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## American Entropy: Doug Aitken's *blow debris*

### Abstract

This article seeks to revive the links between practice and placement in the work of Californian video artist Doug Aitken, with particular reference to his 2001 video installation *Blow Debris*. Despite the artist's self confessed (and possibly strategic) disinterest in "illustrating or making a statement about a specific place", I argue that *Blow Debris* emerges from specifically American archetypes of land, movement and national identity. This contention is a departure from the predominant analyses of Doug Aitken's work. Existing literature focuses on his supposed exploration of a global landscape, a realm of accelerated technological flows and perpetual motion. By pinpointing Aitken's reconstruction of place rather than globalised space, *Blow Debris* may be situated within a longstanding tradition of American landscape art in which entropy acts as the primary determinant for national consciousness.

"we are a nation in search of a frontier,  
and without one we are overwhelmed by anxiety."

Doug Aitken and Dean Kuipers.<sup>1</sup>

It seems that nationalism has become something of a dirty word in contemporary art criticism. So dirty, in fact, that Rex Butler was recently moved to argue that the success of Australian artists overseas is because "they have finally learned to shut up about being Australian."<sup>2</sup> Although Butler may have a point, dismissals such as this come dangerously close to deleting the context of a work's production from the discursive field. International video art in particular is plagued by descriptions of artists as 'explorers of technological flows' whose practices are intended to 'map' a deterritorialised global empire. Such rhetoric neatly aligns contemporary artistic production with the parameters of the art market, a market in which international art fairs have become as prevalent as airports, and almost as banal to navigate.

This article seeks to revive the links between practice and placement in the work of Californian video artist Doug Aitken, with particular reference to his 2000 video installation *blow debris*. Despite the artist's self confessed (and possibly strategic) disinterest in "illustrating or making a statement about a specific place", I argue that *blow debris* is engaged in a putative discourse on the West's impact on

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<sup>1</sup> Doug Aitken and Dean Kuiper on their collaborative internet art piece *Loaded5x*. Currently exhibited at ADA Virtual Gallery: <http://adaweb.walkerart.org/project/aitken/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> Butler, 2004, p.24

American national identity. As an entropic reflection on the death of the frontier, the work emerges from specifically American archetypes of land, movement and national identity.<sup>3</sup>

This contention is a departure from predominant analyses of Doug Aitken's work. Existing literature focuses on his supposed exploration of a *global* landscape, a realm of accelerated technological flows and perpetual motion.<sup>4</sup> By pinpointing Aitken's reconstruction of place rather than globalised space, *blow debris* may be situated within a longstanding genealogy of American landscape art in which entropy acts as the primary determinant for national consciousness. This article charts the physical and conceptual trajectories of this genealogy. The phenomenological experience of the entropic landscape gleaned from early colonial expansions into the west is measured against both Robert Smithson's work of the 1960s and early 70s and the cartography of contemporary Los Angeles. Paul Virilio's notion of the transparent horizon and Deleuze and Guattari's conception of "flight paths" are identified as potentially significant models for comprehending both post-urban space and identity politics in the American West.<sup>5</sup>

## **blow debris**

A triptych of large scale projection screens form a 180 degree enclosure in the darkened gallery. The piece opens with a close-up of an absent sun, a blacked out eclipse whose edges blur with shimmering intensity over two of the three screens. The voiceover tells us; "Everyday I see things. Change. I see the sun. And I can see it moving. But I know that there are things behind the sun. I know I'm changing. And I can't stop it." The narrative backbone of *blow debris* is provided by the journey, the physical movement of four naked protagonists from the Californian desert into the heart of suburban Los Angeles. Aitken's tripartite screens and disjointed narrative gives a pervading sense of travel without destination or purpose. Linear pathways are absent, foregrounding an active, associational spectatorship. The physical distance implicated in the travellers' progressions becomes meaningless as scenes are played simultaneously, in reverse, from different angles. In one scene, a man stumbles into a car in the desert. A single shot of the car in motion is the sole information about his journey. Later, the vehicle rests motionless in a suburban street. The driver disembarks slowly, a trail of sand the only evidence of his physical displacement. Like a dream in which the relics of another time are transported back with the dreamer into reality, the evidence of arrival or departure is supplied only as trace.

