

# ARCHITECTURE MAKES US

CINEMATIC VISIONS OF  
SONIA LEBER & DAVID CHESWORTH

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sovereignty has never been ceded.

ΔRCHITECTURE  
MΔKES US

CINEMΔTIC  
VISIONS OF  
SONIΔ LEBER  
& DΔVID  
CHESWORTH



<sup>1</sup>  
Sonia Leber and David Chesworth  
Biography, *Architecture Makes Us:  
Cinematic Visions of Sonia Leber and  
David Chesworth*, 2018, exhibition  
catalogue p.59.

<sup>2</sup>  
Sonia Leber and David Chesworth  
in conversation with Naomi Cass,  
March 2018.

The four gallery spaces of CCP are a kind of silent partner in the development and realisation of mid career surveys. Sonically, they are one space, which challenges the presentation of sound-based works and yet, these galleries have a remarkable ability to slowly unfold the story of an artist's practice. This has been true for the previous mid career surveys—of Anne Zahalka (2008), Simryn Gill (2009) and David Rosetzky (2013)—yet the architecture of CCP is particularly relevant to both the intention and realisation of *Architecture Makes Us: Cinematic Visions of Sonia Leber and David Chesworth*.

Significantly, it is through sound that Leber and Chesworth reinforce the dimensionality and architecture of site, as well as the duration of our exhibition viewing. Sound both orients the viewer toward individual works and subtly confounds our journey throughout. It is their positioning and editing of sound and image together—sometimes obvious but often not; sometimes in real time; sometimes apparently accelerating or decelerating—which is the remarkable accomplishment of these two artists.

Known for their distinctive, highly detailed video works, Leber and Chesworth's practice begins in the real, however it is their mark to re-present this within the realm of the imaginary without denying the broadly political. They describe their work as “developed through expansive research in places undergoing social change... speculative and archaeological, responding to architectural, social, and technological settings”.<sup>1</sup>

Leber and Chesworth have always been concerned with site—sometimes architectural, sometimes social—whether in their earlier sonic installations or post 2007 when their practice evolved to include video. Previously architecture was a pretext and context, now it comes to the viewer cinematically.

In the context of this survey, architecture, technology and ideology speak to how individuals, small communities of interest, and broader cultures distinguish themselves, not just from nature, but from each other. Visually and sonically *Architecture Makes Us* explores “craggy geographies, territorialisation, surveillance, exhausted systems and future philosophies”.<sup>2</sup>

The 8-channel installation *Geography Becomes Territory Becomes* (2018) opens the exhibition and has been commissioned for this survey. A further five works spiral around CCP's nautilus galleries and Night Projection Window. Judiciously selecting works from a ten-year period has been challenging—but this is the critical task of a survey—and I acknowledge Leber and Chesworth for their robust engagement with the process and in realising this catalogue. We particularly thank them for making *Geography Becomes Territory Becomes*, a significant new video work.

I acknowledge and thank co-members of the curatorium, Pippa Milne and Madé Spencer-Castle: Milne for deftly ushering the survey into being and Spencer-Castle for stepping in at the pointy end of the process and skilfully realising the installation and catalogue. For this publication each of the five video works exhibited and stills from a sixth have been specifically addressed by different writers. I acknowledge the incisive contributions of Giles Fielke, Fiona Gruber, Pippa Milne, Nikos Papastergiadis, Kate Warren and Amelia Winata. Mention must also be made of the distinctive graphic identity and catalogue design by Joseph Johnson.

CCP is grateful for substantial support from the Australia Council to present *Architecture Makes Us*, including funds to commission new work, a significant component of CCP mid career surveys. The Gordon Darling Foundation has graciously funded this exhibition catalogue and is gratefully acknowledged.

*Architecture Makes Us* is a deep focus on the singular work of two artists, whose seamless collaboration interrogates the human world, with incursions into remote landscapes, mid-century technology, utopian visions and the all-seeing eye of the military-industrial complex.

Naomi Cass was Director of Centre for Contemporary Photography 2004–2018 and member of the curatorium for *Architecture Makes Us*.

# GEOGRAPHY BECOMES TERRITORY BECOMES

LIST OF WORKS  
Sonia Leber & David Chesworth  
*Geography Becomes Territory Becomes*, 2018. 8-channel HD video installation, non-sync playback, 14 minutes. Courtesy the artists.  
FILMING, EDITING AND  
SOUND DESIGN  
Sonia Leber & David Chesworth  
COLOUR GRADING  
Peter Hatzipavlis

IMAGE CREDITS  
P. 02, 07, 08–09, 34–35  
PHOTO: Sonia Leber & David  
Chesworth, *Geography Becomes  
Territory Becomes*, 2018. 8-channel HD  
video installation, non-sync playback, 14  
minutes (video still). Courtesy the artists.  
Photograph by Sonia Leber.

KEY ACKNOWLEDGEMENT  
*Geography Becomes Territory Becomes*,  
2018 was commissioned by Centre for  
Contemporary Photography, Melbourne.  
This project has been supported by an  
Australia Council residency at Helsinki  
International Artist Program and a  
NAVA Visual Arts Fellowship supported  
by Copyright Agency’s Cultural Fund.



Indulge sore souls, born  
To a terracotta world.  
*Monte Morgan, Client Liaison*

I have never been to Finland. It seems reasonable to doubt that I will ever visit there. Rather, I am in Galicia. I’m staying in an apartment just off the Avenida Finisterra, a Spanish legacy of the Roman empire which translates to mean ‘the end of the earth’. (A town nearby is also named Finisterra because it once marked the Western edge of the “old world”.) *Non plus ultra*, nothing further beyond. As an Australian subject, an anxiety about where the world ends, and where it may in fact begin, is commonplace. However, there has been a notable shift away from questions of sovereignty in recent times—a reality too difficult to confront, perhaps—towards something like a reconsideration of earth that seeks to look beyond modernity as a spiritual homelessness—a disenchantment—that seems to instead be about meaning, of orientation. Every de-territorialisation is a re-territorialisation. Sonia Leber & David Chesworth’s *Geography Becomes Territory Becomes*, an 8-channel video installation shot in Finland, separates the Cartesian cartography of the map into a series of mediated obstructions. The work’s soundtrack, however, is borrowed from elsewhere. This creates a boundlessness in the work which plays against the looping images. The central



tension is revealed to be teleological: where are these new limits we must face today?

Suomenlinna is an 18th century fortress, but it is also a threshold. It occupies a zone between the exploded Precambrian bed-rock used to make up its walls, and the reclamation of the site by the grasses growing in the sediment. There is no centre. The camera-eye makes sure of this. Instead, there is anonymity of the shelter, documented and fragmented by its capture as an abstract edifice. We are made international by the promiscuous isolation of the camera as a non-site—how ironic. No longer situated at a site for projecting outwards, rather it is already a space that ‘goes both ways’, like George R.R. Martin presenting his song of fire and ice in miniature with his short story set on Suomenlinna, *The Fortress*.

