

Ways to be

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# Volume

# CRITICAL



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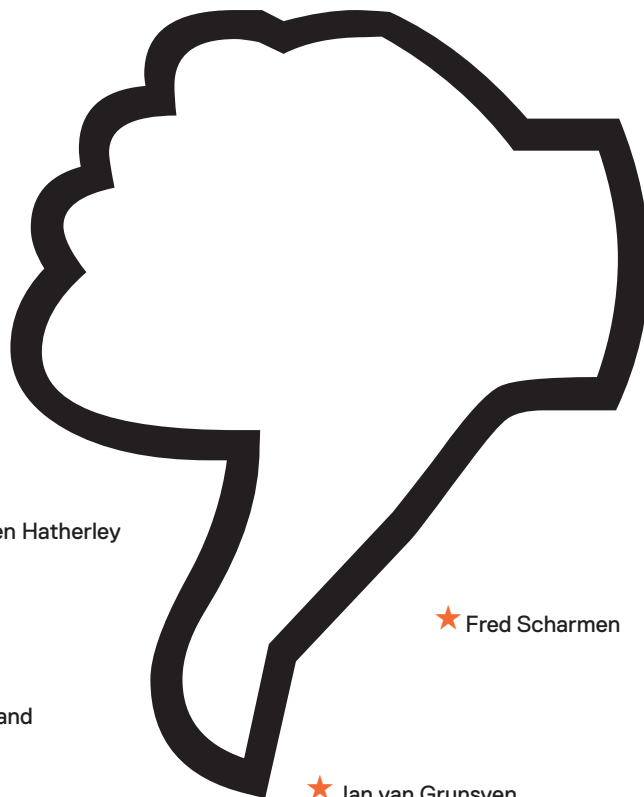
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# FOOTPRINTING SECRECY

By DEMILIT



Criticism is usually a sedentary affair, produced and consumed in relatively still environs. DEMILIT, a collective of architectural researchers in the San Francisco Bay Area, like to 'walk' their criticism, by physically investigating the landscape, and disseminating their criticism and insight through group hikes. These roving studios explore new ways to understand and read one's surroundings, uncovering forgotten or covered-up artifacts, that ultimately reveal the relationship between power's sheen and its spatial banality.

Back in 2010, the US military began its departure from Iraq, leaving behind heaps of waste from dismantled camps and bases. At the time, an account emerged of a certain type of dead scorpion found at one of the abandoned sites. There are approximately eighteen known types of scorpions in Iraq, but some argued that this species in particular was not indigenous to the immediate vicinity.

It isn't a secret that the American military admires scorpions. After all, the Pentagon named one of its major operations in 2003 'Operation Desert Scorpion'. Separately, the CIA baptized a paramilitary unit manned by Iraqis as 'The Scorpions'. And scorpions are even rumored to inspire some visual patterns on military camouflage. Moreover, American military personnel apparently enjoyed gambling on scorpion fights in Iraq and Afghanistan. But despite this history, many were quick to write off allegations from detainees in Camp Bucca that, like the abuse reported at Abu Ghraib, they had been tortured with live scorpions. Therefore, when a particular breed of scorpion was found in a place that was not its normal habitat, and where allegations were often repeatedly asserted over American soldiers' denials, the plausibility of scorpion-enhanced torture at Camp Bucca became higher.

Of course, this suspiciously displaced scorpion could have been accidentally transported by personnel movements or even carried along as a prized fighter. But to us in the landscape group DEMILIT, such a scenario motivates further thought. It indicates that perhaps the only shred of evidence one may ever have of secret affairs could be something that is reminiscent of the recovered scorpion carcass – a kind of evidence that may be nearly indistinguishable from the spatial milieu it emerges from.