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<sup>3</sup> Aitken in Birnbaum, 2002, p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Birnbaum describes Aitken as an explorer of the "perceptual, narrative and poetic possibilities opened up by the global environment and produced by new technologies of communication." Birnbaum, 2002, p. 48. Christine Van Assche's article being the notable exception: Assche explicitly reads Aitken's work in terms of a west coast tradition. Van Assche, 1999, p. 54-58.

<sup>5</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 1987.

This vertiginous experience of the American landscape was from the outset characteristic of explorations into the West. From the early 1800s onwards, visions of Eden propagated by the American frontier expeditions were tainted by the experiential reality of an inhospitable wasteland. Whereas early European landscape images of pastoral domestication were duly supportive of an emerging leisure industry and reliant upon the identification of an affluent audience, American landscape painters were literally explorers, charting unknown territory on frequently arduous expeditions.<sup>6</sup> The colonial journey without maps into a landscape without definition was, for many artists and explorers, a step into the void, inducing an ultimate sense of physical and emotional loss. In 1827, writer James Fenimore Cooper described the Great American Desert as a space “not unlike the ocean . . . there was the same moving and regular surface, the same absence of foreign objects, and the same boundless extent to the view.”<sup>7</sup> George Kendall’s description of the Sante Fe Expedition in 1845 is likewise marked by agoraphobia, meted in the impossibility of comprehending or navigating the new spaces of America:

to be lost, as I and others have experienced, has a complex and fearful meaning. It is not merely to stray from the path, but from yourself. With your way you lose your presence of mind . . . in a word all is lost, except a maniacal impulse to despair, that is peculiar and indescribable.<sup>8</sup>

For Aitken’s protagonists, no path or homeland exists. They appear to navigate by instinct, driven by a seemingly primordial belief that, as one woman asserts softly, “there is something different out there.” The absent path acts as a primary signifier of temporality in crisis. According to Paul Virilio, the collapse of time and space in contemporary first world society can be attributed to the influence of global telecommunication flows.<sup>9</sup> In a realm in which trajectories are mnemonic rather than physical, and movement increasingly virtual, “destination” becomes an obsolete term. Rather than insisting upon the novelty of this condition, however, it may be more useful to track its emergence via the phenomenological experience of the American deserts. E.N. Feltskog remarks that “if the Great American Desert dissolved time past in boundless wastes, then its possible futures offered no

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<sup>6</sup> The collaborative documentation of what is now Yellowstone National Park by Carlton Watkins and William Henry Jackson in the late 1800s is one such example. Their government sponsored mission was to produce nationalistic images in order to divert attention from the genocide of America’s natural populace and appalling rural social conditions. Artists’ renditions of imperial exploration were thought to instil a sense of “national” heritage in the American populace, irrefutably revealing God’s Christian hand in the sublime monuments of the American landscape. Cf Green, 1995 pp. 33-35. See also Beardsley, 1994, pp. 37-41.

<sup>7</sup> James Fenimore Cooper in Feltskog, 1995, p. 83.

<sup>8</sup> Kendall, 1929, p. 204.