In addition to where, it now seems obvious to ask *what* are the ends of the earth? Is it possible that its ends take place not at the boundaries, but at this threshold—between the dynamic magma of hardened rock and the forged brick that becomes the basic unit for building? This is how I understand Leber and Chesworth’s work, shot on site in the Finnish fortress, but which concerns itself with architecture not as a demarcation of space, but almost as a growth: a dissolution of the distinction between the inorganic and the natural environment. The organisation of the inorganic—as Bernard



Stiegler’s re-articulation of technics has devised—seeks to do something to the techniques of the material world that undoes any fundamental alienation from it.

From Galicia I write to a friend:

“Hello,

I’ve been meaning to write to you for a bit. I’ve been away for only nine days but it really feels like an aeon. I dropped the drummer off at the La Coruña train station at 5.30am to get his train to Porto. Afterwards I drove the Europcar around in the dark for a while, trying to get a feel for the city. I then decided to go straight to the Tower of Hercules. It is an ancient structure that lies at the northern tip of the western Spanish coast. It was raining and desolate when I arrived, but it was clearing, so I waited around for the sun to rise. Just the early hour meant it was one of the most spontaneous things I’ve done for a while. I had absolutely no idea where I was, or what the coastline would look like and I needed daylight to come to reveal it. I was thinking about film, it was like the whole earth had turned into a



giant cinema. The walk up to the tower is a well-lit ramp with a low stone wall on either side—more like a gutter—and I wasn't sure if there was a cliff on the sea side but I could hear the ocean and birds and not see anything but the tower lit by floodlights from below. A working lighthouse, multiple beams turned out slowly into the dark. The tower itself is like the model of all war memorials (it was originally built as a monument to Mars in the 2nd century of the common era), then as the sun came up, despite the clouds, amazing grasses and wildflowers appeared on rolling hills down to the sea, which was rough and churned up and cold.

Directly north from the tower, across the Bay of Biscay, is Ireland. The motto of the region (of Spain in fact) is the colonial motto 'Plus Ultra'—further beyond. It was called Finisterra by the Romans—the end of the earth, from here there was nothing but the potential for re-territorialisation. The Atlantic Ocean is what separated the old from new worlds. There is a Gaelic myth about the discovery and colonisation of Ireland from here too, the Spanish region is called Galicia and I wondered whether there is not some forgotten etymological link between the two.

The tower is the oldest extant lighthouse in the world. There is a skull and crossbones on the Coruña herald. It is based on the story of Hercules killing a giant here and burying his head, on which the city was founded. I knew none of this before I went there. At first my experience of the area was purely aesthetic, and from the darkness was revealed the dramatic coastline, competing against the artificial light of the tower monument, which both projects light and is illuminated by a series of spotlights, as well as information. It was supernatural."

I start from elsewhere but the return is always the same: to shelter, to some bastion that is as fragile as it is long-standing. This is how Leber and Chesworth's work appears to me and I was thinking about all this as I walked down the avenue Finisterra. In *Geography Becomes Territory Becomes* the stone walls that obstruct your view have a relationship to this particular textual obstruction before you: in order to orient oneself, to know where you are, it seems necessary to become disoriented—to ask the question: where am I? Stone-age, Iron-age, Bronze-age, Montage. Finland, fin land. The ends of earth.

Giles Fielke,  
La Coruña, Spain, June 2018

Giles Fielke is a writer and musician. He is a member of the Artist Film Workshop and is completing a PhD in the Department of Art History at the University of Melbourne on the work of artist-filmmaker Hollis Frampton.

# UNIVERSAL POWER HOUSE



LIST OF WORKS

Sonia Leber & David Chesworth,  
*Universal Power House: In The Near Future*, 2017. HD video, stereo audio, 12:30 minutes. Courtesy the artists.

FILMING, EDITING AND

SOUND DESIGN

Sonia Leber & David Chesworth

MUSIC

Mino Peric with David Chesworth

PERFORMERS

Maria White

Kevin Ng

Alicia Dulnuan-Demou

Ebube Uba

Harriet Gillies

Sonia Leber & David Chesworth,  
*Universal Power House: Electric Model*, 2017, acrylic, wood, programmed lighting. Courtesy the artists.

FABRICATOR

Matty Fuller

ORIGINAL ARCHITECT

David Liddy

Sonia Leber & David Chesworth,  
*Universal Power House: Research cabinet*, 2017. Objects from the Universal Power House, Sydney. Courtesy the artists.

IMAGE CREDITS

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PHOTO: Sonia Leber & David Chesworth, *Universal Power House*, 2017 (research image).

P. 14, 16, 28–29

PHOTO: Sonia Leber & David Chesworth, *Universal Power House: In the Near Future*, 2017, Single channel HD video, 12:30 minutes (video still). Courtesy the artists. Photograph by Sonia Leber.

P. 15

PHOTO: Sonia Leber & David Chesworth, *Universal Power House*, 2017. Installation view at Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney. Model fabrication Matty Fuller. Photograph by Sonia Leber.

KEY ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

*Universal Power House*, 2017 was commissioned by Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney.

PROFANE ENIGMA:  
UNIVERSAL POWER HOUSE  
*Amelia Winata*



The Universal Power House is a structure that sits on Mt Universe. It is the world headquarters of the Universal Power World Society. It was built in accordance with a doctrine outlined in *The Universal Life Challenge*. All of this really exists, though it sounds like the stuff of science fiction.

In 2017, Leber and Chesworth were commissioned by Campbelltown Arts Centre to produce a work in response to the neighbourhood—a far-removed suburb of Sydney approximately one hour from the city centre. Searching for inspiration, the artists took to Google Maps. A satellite view of Campbelltown reveals a





mystery structure comprising a series of interlinked rings built on the outskirts of the suburb. Perched atop a hill, the building appears to exist as an island surrounded on all sides by dense trees. A long driveway connects the building to the main road and circles the building like a moat. The scale of a car demonstrates just how much larger it is than any house in the area.

To understand how this structure came to be, we must step back in time. In 1979, Stefan Dzwonnik, a Polish immigrant, self-published *The Universal Life Challenge*: a book that outlined his ideology for revolutionising the way that people live. Dzwonnik theorised that a vital Universal Power underpins the harmonious structure of the cosmos, from the interaction of planets and solar systems down to atomic structures:

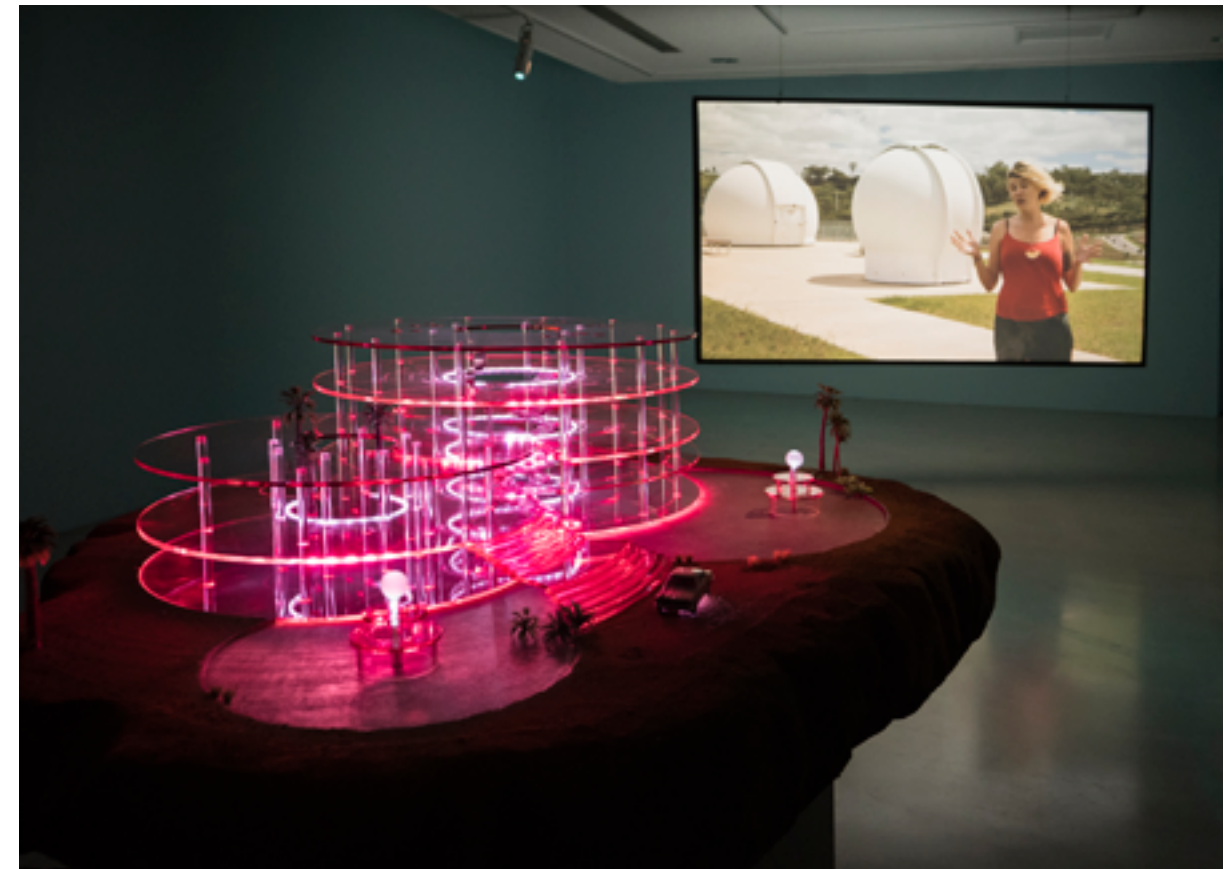
Universal Power is a chemical composition of different energies and atoms which in themselves have creative abilities and creative principles [...] we human beings are very small particles of this vast Universal Power.

Respecting these forces and their supporting principles, argues Dzwonnik, is the key to accessing full human potential.

The book reads like a self-help guide divided into sections: how to deal with personal problems; general ideologies and philosophy of humans; and “the philosophy and establishment of the Universal Power World Society, which is neither political or religious but will try to uplift mankind into a higher level of consciousness and concern.” Paradoxically, there are many affinities between the book’s rhetoric and the contemporary concept of ‘wellness,’—“Food in artificial containers is never as nutritious or palatable as fresh food, despite any advertising campaign”—suggesting little difference between Dzwonnik’s philosophy and the ‘lifestyles’ that people pursue today. The structure that Leber and Chesworth identified on the

satellite map was built during the 1970s and 1980s and was designated to host the first meetings of the Universal Power World Society, until other centres were built around the globe.

Seeing Leber and Chesworth’s electrified model of the Universal Power House, one gets the feeling that the house could only have existed in the imagination of Dzwonnik, but never in real life. Indeed, the structure has an affinity with paper architecture: the prime example being Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* insofar as it embodies a grand form of architecture borne of a strong ideological underpinning, intended to house and promote these ideologies. The fundamental difference between paper architecture and the Universal Power House, however, is that the latter was actually built. Yet, it remains detached from society at large and its philosophy was never tested; the Universal Power House occupies a unique state of temporality that evades our common understanding of linear histories. While couched in modernist values of utopian societal advancement—as well as a decidedly modernist architectural aesthetic—there is little of the trajectory that we would usually associate with these prompts. As such, it disrupts the classic modernist pattern associated with grand ideologies, a pattern that generally follows a logic of: an idea; the application of this idea; and an ultimate binaristic assessment of success or failure. One could say that there is an atemporal



quality to the Universal Power House and the philosophy it is borne of; materially, the site abides by the conventional laws of time, ageing with the years. Yet, the philosophy that Dzwonnik developed in his book—having never been disseminated—remains a pure source of potential.

We cannot know what the outcome of the Universal Power World Society might have been, however we are offered a glimpse of it by way of a film. In this film young actors recite lines from *The Universal Life Challenge* against the backdrop of local playgrounds rife with ascent-centred equipment, including: a molecular climbing tower; a ziggurat; orbiting planet-like rides; as well as the white domes of the Campbelltown observatory. Leber and Chesworth have their performers re-voice selections of the doctrine. The result of this feels simultaneously contemporary and not of this time, mimicking the slippages of history that play a large role in the reception of Dzwonnik's overall vision. Dzwonnik repeatedly underscored the importance of “the people of the future,” a crucial element that Leber and Chesworth have latched on to, presenting their performers as those future bearers and disseminators of the doctrine.

Leber and Chesworth's *Universal Power House* project is rife with unjoined dots. The desire and incapacity to fill the holes in our knowledge is crucial to the overall reading of the project, which presents a moment of absolute potentiality that, paradoxically, might never materialise.

Amelia Winata is a writer and curator. She is a PhD candidate in Art History at the University of Melbourne.



# ZAUM TRACTOR

LIST OF WORKS

Sonia Leber & David Chesworth, *Zaum Tractor, Eternal Pools*, 2013. Archival inkjet print, 66 x 100cm. Courtesy the artists.

PRINT PRODUCTION

Peter Hatzipavlis

Sonia Leber & David Chesworth, *Zaum Tractor, Battle for the Future*, 2013. Archival inkjet print, 66 x 100cm. Courtesy the artists.

PRINT PRODUCTION

Peter Hatzipavlis

Photographic prints from the *Zaum Tractor* video project. Sonia Leber & David Chesworth, *Zaum Tractor*, 2013, 2-channel HD video, 5.1 audio, 26 minutes. Courtesy the artists.

FILMING, EDITING AND

SOUND DESIGN

Sonia Leber & David Chesworth

IMAGE CREDITS

P. 30–31

PHOTO: Sonia Leber & David Chesworth, *Zaum Tractor, Eternal Pools*, 2013. Archival inkjet print, 66 x 100cm, from the *Zaum Tractor* video project.

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PHOTO: Sonia Leber & David Chesworth, *Zaum Tractor, Battle for the Future*, 2013. Archival inkjet print, 66 x 100cm, from the *Zaum Tractor* video project.