When it comes to mapping landscapes of secrecy or violence, evidence needs to be scrutinized from an imaginative and experimental – even an artistic – standpoint that accounts for environmental interpenetration. This oftentimes means going around in proverbial circles, open to contextual clues. We see this as a critical design process, a fictional imagination of possibilities that often gets overlooked by experts; a purposeful disorientation into a territory. As Walter Benjamin explains with regards to the urban, "Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal...but to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – that calls for quite a different schooling."

Of the scorpion torture story, nothing ever did seem to come. Nevertheless, the scenario became a significant launching pad for us in terms of seeking out and locating the kinds of innocuous forms of evidence that we might find lying around at our very own feet. And so, we began walking, like many others before us.

In a fashion similar to artists and writers like Guy Debord, Rebecca Solnit, Trevor Paglen, Francis Alys, the L.A. Urban Rangers, kanarinka, and many more, we walk in order to balance the active intention of scrutinizing our environment with the kind of meandering curiosity that allows one to notice the unexpected – losing oneself in a perceptive way, to borrow from Benjamin.

No sense of spatial speculation can succeed without a regular regimen of combing one's environment on foot with widely cast senses. Nor could we imagine an investigation of any sort taking shape without practicing the most basic political act of exercising our right to mere movement. Especially given the rampant securitization and privatization of places we've seen in the

spatial redacting of the post-9/11 landscape, the closures of borders, and details of clandestine military sites (some even in our own midst), methodical walking emerged in many of our conversations as essential.

In 2005, Paglen led one of our members, Bryan Finoki, on a hiking tour of the notorious Area 51 military base in the Nevada outback. This came to be one of Paglen's 'experimental lectures', scaling the rugged edges of mountain perches with telescopes hooked up to high-end cameras. Finoki published an article about it and credits this experience as a primal provocation in recalibrating his own lens towards the boundaries of state secrecy. All the while, Javier Arbona (another member) was busy writing an architectural thesis on the Vieques Island bombing test site in Puerto Rico, his national origin, where he had spent countless hours measuring the juxtaposed contours of paradisaal beach fronts pummeled by the toxic litter of military ordnance. Later on, Nick Sowers would take a year on a Branner Fellowship touring US military bases around the world and circumambulating their distinct edges with a sound recorder in hand, ultimately re-imagining an acoustic reclamation in their ruins for his final master of architecture project at UC Berkeley.

It was with the 2011 invitation to lead a group walk at the Headlands Center of the Arts in Marin County, California, that our practice found a palpable experiment. The Headlands, a tenant of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, is laden with strange adjacencies and contradictions, perhaps typical of such post-military, public-owned lands. Old bunkers and missile silos crumble in the dry grassy hills, while even older army barracks have been restored as a youth hostel and housing for artists in residence. Rangers patrol around, maintaining the layer of bureaucracy and uniformed surveillance, and even manicure the grass per Army standards around a Cold War silo with missiles polished and displayed.

Another tenant is the Marine Mammal Center. Using the vast underground silos to hold filtration tanks, refrigeration equipment, and ozone generators, the Center rehabilitates wounded seals and sea lions. We toured the Mammal Center and recorded the sounds of its mechanical pumps inside the old concretized bowels, the barking seals splashing in recovery pools, the amused delight in children's voices, and the creaks and clangs of Cold War steel doors.

While analyzing the rich layers of the Headlands' hillsides, we asked ourselves about the relationship between military power and nature, and the various means of the former imitating and subverting the latter. We wondered how we could intervene in that feedback loop where military and landscape mutually reconstitute one another, and create a temporary space whereby we would not only extract information buried in the Headlands' past, but remix and amplify that to uncover an even more disguised relationship lurking in its future.

We designed a public walk as a cross-section through the former military ruins and through strategic props and dialogue, initiating subtle hints about the ways in which old and new collude. The walk provided a ground-work to probe not only the past uses of the silos but also how a new military production of nature squats in their horizon. We positioned stops along the walk to analyze 'postcard' views. Meanwhile, a series of 'sound grenades' were planted in the landscape playing shards of sounds taken from our own field recordings of the missile silos, along with other recorded sounds of military landscapes. At the main building, we temporarily installed a 'sound

cannon', repeatedly droning like a sonic lighthouse. The layers of barking seals, and new and old bunker operations, all piled up together, feeding a simultaneous discussion that took place throughout the day amongst the group. From this experience, we forged a method to take forward in approaching future critical inquiries and broadcasting multimedia landscape critiques.

