And, Apollo: A Laboratory

Dean Erdmann
As authoritarian regimes continue to emerge in unexpected parts of the world, we seek radical gestures to counter such developments. What if we look to recent modes of art-making and declare art itself a political practice? What if we take this proposition quite literally, and follow artists as they create spaces where individuals and communities, but also archives and ancestors, soil, plants and air come together as political subjects? In Fall 2018, we launched If Art Is Politics as the Vera List Center’s two-year focus theme generating a constellation of research clusters. Among them are the open campus-style VLC Seminar Freedom of Speech: A Curriculum for Studies into Darkness with performances, lectures, and a forthcoming publication; a series of panels on institutional accountability and philanthropy; an international convening around the legacy of Pan-African solidarity and as culmination this project, positions the political at the confluence of material and social histories, autobiography, and notions of body, and queerness. What might seem to be unrelated histories and cultural expressions, rituals, or diseases is distilled into a complex narrative that crystallizes intersections between the deeply personal and the geopolitical.

Dean Erdmann is a 2018–2020 Vera List Center Fellow Dean Erdmann is an exhibition combining experimental documentary, video, and sculpture to connect autobiography to historical pasts that have produced current moments of social and political crisis. The narrative of And, Apollo is anchored in the Mojave Desert, the place where the artist grew up and the background for their exploration of Americana, the body, and queerness. Using artifacts and storytelling Erdmann turns the Californian desert into a landscape reverberating with connections between the Cold War space race, militarization, technological acceleration, All Terrain Vehicle (ATV) culture, class, and meth addiction. What might seem to be unrelated histories and cultural expressions, rituals, or diseases is distilled into a complex narrative that crystallizes intersections between the deeply personal and the geopolitical.

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Notes
Dean Erdmann

The force of my touch is asymmetrical to the amount of force required to slow.

Fossil fuel is life that went dead and then came back around again. In transforming, did it become undead? Alive?

Tongue numb in my spinal cord and bones ringing in my cells.

Are you ever afraid?

Sometimes I have to do a body check several times a day like when I was deployed. Then the adrenaline takes over and I usually don’t think of it again. moto_dave.

I sometimes say I’m gonna hang it up…which lasts for three months. But, that feeling fades. The itch comes back and I’m back out there. What can you do…its as much fun as death.

Apollo lands. The potency of jet fuel: how did something so new and fast come from something so old and slow?

For him, modest and even abject objects are hieroglyphs in whose dark prism social relations lay concealed and in fragments. They are understood as nodes, in which tensions of a historical moment materialize in a flash of awareness or twist grotesquely into the commodity fetish. In this perspective, a thing is never just an object, but a fossil in which a constellation of force is petrified. Things are never just inert objects, passive items, or lifeless shucks, but consist of tensions, forces, hidden powers, all being constantly exchanged.

We are already time traveling—so many latent relationships within us. I am also trying to understand modernity’s arc towards progress and the future, and the depletion of resources that figures the future into a place that is nearly impossible to live.

How to figure the fold of the present?

When I read, I’m in communication with someone who wrote 100 years ago, 50 years ago, 200 years ago, and I am connecting with them in their future, which is my present.

What about things that have not been digested, that linger here and inform the present? Violences or pain inherited, not dealt with. The law of the conservation of matter. Energy cannot be created or destroyed; it simply changes shape. Rather than addressing the pain of guilt, responsibility, and shame following the disgrace and mass criminality of the Nazi period, the Mitscherlichs describe that post-war Germans focused their energies on technology, with charitable progress and gains. The moon landing, inhabiting a different place in American history, also holds a will towards a particular mark and value of progress (technology), global dominance, and an unwillingness towards other forms of progress (social equity, justice, national rehabilitation). Its byproduct produces a mirror or opportunity for reorientation.

The simultaneity of disparate stories in my body.

High Country News: the “poor man’s cocaine” (meth) delivers a similar euphoric high. Tony was incarcerated for meth use after using for years to get through grueling 12-hour days of oil and gas drilling.