P. 20–21, 22, 33

PHOTO: Sonia Leber & David Chesworth, *Zaum Tractor*, 2013. 2 channel HD video, 5.1 channel audio, 26 minutes (video still). Photograph by Sonia Leber.

KEY ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

*Zaum Tractor*, 2013 was supported by Australia Council for the Arts, Creative Victoria, Gridchinhall Art Centre (Moscow), Art-Amnesty Project by Olga Kalashnikova (Rostov-on-Don, Russia), and 16thLINE Gallery (Rostov-on-Don, Russia).

Fiona Gruber

ZAUM: *a linguistic experiment in transrational poetry created by the Russian Futurists Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh.*

TRACTOR: *a mechanical vehicle used predominantly for agricultural tasks. In the early to mid 20th century it largely replaced the horse or ox as the beast of burden on the farm.*

Leber and Chesworth are cultural investigators, deftly exploring foreign territory, weighed down only by a mixed bag of pre-entry research, a camera, some sound equipment and a couple of laptops. The work they are going to make is out there waiting; images and events to be re-interpreted, re-framed, recorded and edited.

Zaum poetry turned out to be an essential part of their travel kit on this assignment, giving voice to a new place and providing a lens through which to view the alien terrain. As a voice and a lens, Zaum’s effect is to further estrange and uncouple the viewer from the quotidian.

The name Zaum is a composite of two sounds in Russian: the first, *za*, meaning beyond or behind, with the second *ym* or *um* meaning the mind, translatable as beyond sense or transreason. Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh coined the term in 1913. The Russian revolution was just around the corner and the air was already thick with cultural rebellion.

Normal language, they argued, binds and weighs you down with hierarchies; the claustrophobic carapace of comprehension. The phonemes and unfettered words of Zaum poetry, however, allow you to make your own sense and imbue the sounds with your own emotions. It is the ultimate in individuality. Whereas, a tractor? In Soviet Russia it was one of the most potent symbols of collectivisation.

Leber and Chesworth are not aiming for binary opposition, but they like to set up tensions between ideas and let the imagination run free. In *Zaum Tractor*, barges pass serenely on the wide river Don, operatic in their grandeur. Where vistas are often majestic, it is the close-up that reveals the complexity of things.





We see priests in belfries hauling frantically on bell ropes and local Cossacks marching and being blessed. There are cracking whips and charging horses. These old customs and beliefs are part of the new Russia. We see monuments to the war dead and a shiny mural of smiling Soviet pioneers in their jaunty uniforms. These more recent symbols and customs are also now old, but part of the contemporary melange.

Buildings that once soared with a Communist spirit are monuments to an ideology few Russians under thirty understand anymore. They are crumbling now. It is all part of life down here, where the past and the present slump against each other. No one has got around to clearing the ground for post-Soviet Russia, so it just does its thing—all its things—alongside the rubble.

The sound track of the video blends Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* with the Zaum opera *Victory Over the Sun*, both of which premiered in 1913. Where one is a paean to nature, the other is about overthrowing nature, creating another layer of meaning and anti-meaning.

Spliced throughout the video we see repeated images of a woman called Marfa—she is the peasant heroine of Sergei Eisenstein's 1929 film *The General Line or Old and New*. At first resistant to mechanisation and collectivisation, she ends up as its poster girl; a grinning modernist in leather helmet and goggles, more Amelia Earhart than Miss Ploughshare. Delirious behind the wheel of an anti-Kulak tractor, she is both destroyer and creator.

Throughout the video, there is Zaum poetry performed by local actors: Zaum in empty outdoor theatres; Zaum in front of a building shaped like a tractor; and Zaum next to an old city edifice whose stones are all numbered so that it can be resurrected elsewhere (it never will be). Numerous things are happening simultaneously. Monuments to the dead sit next to celebrations of a bright imagined future, now part of a decaying past. It is palimpsestic:



intentionally open-ended, with shape and tone but not readily intelligible. Very Zaum.

The two stills from *Zaum Tractor* presented in *Architecture Makes Us* are radically different, yet both are imbued with a distinct theatricality. The first *Zaum Tractor*, *Battle for the Future* is a window into a once grand room, the foyer of a theatre from the time of the Tsars. Attached to the outside of the building is a plaque that we cannot see, but it tells us that the great poet and theatre-maker, Vladimir Mayakovsky, performed here in 1927. Inside—despite the lofty ceiling and slender Corinthian columns—the room is a degraded tip. Plastic is everywhere: bags, bottles and food containers are piled high, oozing and rotting. A red record player, retro and tawdry, sits silently on a table. No one is performing now, but this was home to a vagrant who secretly lived and recently died here. The actors have left the building.



The second *Zaum Tractor*, *Eternal Pools* is very different, but similarly a stage. It is summer and the scene is a 19th century warehouse, bomb damaged and neglected. Underground springs once used for cooling have since filled the ruined basements with water. Leber and Chesworth discovered it was being used as a secret hangout for Rostov's youth; out-of-bounds and therefore even more exciting. Some perch two stories up on parapets and windowsills before plunging into the shallow water. Some balance on scarred and narrow roof beams. It is balletic, charged and very dangerous; another rite of spring.

*Zaum Tractor* is one of Leber and Chesworth's least prescriptive works. It is ambiguous, contrary and unexpected—an exploration of spaces that have been repurposed by individuals. Sometimes this leads to new, unplanned acts of collectivism; sometimes to gestures of isolation and profound neglect. The consequences are frequently unexpected, unplanned and subversive. The language of culture and cultural acts are always being renewed and remade.

Through the framing lens of *Zaum*, these and the multiplicity of other spaces are being enunciated. This enunciation is almost an Annunciation; something momentous is about to happen. Sometimes we see what happens and sometimes we do not. Performance changes everything.

Fiona Gruber is an arts journalist and broadcaster who works in Australia and Europe. She is a features writer and critic for several publications including *The Guardian* and *The Times Literary Supplement* and makes programs about the arts for Radio National.



























# MYRIAD FALLS

LIST OF WORKS  
Sonia Leber & David Chesworth,  
*Myriad Falls*, 2017. Single channel  
HD video, stereo audio, 7 minutes.  
Courtesy the artists.

FILMING, EDITING AND  
SOUND DESIGN  
Sonia Leber & David Chesworth

IMAGE CREDITS  
p. 26–27, 41–42, 44  
Sonia Leber & David Chesworth,  
*Myriad Falls*, 2017. Single channel HD  
video, stereo audio, 7 minutes (video  
still). Courtesy the artists. Photograph  
by Sonia Leber.

KEY ACKNOWLEDGEMENT  
*Myriad Falls*, 2017 was supported  
by Australia Council for the Arts.



As we strolled together, I once asked a friend if he knew what the time was. He slowed, smiled knowingly, and impishly responded, “sure, it’s the abstract construct that allows us to document the persistence of reality”. What appeared playfully unhelpful on first encounter was really a reminder of what I had just asked.