<sup>9</sup> Virilio, 1997, pp. 9-45.

comprehensible purpose or design.”<sup>10</sup> From the 1800s onwards, purposeless mobility was a formative element in American national consciousness, a trope which John Steinbeck employed to great affect in his now canonical portrayal of American homelessness, *The Grapes of Wrath*. As Shaune Lakin points out in his detailed investigation of democracy and movement in 20<sup>th</sup> century American art, the West is a space in which constant directionless mobility has *always* superseded the importance of the path.<sup>11</sup>

It is then no accident that Aitken's actors are also seasoned travellers. In the realisation of *blow debris*, Aitken spent some months living with a nomadic desert community located in the hills of the Mojave Desert on the outskirts of Los Angeles. Slab City is a permanent camp comprising 200 to 2000 residents dependent on season.<sup>12</sup> All of the subjects in *Blow Debris* are inhabitants of Slab City, a zone in which legality and illegality are meaningless and home is motion. As Aitken explains, “for this piece, I didn't want to work with actors and actresses... I wanted a direct connection with the individuals with whom I was working...they live in the remote, warm foothills of the Chocolate mountains, a location falling between government jurisdictions, a kind of legal black spot without taxes or police.”<sup>13</sup>

Leslie Fielder's treatise on national identity in American literature discusses this kind of lawless hybridity as a symptom of existential conflicts peculiar to the American West. Fielder describes the archetypal Western story as “a fiction dealing with the confrontation in the wilderness of a transplanted WASP and a radically alien other” whose narrative structure ultimately requires the metamorphosis of the WASP into a hybrid form.<sup>14</sup> He writes: “even as he...becomes fully hippie, the ultimate Westerner ceases to be White at all and turns back into the Indian, his boots becoming moccasins, his hair bound in an Indian headband...to declare that he has fallen not merely out of Europe, but out of the Europeanized West, into an aboriginal and archaic America.”<sup>15</sup> Aitken's four protagonists, on their separate journeys from the desert through urban wastelands and into suburban Los Angeles, may be located within this model. Their presence clearly flags a return to ‘archaic’ America, and yet they also visibly bridge the junction between coloniser and dispossessed both in appearance and via the narrative enactment of the east-west journey. The naked figures mesh awkwardly with their high modernist, urban environments, and are out of place in desert or metropolis.

This ambivalence is staged against the backdrop of *blow debris's* hybrid landscape and apocalyptic surrounds. Since 1945, the American deserts have

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<sup>10</sup> Feltskog, 1995, p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> Lakin, 2000, p. 494.

<sup>12</sup> Aitken in Sharp, 2002, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> Birnbaum, 2002, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Fielder, 1968, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Fielder, 1968, p. 23

functioned as testing ground for advanced weaponry including ballistic missiles and nuclear devices. In much of the South West, the landscape is still mottled with the rusted remains of these activities. What was once the 'promised land' is now haunted by the ghosts of mass destruction. The fine line between 'savage' and 'civilian' that so terrorised early explorers is encapsulated within these inherently savage relics of a supposedly civilised society. In addition to this military detritus, LA has now expanded its urban territory into the Mojave deserts and beyond. Even in 1972, urban planners commented that "the entire desert seems to be subdivided and covered with a gridiron of graded street; such development destroys the deserts as landscape and as open space, replacing them with nothing but the empty wasteland of ex-urbanism."<sup>16</sup>

Rather than negative moralising upon such ruinations, Aitken finds in this interzone the remnants of a sublime beauty. Nowhere is this so evident than in *blow debris*'s camera work. Luscious pans and tilts linger upon details, pausing to capture a colony of ants, a broken television screen, creases across hands. The saturated colour and organic quality of the images can be attributed to Aitken's preferred medium, 35 mm film, while the use of a slight slow motion in many of the scenes lends a hypnotic flow to the camera's movements. Aitken's aestheticisation of wasted wilderness is reminiscent of Dennis Hopper's loving portrayal of the landscape in *Easy Rider* (1969): both pieces simultaneously sustain and distance spectatorial romance with the land.<sup>17</sup> A similar strategy is evident in Aitken's earlier video installation *diamond sea* (1997), in which rolling vistas of supposedly untamed desert are eventually revealed as the site for the world's largest diamond mine, manned not by human workers but solely by high tech machinery.<sup>18</sup> Here too, the ground which appears so visually arresting is "contaminated by colonisation and greed."<sup>19</sup>