Either you’re wired, or you’re fired, he says. Doug says it’s 12-hour days of oil and gas drilling. The simultaneity of disparate stories in my body.

Speed provides the one genuinely modern pleasure.

Tumb nongue
Why would a thing be called a tire, because it never stops?

In the room that is not windowless, but does not really have a window either, Doug and I sit and talk about politics and family.

Dear James,
To dusty mouths
And sore hands
Surface burns
And
Adrenaline exhaust
It was a great ride
love, dean

1  *Untitled (Sand)*, 2020
Video, sound, 7 min.

2  *Glass*, 2020
Video, sound, 25 min.

3  *Parts*, 2020
Front Tire (Right). Glass, hot blow mold, 21 in. diameter × 9 in. high.
Front Tire (Left). Glass, hot blow mold, 21 in. diameter × 9 in. high.
Battery. Glass, hollow-core kiln cast. 5 × 5 × 3.5 in.
Grill. Glass, slump cast, 10 × 13.5 × 3.5 in.

4  *Untitled*, 2020
Unique glass amassed by fire, dimensions variable.

5  *Untitled (Phytochemicals)*, 2020
Ephedrine Installation: Modified glass vessels, Ephedra sinica (Ma Huang), Ephedra distachya, Sida cordifolia (Bala), Pinellia ternata (Ban Xia), soil, desert sand, rock.

6  *Untitled (Dig)*, 2020
Video, sound, 1:33 min.

7  *Untitled (37)*, 2020
Scan of unique glass object. Giclée print, 48 × 65 in.

8  *Untitled (37)*, 2020
Scan of unique glass object. Giclée print, 16 × 22 in.

9  *Untitled (40)*, 2020
Scan of unique glass object. Giclée print, 24 × 36 in.

10 *Untitled (43)*, 2020
Scan of unique glass object. Giclée print, 24 × 36 in.

11 *Donut*, 2008
Video, sound, 7 min.
Untitled (Sand), 2020
Video, sound, 7 min.
Scan of unique glass object. Giclée print, 48 × 65 in.
The young soldier, though, needed more of the drug, much more. He was exhausted by the war, becoming *cold and apathetic, completely without interests*, as he himself observed.

A Pyrex dish (the meatloaf one is suggested)

A glass quart jar
Cultivating Weeds: Ephedra sinica, Ephedra distachya, Pinellia ternata and Sida cordifolia
Marisa Prefer

I am sweating so I open the window. The plants on the radiator near the windowsill quiver in the breeze. They like it warm and dusty, and would be happiest near a footpath in the desert, but they survive in my apartment where the heat has only one setting: on. They have journeyed from warmer climates, and are preparing to settle into their next habitat, as participants in Dean Erdmann’s And, Apollo: A Laboratory.

Ephedra sinica is a spindly, pine-scented shrub that grows along faces of mountains spreading on the edges of desert landscapes from East Asia to Northern China. It originates in these regions, and is also known as a popular over-the-counter decongestant supplement. Ma Huang; some believe that it has been cultivated longer than any other herbarious plant in the world.1 Pollen from an Ephedra plant was found in the Shanidar cave of the Kurdish region of Iraq, where the remains of Neanderthals over 60,000 years old were discovered to have been buried alongside other long-valued medicinal plants.2 The plant was also cultivated by the ancient Egyptians, and appears in the first recorded text in the Bible.3 In the United States in 2006, the Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act restricted drug purchases of more than 3.6 grams per day. In the southwestern Bakwa province of Afghanistan, it has been cultivated longer than any other herbal supplement. It is considered invasive. It can be found along roadsides, growing in disturbed soil, and in New York City, it thrives near the untended edges of gardens alongside fellow volunteer plants. Its deep pink flowers are toxic when raw, containing high levels of ephedrine and calcium oxalate, which upon consuming, “make the mouth and digestive tract feel as though hundreds of needles are being stuck into it.”4 When prepared properly, the root is a powerful remedy with warming, drying properties, used in Traditional Chinese Medicine to treat nausea, vomiting, coughs and mucus. Along with its activating and warming properties, it is also a sedative, calming the nervous system. Several studies cite ban xia, originates in China, Japan, Korea, and now grows in parts of Europe, California and North America where it is considered invasive. It is found in disturbed soil, and New York City, it thrives near the untended edges of gardens alongside fellow volunteer plants. It is also banned in many countries where its cultivation and commerce is regulated.