Time is, of course, a pervasive dimension of modern life. An organising principle of history and society; the invisible scaffolding, or architecture that supports the flow of everything we experience, anticipate or remember. And when you unpack it, it also has the potential to thoroughly disrupt our understanding of how things work.

The need for a unified conception of time developed alongside the industrial revolution. The expansion of capitalism and commerce demanded time-discipline across vast geographies. The wristwatch is one of the final steps in this process towards constant and accurate awareness of the time.

With the exacting capacity of clocks came a plethora of instruments, methods and theories to regulate and conceptualise time. One of a raft of philosophers who sought to understand the subject, Henri Bergson, suggested that time can be thought of as spatialised time, which is mechanical and sequential, and also durational time, in which the past, present and future all flow together as we experience them, linear and directional, enmeshed and porous.

In 1907 Bergson used the emergent art of cinema to draw the distinction between these two concepts. As audiences, we have become fluent in cinema's language, which treats time as something pliable. We slip naturally into the durational experience of a film, unfazed by changes in temporality. In cinema, scenes move forward or backwards, fast or slow, into projected dream sequences or memories of the past. We are open to the fluidity of time that exists within the cinematic space, able to weave together experiences—or scenes—so as to understand a compressed yet assimilated version of time. Here, cinematic time is wielded with a reflexive acuity, as time is both the film's medium and its subject.



*Myriad Falls'* soundtrack is awash with temporal motifs. Birds sing their morning chorus. Bells toll the hours. Industry machines time itself. Wind rushes as seasons pass. An alarm sounds.

At one point, a watch sinks down through a cylinder of water in a Rolex Etancheiscope (a vacuum device to test diving watches). As pressure builds around the object, a sonic pressure simultaneously compounds within the work. The sound that is growing is a highly abstracted version of Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, a piece of music that was initially met with shock and revolt and became a turning point in the history of Western music. The orchestra first performing the piece in 1913 was all but drowned out by its audience who whistled, hissed and shouted in protest of the unfamiliar rhythm and score, while Nijinsky's iconoclastic dancing was deemed a caricature of the high art of ballet.

Leber and Chesworth have 'smeared' this composition so that it is almost unrecognisable. Instead of a note starting and then finishing as it would in a traditional melody—and indeed as a traditional reading of time might require that one second, minute or month end before the next can start—each note goes on indefinitely, with the next note simply added on top of the one before it. In this way, a wall of sound slowly grows. Beneath this sonic space, abrupt edits between moving images give a stressful sense that time is not only passing, but perhaps accelerating, building, being blocked and unblocked, and flowing unnaturally through different watch-faces and their mechanical innards. This relents with a cut to the quiet relief of the unmediated space of a horologist's workshop, blissfully nearly silent except for the gentle whirring of his tools.

Appearing frequently in this work (both within a black void and on the horologist's desk) is a space age machine used to rotate many watches concurrently; a slow and steady mechanical ballet of rotations within gyrations. Designed to emulate the movement of wrists, this machine creates a scenario whereby self-winding wristwatches remain wound without a wearer. Its strange, mesmeric dynamism is vaguely organic in feel; though clearly automated, it calls to mind some potential for machines to do human jobs, dividing and spending time in non-human ways.

The wristwatches wound by this machine mark time in more ways than just the obvious. They demonstrate the fashions that have come and gone: grey plastic rectangles, oval gold faces and chunky straps all conjure a specific period and style. They also bear the physical markings of age: time's passing is visible in the tell-tale patinas of their scratched faces and worn straps. This is not the future. There are no smooth, androgynous 'smart-watches' here. Moving parts fling time to and fro, from one side of a tiny container to the other, as if percussively pounding out physical bits of time.

At the end of the film after all these wrist-scaled timepieces, the largest clock face appears as a garden bed. The force of the wind thwarts it. As its arms flail and flowers are battered, a man in a suit walks obliviously along a path in the background, headed *somewhere*.

Across the scene's human and atmospheric protagonists, time is at turns tight, loose, unbound, disrupted, blending and bleeding—all the while inexorably marching on.

Pippa Milne is a writer and curator and part of the *Architecture Makes Us curatorium*. She has held curatorial positions at Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne; Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne; Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane; and Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne.



# EARTHWORK



LIST OF WORKS  
Sonia Leber & David Chesworth,  
*Earthwork*, 2016. Single channel HD  
video, stereo audio, 5 minutes, timber,  
acrylic. Courtesy the artists.  
FILMING, EDITING AND  
SOUND DESIGN  
Sonia Leber & David Chesworth

IMAGE CREDITS  
P. 36, 48–49  
Sonia Leber & David Chesworth,  
*Earthwork*, 2016. Single channel HD  
video, stereo audio, 5 minutes, timber,  
acrylic. (video still). Courtesy the artists.  
Photographs by Sonia Leber.

P. 50  
Sonia Leber & David Chesworth,  
*Earthwork*, 2016. Single channel HD  
video, stereo audio, 5 minutes, timber,  
acrylic. Installation view at 4A Centre  
for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney.  
Courtesy the artists. Photograph by  
Sonia Leber.

I  
Edwin Jacob, ‘Killing at a Distance’, in  
*Homeland and Philosophy: For Your  
Minds Only*, ed. Robert Alp (Chicago:  
Open Court, 2014).

*Earthwork* by Sonia Leber and David Chesworth is disorientating in multiple ways. A single-channel video, it is installed on the gallery floor, so that viewers must look downwards to see the images on-screen. The video imagery and framings all amplify the head-spinning experience. *Earthwork*’s camera is in constant movement, barely pausing as it scans a damaged and ruined landscape. Houses and trees lie destroyed and streets deserted; it shows an ‘aftermath’ scene that is recognisable, but not specifically locatable in terms of geography or topography. Superimposed in the middle is a second frame, more abstract and difficult to decipher. Using similarly mobile but tightly cropped camerawork, it scans some sort of map or technical plan, panning across obscure symbols, coordinates and visual data.

Leber and Chesworth’s video mimics the viewpoint of an unmanned aerial drone. These weapons of contemporary warfare—driven by secretive, opaque and hidden systems of data and control—have been described by Edwin Jacob as the “quintessential weapon in America’s “war on terror””.<sup>1</sup> The deadly ‘appeal’ of drones is that they keep soldiers out of harm’s way, while exerting control over physical sites through secretive non-sites and virtual representations, yet with very real effects and deadly consequences.

*Earthwork* displaces these present-day realities into a speculative scenario, performing a role-reversal and re-orientation. The destroyed landscape is in fact a discarded and damaged architectural model that the artists found at a rubbish tip. As the camera sweeps from above, the telltale signs of Australian suburbia appear across the frame—quarter-acre blocks, cul-de-sac streets, tree-lined nature strips—though the camerawork is decidedly not choreographed. The artists’ framed their searching shots ‘blind’, so-to-speak, by moving the camera over the model without looking through the viewfinder: the camera’s gaze does not stop at the model’s defined edges. This miniaturised world, so realistic and detailed, almost seems to levitate above the detritus of the tip below.