By the end of this exhibition, it was clear that the secrecy we track, trace, and scour is the landscape itself; it is both embedded in and an embodiment of a recombinant nature. The Headlands project was a re-animation of Marin's military past that was meant to suggest a more insidious contemporary use, and which may tie to other global military sites. By this we mean, the irony of the Marin Headlands' is that while the old Cold War bunkers are being reused today to heal damaged or distressed seals in the Pacific (perhaps due in certain cases to the known hazards of military sonar), other seals are being trained and deployed from advanced Naval bases in San Diego as highly specialized sentries. Where reuse of old war space alludes to a re-humanization of the military landscape, nature is being seamlessly remilitarized elsewhere. Like the scorpion, the seal has been harnessed and weaponized – evidence once again that unseen military operations are often a hybrid with the environment in which they take place.

By overlaying the walk with an artificial soundscape, we leached a kind of spatial leak to the surface, turning the cross-section of an old and militarily haunted landscape into a composite of its suspect future. In this sense, our practice is rooted not so much in the past that is woven into the performance, but in forecasting futures.

Though playful and fresh, walking in this way is not lacking in certain skills. Even while accessible to just about anyone, including those who may need assistance, in this setting walking develops into an 'intellectual' endeavor, as was laid out by Michel de Certeau:

"When someone departs the security of being there together...another time begins, made of other sorts of excursions – more secret, more abstract, or 'intellectual' as one might say. These are traces of the things we learn to seek through rational and 'academic' paths, but in fact they cannot be separated from chance, from fortuitous encounters, from a kind of knowing astonishment."

In this mode of walking, discussions begin and never end, or they cease for a momentary opportunity that may present itself, as different appearances in the landscape take precedence over others. For instance, in the Headlands walk, as views and landmarks emerged in the scenery, conversations cropped up about the San Francisco Bay's former role as a military stronghold, contrasting with the contemporary military presence of high-tech Pentagon contractors barricaded in seemingly benign glass towers.

At other times, we just watch, listen, and make subconscious mental maps. Discussions have been borne out of the walking provided by our outdoor laboratory, so to speak. But these have also come second to the other experience that goes with walking: the body as a register itself. At another walk we facilitated, for example – an Oakland convening of our collective cartographic game called Terra Incognita (originally created for the Istanbul Design Biennial) – participants were drawn to the multi-various smells of marijuana and other weekend



A walk through the Headlands with DEMILIT

delicacies that speak of hidden spatial struggles for autonomy from federal authority.

This type of walking, as we mentioned, has various roots in psychogeography, situationism, landscape studies, culture jamming, and political protest. This is also what we simultaneously have to be suspicious of. In walking, there can be an uneven access to free movement. The Headlands itself affords a privileged space to consider art and other spatial interventions in a manicured landscape, sustained by public-private partnerships. There are choices related to where one walks that can be loaded with class and racial privilege. The history of walking has included examples of an exoticizing gaze towards the street and the people who labor there. We recognize these issues and try to force ourselves to move beyond them by conducting interviews with subjects, starting conversation, recording sounds, attending protests, and even engaging in questionable trespass. In addition, the walking is often the start of a larger investigation.

If walking generates a roving studio, so to speak, subsequent development demands a concerted effort with our collaborators to carry forth concepts to some kind of fruition, even while far removed from mass disseminating as of yet. In one case, we asked a computer engineer to prototype a Wikileaks search that mined the web for troubling and even absurd juxtapositions of images conjured by terms used in the embassy cables. Similarly, our public call for the détournement of military drone images (#bombthedrone) also emerged from walking discussions.