People who use the drug commonly refer to it as “sheesha” — a name given due to its ‘glass’-like shards that are crushed and smoked or injected.”5 According to one of the plant gatherers, “It has grown in the mountains for a very long time. It is the only plant that people just go to the mountains during harvest time... In one season I can collect up to 99 lbs in one day.”6 In recent American history, outdoor labs where people “cook” methamphetamine appear in the Mojave National Preserve, along dusty hillside trails littered with trash including empty containers of drugs containing pseudoephedrine.7 These sites are terrorized by what is left behind. The toxic chemicals are accumulated and abandoned in the landscape, polluting soil and contaminating groundwater. Global desertification or the loss of fertile soil due to poor land management, overfarming, and deforestation, constitutes a major threat to life on earth—according to the United Nations, “every year, 75 billion tons of fertile soil is lost to land degradation.”8 As a growing number of regions experience desert-like conditions,9 we might benefit from acknowledging the plants thriving in these harsh conditions—among lifeless soil and detritus produced by humans. Sida cordifolia arrives in January. Each pot is wrapped in plastic bags, with drops of condensation and miniature yellow flowers emerging on the plants inside. I rinse each one in the kitchen sink. Caring for plants that are weeds—and would grow easily if left in the right habitat—feels akin to encouraging an invasive plant revolution. These plants have migrated from their places of origin, and bring new life to our shifting ecological networks. Perhaps they can contribute a mutually affective glow within the murky spectrum of co-mingling that emerges as “nature” is recognized as “culture.”

A pervasive shrub that originates in India and grows in sandy soils, it has become an invasive weed in the United States. It is used as a herbal supplement called bala (strength in Sanskrit) which has been valued in Ayurvedic medicine for thousands of years for its aphrodisiac properties, in the treatment of asthma (as a bronchodilator) and cognitive abilities, and for weight loss.11 The plant was a component of Herbal Ecstasy, a popular supplement in the 1990s, “designed to expand people’s consciousness by giving them access to another dimension,” according to Iranian-American filmmaker and herbalist Shaahin Cheyene. Cheyene ran a multimillion-dollar company producing Herbal Ecstasy until 2004 when the United States Food and Drug Administration banned all products containing ephedrine.12 Plants that grow like weeds have queer tendencies: they are strange, out of place, spoiling or ruining pristine landscapes. These plants hold spaces in-between brownfields and farms, cultivated lawns and asphalt streets—accumulating knowledge of resilience and regeneration amidst a changing climate. Weeds travel by any means necessary to gather in new enclaves—wherever they find the conditions to live.

Pinellia ternata, also known as herbal supplement ban xia, originates in China, Japan, Korea, and now grows in parts of Europe, California and North America where it is considered invasive. It is a pervasive shrub that originates in India and grows in sandy soils, it has become an invasive weed in the United States. It is used as a herbal supplement called bala (strength in Sanskrit) which has been valued in Ayurvedic medicine for thousands of years for its aphrodisiac properties, in the treatment of asthma (as a bronchodilator) and cognitive abilities, and for weight loss. The plant was a component of Herbal Ecstasy, a popular supplement in the 1990s, “designed to expand people’s consciousness by giving them access to another dimension,” according to Iranian-American filmmaker and herbalist Shaahin Cheyene. Cheyene ran a multimillion-dollar company producing Herbal Ecstasy until 2004 when the United States Food and Drug Administration banned all products containing ephedrine. Plants that grow like weeds have queer tendencies: they are strange, out of place, spoiling or ruining pristine landscapes. These plants hold spaces in-between brownfields and farms, cultivated lawns and asphalt streets—accumulating knowledge of resilience and regeneration amidst a changing climate. Weeds travel by any means necessary to gather in new enclaves—wherever they find the conditions to live.
Cultivating Weeds: Ephedra sinica, Ephedra distachya, Pinellia ternata and Sida cordifolia

effects on human physiology. Plants high in alkaloids contain a power that startlingly juxtaposes these effects when ingested in the human body. This disambiguation may be likened to the difference between how one might experience living plants, and the effects upon consumption of plant-based extractions without contextual understanding of their origins.