### **The Entropic Landscape: Robert Smithson and Doug Aitken**

This ambivalence toward the landscape stems from Aitken's evident attraction to entropic states of being, a field well trodden three decades earlier by American artist Robert Smithson. *blow debris* owes much to Smithson's investigations into environments spiralling toward disorder, with "no exits, and no great beyond."<sup>20</sup> Projects such as *Spiral Jetty*, (1970) and *The Monuments of Passaic* (1967) dwell upon the voids of urbanity and the pleasures of incoherence. Describing the

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<sup>16</sup> As cited in Davis, 1998, p. 173. It is worth remembering that this comment was made around the same time that Robert Smithson was making his treks through the deserts outside of Los Angeles.

<sup>17</sup> There is a specifically 1960s ambience to Aitken's piece which was in part established by films such as Hopper's. However, Aitken's inditement of 60s tropes (idealism of hippy communities, freedom through connection to the earth, anti-materialism) is simultaneously marked by deep cynicism. Reflections on cold war paranoia regarding boundaries, the anti nuclear movement, and the massive human suffering which inspired the 60s peace protests are unavoidable.

<sup>18</sup> Doug Aitken in Bonami, 1998, p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> Heiser, 2002, unpaginated.

<sup>20</sup> Smithson, 1979, p. 170.

environment around *Spiral Jetty*, Smithson noted “the mere sight of the trapped fragments of junk and waste transported one into a world of modern prehistory . . . a great pleasure arose from seeing all these incoherent structures.”<sup>21</sup> *blow debris* resonates strongly with Smithson’s earlier interest in the continuous disintegration of defined structures. Natural and artificial elements feed into each other and toward decay; Aitken pairs shots of panoramic desert-scapes with close-ups of broken televisions, splicing naked wanderers with urban detritus. Smithson’s archaeology of cultural sedimentation is adopted by Aitken as methodology.

And it is not simply conceptual similarities that link the two artists. Smithson’s sense of cyclical time and filmic structure are both emulated in *blow debris*. Aitken reworks the spiral motion of Smithson’s original film through associational narrative, utilising the three screens to block linear temporality and spectatorial stability. Gary Shapiro locates a similar quality in the film of *Spiral Jetty*:

Every motion we see in one direction is doubled by motion in the opposite direction. Journeying to the centre of the spiral does not provide a stable, substantial focus, for there is nothing there. The loss of the center induces vertigo.<sup>22</sup>

Aitken literalises this double movement through his use of mirrored images: the left and right screens frequently depict the same scene flipped horizontally. An analog, low fi version of this technique formed the basis for Smithson’s 1968 sculptural installation *Enatiomorphic Chambers*. Smithson’s enatiomorphs were panels of mirrors mounted on walls, angled to reflect only each other.<sup>23</sup>

Both artists also introduce their works as monuments to change. In a voiceover excerpt taken from Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnameable*, Smithson intones; “Nothing has changed since I have been here. But I dare not infer from this that nothing will ever change.”<sup>24</sup> Aitken also explicitly frames his work as a monument in flux: “everyday I see things change . . . and I can’t stop it.” Aitken has described *blow debris* as an exploration of “cycles of change as if any given moment could open up into a multitude of levels . . . Relationships with time start to break apart and create faulty connections.”<sup>25</sup> The splintering of time, inchoate in *Spiral Jetty*’s voiceover and repetitive editing, is now fully realised by Aitken’s manipulation of optical technology to rupture temporality. Change is both Aitken’s subject and his methodology.

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<sup>21</sup> The pleasure Smithson encountered was also attributable to his interest in finding or creating art outside institutional strictures. This is most evident in his writings on museum voids and minimalism. Smithson (1973) in Smithson, 1979, pp. 115-118.

<sup>22</sup> Shapiro, 1995, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Smithson, 1979, p. 153.

<sup>24</sup> Shapiro, 1995, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Sharp, 2002, p. 30.

