s. The hundreds of thousands of images (still and moving) generated by this activity were, largely, classified for many decades. These were 'images as dangerous as the isotopes that produced them,' she noted. Images as toxic waste, to be buried beneath the sand. Inherent in her work is a questioning of the 'effects' of classifying these 'effects tests.' What happens when imagery is removed, left in the dark for decades? What happens when it is returned to the light? Scratchy footage of atomic tests from the Nevada deserts, as men in goggles look on, functions nowadays more as historical kitsch than pure horror. It has been sanitized by time, rendered as a strictly historical document. 'Declassification' speaks to their political and aesthetic impotence. Of course, the weapons tests were hardly secret — people gathered on predawn Las Vegas rooftops to view them. They saw in the blasts — (they never saw the 'effects') — something else: perhaps a sublime beauty, felt perhaps an awed speechless and frightened reverence towards man's ability for self-destruction.