Marisa Prefer helps to facilitate relationships between plants and people and helped to grow the flora for And, Apollo: A Laboratory.


Towards the end of Untitled (Sand) (2020), a meditative, almost hallucinatory video, bodies appear, three of them, defined by the very dust their feet kick up as they frantically move across the screen. Conjured by sand, wind, and sound, these figures materialize on screen as sculptural images. The desert where Dean Erdmann grew up is the backdrop for this video, and it underscores the exploration of speed, technology, and time in their first New York solo exhibition, And, Apollo: A Laboratory. The desert is also characterized by both constant change at the surface level and a static, deep time quality. The possibility of being able to experience self and body as governed by this geological time/space stands in contrast to the sociocultural time/space that governs the desert and its subcultures.

In the expansive of the desert, gender, class, and identity become less determined. They are replaced by a shared temporary presence and sensory experience, while limitless narratives of being emerge, as does a terrain of queer bodies. In a second video, Untitled (Dig) (2020), a woman softly digs around a mound of rocks in the desert until a molten mass of glass appears. Detritus from beer bottles thrown into bonfires after recreational ATV (all-terrain vehicle) rides across California’s Anza-Borrego Desert; the colored glass has found a consumer market in the postwar apathetic to the war. The recipe for how to make meth, containing ephedrine found in it. The recipe for how to make meth, containing ephedrine found in it. The recipe for how to make meth, containing ephedrine found in it.

Erdmann’s project includes work with the archive and archivists of the Magnus Hirschfeld Society in Berlin, who are actively recuperating the history (and oppression) of sexuality and sexual science—is a commitment to reparative histories and the construction of alternative repositories for histories and reorientation for the future. Taking a long view of our current political landscape and rising illiberalism, Erdmann generates new materialities, images, and meditative and queer experiences that allow for the kind of transformative, recuperative and sensorial responses we may be lacking in facing such fast-coming urgencies.

Eriola Pira is Curator at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics.
Vera List Center for Art and Politics

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The exhibition, documented here, was organized by Christiane Paul, Director/Chief Curator, Sheila C. Johnson Design Center, and Eriola Pira, Curator, Vera List Center for Art and Politics. It has been supported by the Vera List Center for Art and Politics, the Sheila C. Johnson Design Center and Urban Glass.

We would like to thank the Sheila C. Johnson Design Center staff: Daniel Chou, Kristina Kaufman, Christiane Paul, and Daisy Wong; Noah Beckwith, Gary Fogelson, and Ryan Waller at Other Means; Philip Farra; Marisa Prefer; Tabor Banquer, Senior Director of Development, The New School; and the members of the Board the Vera List Center, especially Susan Meiselas, Megan Noh and Silvia Roccioilo.

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Dean Erdmann completed their MFA at UC San Diego (2008). They received a CCI Completion Grant (2012), CCF Emerging Artist Fellowship (Los Angeles, 2013), Vera List Center for Art and Politics Fellowship (2018–2020), Urban Glass Artist Fellowship (2019). Erdmann’s work has been exhibited at ONE Archive (Los Angeles), 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art (Kanazawa, Japan), REDCAT (Los Angeles), Hammer Museum (Los Angeles), the Images Festival (Toronto), and the MexiCali Biennial (San Bernardino) among many other locations. Their Los Angeles Metro artwork commissioned for Crenshaw/LAX Line project opens later in 2020. A Metro artwork commissioned for Crenshaw/MetroSouth project opens later in 2020. A Metro artwork commissioned for Crenshaw/MetroSouth project opens later in 2020. A Metro artwork commissioned for Crenshaw/MetroSouth project opens later in 2020. A Metro artwork commissioned for Crenshaw/MetroSouth project opens later in 2020.

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