In effect, Leber and Chesworth assume a position of quasi-drone operators, using a detached and machinic gaze. In doing so, they implicate themselves and the exhibition viewers in the destruction



wrought by contemporary conflict. This type of speculative ‘role-reversal’ scenario creates a scene that is recognisable, but is reimagined through a lens of destruction and trauma that is vastly unfamiliar to many (if not most) people living in Australia and other Western societies.<sup>2</sup> It is an uncanny scenario: not only because the destroyed houses recall the original German term *unheimlich* (unhomely), but they also project the return of a repressed socio-political responsibility for actions taken ‘at a distance’.

Fictionalised and speculative approaches are popular ways for contemporary artists to implicate their viewers in unfamiliar or distant situations. In a more understated way though, Leber and Chesworth draw on another important artistic legacy: their video’s title is a reference to American artist Robert Smithson and his iconic ‘earthwork’ projects such as *Spiral Jetty* (Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah, 1970), as well as his conception of the ‘site’ and ‘non-site’ dialectic. *Spiral Jetty* is one of the most impressive realisations of Smithson’s idea of the site as “physical, raw reality”.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the “open limits” and “scattered information” of the site, Smithson conceived of his non-sites as abstract representations of real sites, with defined boundaries and contained information.<sup>4</sup> The non-site does not simply represent the site: it confines, distils and centralises it.<sup>5</sup> Smithson’s non-sites take various forms: maps, scale models and multi-media installations that displace and materially reconfigure distant sites.

Yet in the context of contemporary communicative and militaristic systems, the concept of the non-site is also transformed: from something that displaces, to something that actively conceals or erases. Smithson anticipated this when he said that “all the points

2

Of course, we must be alert to the problematic potentials for over-identification and appropriation. In this sense, I find Dominick LaCapra’s discussions about the productive use of empathy in representations of trauma useful, which “puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place”. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 78.

3

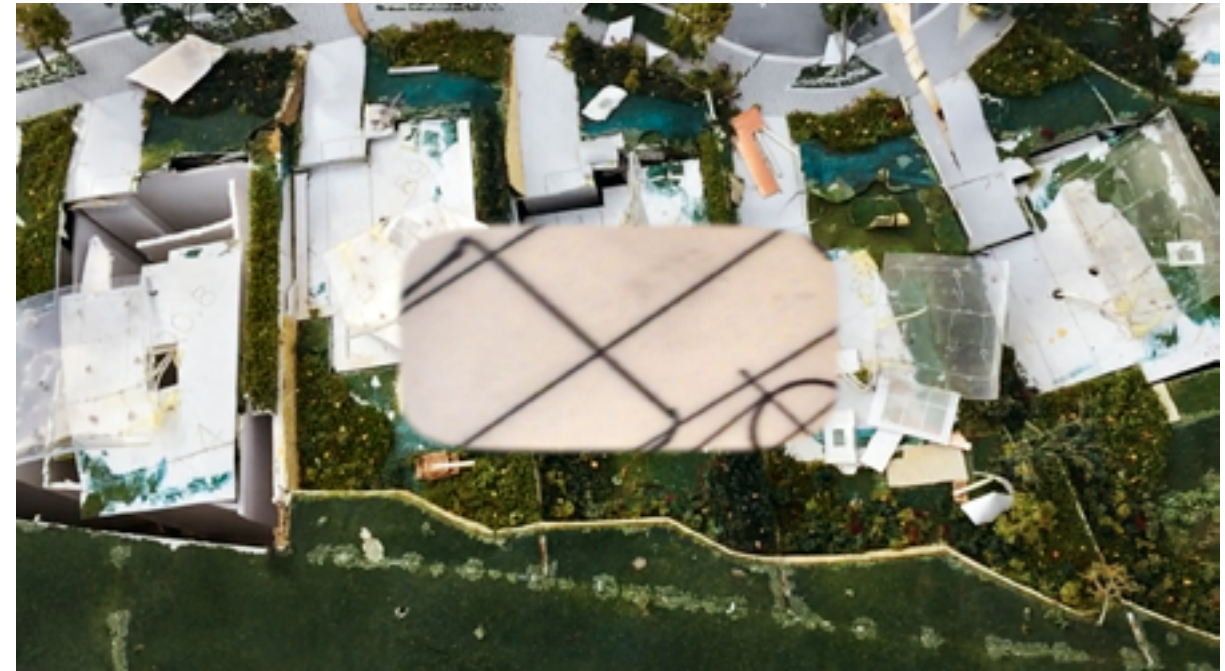
Robert Smithson, ‘Earth (1969)’, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 178.

4

*Ibid.*, p. 152.

5

Jack Flam, ‘Introduction: Reading Robert Smithson’, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. xviii.



6

Robert Smithson, ‘Four Conversations Between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson / Edited by Eva Schmidt (1969–1970)’, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 221.

7

Trevor Paglen, ‘Trevor Paglen on Robert Smithson’ (lecture, Dia: Chelsea, New York, 25 October 2016). Accessed 1 October, 2017 <<https://diaart.org/media/watch-listen/video-trevor-paglen-on-robert-smithson/media-type/video>>

[...] obliterate once again the expansiveness of the sites, so that the points of the nonsite envelop the entire site”.<sup>6</sup> In order to exert power over far removed sites, the contemporary military-industrial complex must obscure its own infrastructure at all costs, transforming its highly specialised sites into secretive non-sites. Topographical maps, for example, do more than visualise and impose order on remote locations; they can also enact and create strategic blank spots. As American artist Trevor Paglen observes, it is “useful to have a non-place, a blank spot on the map [...] [they] are usually never blank, but there is something under there that someone doesn’t want you to see”.<sup>7</sup> Maps obscure as much as they reveal, hiding connections that persist over time and space—such as the fact that less than 800 kilometres south-west of *Spiral Jetty* is the Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, from where the US military controls its fleet of drones.

With this in mind, perhaps the important contemporary dialectic is not so much between site and non-site, but rather between non-site as representation/displacement and concealment/erasure. These shifting relations inform Leber and Chesworth’s contemporary mediation where neither of *Earthwork*’s moving images—the scale model nor the frame of co-ordinates—simply depict ‘sites’. A key interplay emerges between two non-sites that both displace ‘real’ sites in favour of inferred and illusory locations. Furthermore, the relationship between these two frames remains perpetually unclear. Do they actually correspond? Do the coordinates map the area below? Resembling the shape of a smartphone, the superimposed image visualises some kind of hidden data, but in its smaller size it is impossible for the viewer to decipher.



*Earthwork*'s installation further evokes and imagines potential non-sites. The thin covering that conceals the monitor's cables seems to become a conduit to another portal, perhaps to a hidden, classified location. The soundtrack furthers this possibility, consisting of continuous, low level sounds that mimic the noises of Sensitive Compartmented Information Facilities (SCIFs), which are self-contained military drone sites, where data collected by a drone is collated, analysed and acted upon. When surrounded by this soundscape and forced to assume the viewpoint of a drone itself, viewers are made to consider their level of complicity in contemporary conflicts that are waged from afar; while we may not pull any triggers, we are nonetheless conditioned by a world that has been infiltrated by war.<sup>8</sup> Through its striking and speculative construction, *Earthwork* provides an important moment of recognition, such that we as viewers cannot comfortably and mentally remain 'at arm's length'.