If Paglen provoked us with the dictum, "to make visible the invisible" through an experimental approach to recording landscapes, then it was other practices





like Cryptome, Wikileaks, Forensic Architecture, and the Center for Land Use Interpretation that provided notions of how the demands of secrecy, once leached from the surface, would need to be archived for public knowledge. But if so, materially encoded into *what*, exactly; through which formats? We asked ourselves, if the landscape itself is a terrain of secrecy, then what would a ‘spatial leak’ look like? How could we scour landscape, interrogate space, get architecture in this context to give itself away? How could we capture, much like Paglen or Weizman, its reality as a strategic niche where power structures conduct themselves outside of scrutiny?

Collectively, we oriented our lens to peer at, and diagnose, this sort of landscape – one we see as a unique crime scene. We agreed: all military abstractions – abstractions from legality; from the social realm itself – are partly abstractions of space, place, and people sliced off from each other. That is, the machinations of ‘military urbanism’ operate at times under cloaks of invisibility, but perhaps most often, the spectral abstractions of military urbanism manifest themselves through hyper-visibility. Whereas one of these types cannot be seen, the other remains so obvious that it is strategically placed in the open to be monumentalized, celebrated, or simply overlooked, much like the marine rescue building breathing a new character into the silos of the Cold War. Between these two apparitions, a liminal thirdspace emerges as a larger cloak for the vastness of the military-industrial-entertainment landscape’s layered spheres, which span the daily mundane to the popular imaginary. The objects across this spectrum, when they can be observed, illuminate a curious lenticular relationship to power and culture.

We operate in this zone that lurks between power’s sheen and it’s spatial banality. We try to unravel the reversibility of space’s material relation to power, where space disguises power, and power blatantly conflates space. We study the patterning of the daily landscape’s political camouflage by examining what often gets taken for granted and overlooked, like a private property marker on a downtown sidewalk or trees used as barriers for an imagined truck bomb; in other words, how urbanism is used to hide the subtleties of militarization out in the open.

The spatial is haunted by this specter of abstraction – a refractory composite of equal parts architectural, financial, political, militaristic, and metaphoric information. A menagerie of encoded objects monitors and stores our every move within a securo-logistical universe of statistical data abstraction. This data populates the production of space that is programmed by a nascent politics through which militarism and spatiality are forged into a landscape that further interrogates us, extracting more and more data, reducing us to algorithmic conclusions. We are all disoriented inside this feedback loop that tracks and catalogs every move inside a fully untraceable infrastructure of secrecy designed to evade detection, accountability, and even public knowledge of any kind.

Neil Smith established that the “assumption of a pure form is no *arbitrary* abstraction” (emphasis added). He explained that the abstraction of space from nature and place, reified as pure, unmediated, and autonomous, was historically specific as a product of colonialist-capitalist development. In our attempts to decode secrecy, we accept that one can only capture mere traces of what is spawned in these ruptures to draw inferences from what is sensed, felt, and observed. But unlike Wikileaks revealing the high-level secrecy of data, we are trying to decode secrecy as it can only exist in everyday space: secrecy in material form; the highest ranks of privacy as a built environment; clandestinity right where it stands as pure, socially-normalized art. Secrecy in our scope is an architecturally disguised system. Politics are encoded by spaces, and spaces encrypt these other abstract infrastructures, like global finance or the sub-legality of torture.

DEMILIT sees the architectural abstraction of secrecy modulating a greater feedback loop of space and politics. No abstraction, despite fantasies to the contrary, is entirely liberated from its fixity in site or the greater constellation of geographies in which it lives, like the Camp Bucca scorpion. Abstraction gives way, one might say, oozing a detectable fallout. The scorpion, in this light, reveals the traceability of the military’s abstractions. We look for the minimal glitches of this architectural abstraction, the shadowy outlines of the power forms they enable, in order to track the future movements and alignments of power conduits. It is a project nearly without end.