This essay contains excerpts from 'A non-site implication: Sonia Leber and David Chesworth's *Earthwork*', which was originally commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, for *4A Papers*, issue 3, November 2017.

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8

Joanna Bourke, *Wounding the World: How Military Violence and War-Play Invade Our Lives* (London: Virago Press, 2015).

ALMOST ALWAYS  
EVERYWHERE  
APPARENT



LIST OF WORKS  
Sonia Leber & David Chesworth, *Almost Always Everywhere Apparent* (single video element), 2007. Video, silent, 1:40 minutes. Courtesy the artists.

FILMING AND EDITING  
Sonia Leber & David Chesworth  
PERFORMER  
Zofia Witkowski-Blake

Single video element from Sonia Leber & David Chesworth, *Almost Always Everywhere Apparent*, 2007. 16-channel audio, 6-channel video, wood, bondor, polystyrene, acrylic, light. Courtesy the artists.

IMAGE CREDITS  
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Sonia Leber & David Chesworth, *Almost Always Everywhere Apparent*, 2007. 16-channel audio, 6-channel video, wood, Bondor, polystyrene, acrylic, light (still of video element). Photograph by Sonia Leber.

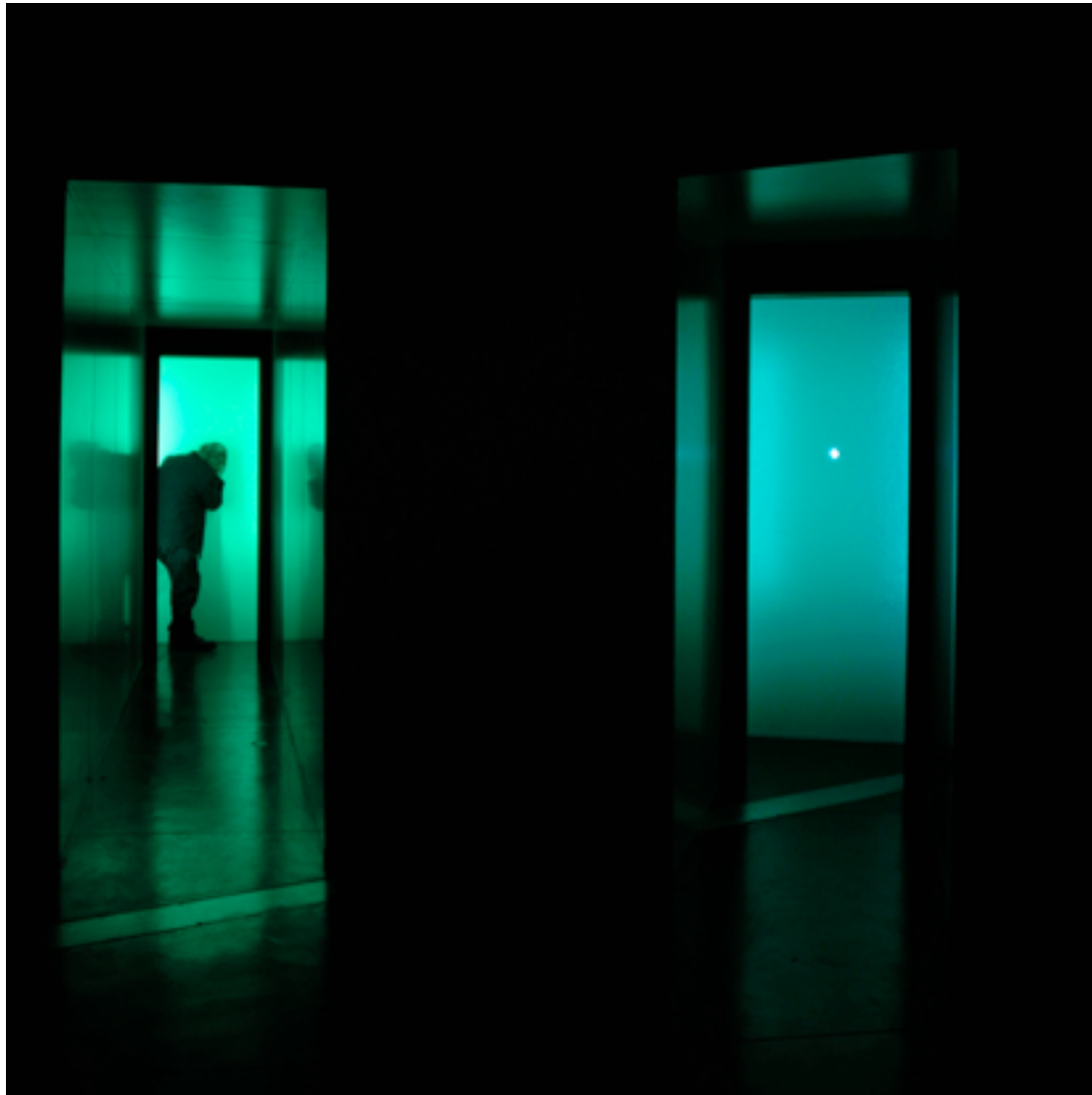
P. 54  
Sonia Leber & David Chesworth, *Almost Always Everywhere Apparent*, 2007. 16-channel audio, 6-channel video, wood, Bondor, polystyrene, acrylic, light. Installation view at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (detail). Photograph by Sonia Leber.

P. 53, 56  
Sonia Leber & David Chesworth, *Almost Always Everywhere Apparent*, 2007. 16-channel audio, 6-channel video, wood, Bondor, polystyrene, acrylic, light. Installation view at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (detail). Photograph by John Brash.

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*Almost Always Everywhere Apparent*, 2007 was a Helen Macpherson Smith Commission at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne.



The primary site that inspired the investigations for this project is a prison that was modelled on the idea of the panopticon. A great deal has been written on the history of the panopticon. The appearance of the panopticon revolutionised the design of prisons. It also materialised contradictory projects: on the one hand it was the embodiment of the Enlightenment’s principle of instilling individual responsibility and self-policing into people’s consciousness; on the other hand, it sought to change the evil nature of man and to bring him closer to God. The panopticon was the product of both a scientific logic and a socio-religious system of belief. It reflects both Enlightenment principles of social organisation and the Christian cosmology of a God with an all-seeing eye. It is a building that not only gives form to this idea of total vision, but is also a structure that seeks to redeem



criminals by subjecting them to a form of surveillance that makes them think they are under the constant gaze of an invisible guard. The redemptive aspect of this device is premised on the assumption that eventually the prisoner will internalise the image of the guard/God and become a real subject under the law.

Sonia Leber and David Chesworth reflected on this ambition to make something 'good' out of these 'criminal types'. However, what they were also struck with was the loss of faith in such structures. They draw attention to the dimension of the prison cells, which, like monastic cells are meant to be a space that is disconnected from everyday life. For the monk or the nun, the solitary space is meant to help focus the mind on the spiritual realm, whereas for the prisoner it is the opposite of a private room—both a punitive site of material privation and a starting point that leads back to society. In their installation, Leber and Chesworth pushed further this idea of the cell

as a lifeless place; they constructed a zone in a place somewhere like limbo. The images of confinement that they depict are all of people in boundless but claustrophobic spaces. They appear boundless because the relation between floor, wall and ceiling seem to be inverted or blurred. They are also claustrophobic because the people inside these spaces seem to writhe and choke. This brings to mind the more sterile and atopic images of the prisons and detention centres for refugees and suspected terrorists.

What is most pertinent for this installation is the belief that architectural forms—in particular the introduction of a new visual and spatial apparatus—can change the nature of inhabitants. This is of course a long-standing belief in almost all civilizations. The effort to make churches, temples and shrines into places of great significance is not simply to demonstrate the capacity to realise a spectacular display of power and art, but to render a specific set of relations between the deity and the subjects that shape the consciousness of those who enter these spaces. It is as if the building's main purpose is to communicate the awesome omnipotence and the breathtaking omnipresence of the deity. The scale of the building and the use of materials—like stone that suggests permanence and stained glass that plays with light to produce multiple nuances—are designed to create not just a reverential ambience of submission, but to define the sources that give form to the spirit of absolute power. Even the scale and volume of these buildings is designed to enhance both the reach of a single voice that speaks from the pulpit and the sustained reverberations of the choral cadences. This combination of authorial clarity and wafting notes creates an ambience in which the message from God is both specific and almost everywhere.

In Leber and Chesworth's installation we are given the opportunity to enter a space in which there is a similar tension between containing and unsettling forces. Upon entering the long corridor, my initial reaction was that I was proceeding down into an abyss. As I arrived in the centre of the work, there was an overwhelming feeling of being confined, even as I stared down various alternative corridors: the music, however, stimulated a feeling that my body could rise above this confinement. As soon as I turned my eyes upwards *seeking* the heavenly image that was just starting to form in my mind, this image was interrupted by the presence of a fan that turned in a menacing circular motion, like a cylindrical guillotine. The image from Saint Paul's Cathedral in London that Leber and Chesworth have incorporated into this installation acts as a telling instance of that which induces this experience of awesome power. They have chosen to reverse the gaze: rather than displaying the massive structure from the perspective of a seated visitor, they have captured the peephole view from the top of the heavenly dome towards the floor. This works to reveal both the complex pattern of the mosaic, whilst also reducing the appearance of the visitor to a minute ant.

The assumption that music can heighten creative contemplation—or even destroy defensive shields—grants it a great deal

of power. Leber and Chesworth's practice operates somewhere between these two extremes. I suspect that they also share the view that music—and sounds in general—transform not only our experience of space, but also take an active role in shaping our consciousness. However, there is something even more unsettling about the aural domain than the paradox of visibility that framed the idea of the panopticon. I imagine that Leber and Chesworth have become attuned to the ways sonic and spatial elements are combined to both control our consciousness and also produce effects that defy any kind of rational logic. Sound is perhaps the most elusive element: it has no real end, and it cannot be relied upon to achieve social ends in a linear manner. It can be brittle and triumphant. This contradictory possibility brings us back to the realm of the spectral. It is through sound that Leber and Chesworth suggest that the trace of things not apparent in the here and now can become faintly present; the imperceptible and the departed can return with a hint or a whisper.

This essay is a reworking by Nikos Papastergiadis, first published as 'Confined Abyss: Art in the Dusk of Reason', *Sonia Leber & David Chesworth: Almost Always Everywhere Apparent* (ed. Juliana Engberg), Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2008.

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SONIA LEBER &  
DAVID CHESWORTH

Sonia Leber and David Chesworth are known for their distinctive installation artworks, using video, sound, architecture, and public participation. Developed through expansive research in places undergoing social change, Leber and Chesworth's works are speculative and archaeological, responding to architectural, social, and technological settings. Their highly detailed, conceptual videoworks emerge from the real, but exist significantly in the realm of the imaginary.

Leber and Chesworth's works have been shown in the central exhibitions of the 56th Venice Biennale 'All the World's Futures' (2015) and the 19th Biennale of Sydney 'You Imagine What You Desire' (2014); and a parallel exhibition of the 5th Moscow Biennale (2013). Group exhibitions include 'The Last Reader', annex M, Megaron, Athens (2018); 'The Score', Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne (2017); 'Looking at me through you', Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney (2017); 'Call of the Avant-Garde: Constructivism and Australian Art', Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne (2017); 'I don't want to be there when it happens', 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney (2017); and Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (2017); 'The Real and Other Places', Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, at Photo Shanghai (2017); 'This is a Voice', Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, Sydney (2017); 'Borders, Barriers, Walls', Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne (2016); Substation Contemporary Art Prize, Melbourne (2016); 64th Blake Prize, Casula Powerhouse, Sydney (2016); 'The Documentary Take', Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne (2016); 'Melbourne Now', National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (2013-14); Gold Coast Art Prize (2014), Screengrab6 International Media Arts Award, Townsville (2014), 'Cooperation Territory', 16thLine Art Gallery and Makaronka Art Center, Rostov-on-Don, Russia (2013); 'Spaced: Art Out of Place', Fremantle Art Centre (2012); 'Animal/Human', UQ Art Museum, Brisbane (2012); 'Stealing the Senses', Govett-

Brewster Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand (2011); Melbourne Prize for Urban Sculpture (2011); 'In camera and in public', Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne (2011); 'Madrid Abierto' (2007); '+Plus Factors', Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (2006); and the visual art program of Melbourne International Arts Festival (2004).

Solo exhibitions include 'Architecture Makes Us', Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne (2018); 'Zaum Tractor', Fehily Contemporary, Melbourne (2014); and Gridchinhall, Moscow (2013); 'The Way You Move Me', Fehily Contemporary, Melbourne (2012); 'Space-Shifter', Detached/MONA FOMA, Hobart (2012); Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (2011); and Conical, Melbourne (2009); and 'Almost Always Everywhere Apparent', Mildura Arts Centre (2008); and Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (2007).

Leber and Chesworth were awarded the Substation Contemporary Art Prize (2016); Gold Coast Art Prize (2014); and Screengrab International Media Arts Award (2014). They were finalists in the Blake Prize (2016); Incinerator Art Award for Social Change (2016); and the Melbourne Prize for Urban Sculpture (2011). They have been commissioned to create site-specific works for public spaces in Australia, New Zealand, Wales, and Slovenia.

Collections include Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw; National Gallery of Victoria; Art Gallery of Western Australia; RMIT Gallery, Melbourne; Gold Coast City Gallery; Mildura Arts Centre; and Australian Centre for the Moving Image.

[www.leberandchesworth.com](http://www.leberandchesworth.com)

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*Geography Becomes Territory*  
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