The visual cue to the shared temporality of both *blow debris* and *Spiral Jetty* is introduced in the opening shot: both films begin with a close-up of a blacked out sun, explosions and flares shooting outwards from its surface. No longer a measure for the days, the black sun is defamiliarised, isolated from its slow charting of time. The seeming stability of the sun's eternal presence is revealed as illusory, mutable. Jacques Ellul dates the Christian link between duration and sunlight to the earliest origins of man;

When Genesis tells us the first creation is light, surely this is to tell us precisely that it is the creation of time, since time and light are indissoluble . . . Arising from truth, light literally gives rise to reality, for again in the text of Genesis, light is the appearance of time.<sup>26</sup>

In Aitken and Smithson's world, this partnership is dissolved. Chronological succession has evaporated into overexposure, a clinical condition which, as Smithson knows so well, has the potential to induce nausea and amnesia. The black hole sun does not allow for contemplation of the world: it illuminates nothing but itself. Its vast circumference reveals only the knowledge that it too is a surface in front of other surfaces, shadowing "things behind the sun." The appearance of time, and the "truth of reality" are troubled from the outset.

### **Walkscapes: Travel, Spectatorship and LA**

That such ruptures may be best experienced by a subject in motion is also central to both works. Aitken's protagonists understand their space through perambulation. As James Gibson remarks; "we must perceive in order to move, but we must also move in order to perceive."<sup>27</sup> Perception is in itself a mobile and active undertaking, heightened and transformed by motion through space. Movement integrates time and space and produces a flow state maintained through shifting interconnections between person and place. The same connectivity is present in the structure of *Blow Debris*: the plurality of narrative allows for a kind of rumination inspired by travelling.<sup>28</sup> Jorg Heiser rather astutely argues that Aitken's use of both moving protagonists and kinaesthetic environments challenges spectatorial ability to regard landscape as a

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<sup>26</sup> Jaques Ellul in Virilio, 1997, p. 139.

<sup>27</sup> James Gibson in Leed, 1991, p. 21.

<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, this kinaesthesia is antithetical to European notions of the sublime landscape which depended on a *motionless* awestruck viewer and a frozen moment.

“sublime manifestation of inner struggle.”<sup>29</sup> Instead, both parties become *part* of Aitken’s landscapes. They are quite literally immersed in their surroundings.<sup>30</sup>

Movement also fractures the ability to regard place as anything but territorial. As Eric Leed comments, “the eternal assumption that societies are ... centered, contained and enduring structures is a distortion of retrospect, a view of history filtered through history.”<sup>31</sup> *blow debris* debunks this assumption in its disavowal of borders and boundaries; both the desert and the wanderers’ final destination are fundamentally decentred environments. And Aitken makes this abundantly clear once the narrative moves to the suburban houses of Los Angeles. One scene opens with a close-up of a man seated at an Ikea-style table set. Pencil in hand, he obsessively draws and redraws a circle on an otherwise blank sheet of paper. “What are you drawing?” his flat voiced companion drawls. “An Island”. The woman gazes unmoved at the page whilst the man continues his vicious circle; Aitken cuts to a close up of her finger running around the edge of a full glass of water. The scene imparts a desire for protection, for sanctuary on isolated ground. Elements of anxiety introduced earlier in the piece are at their peak: the journey towards civilisation offers no answers, only a greater sense of displacement. Continually redrawn, Aitken’s pencil island is inscribed with tension. Its edges slip and jar against each other, circles upon circles that cynically deride the possibility of a symbolic whole. As Deleuze and Guattari once wrote; “my territories are out of grasp . . . because I am in the process of drawing them.”<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the longest standing gated community in LA’s Westlake Village also goes by the name of ‘The Island’. Life in the luxury housing project was described by one LA Times article as “a sublime existence of morning tennis matches, cocktail hours and midnight strolls.”<sup>33</sup> But if the Island is a sanctuary from real and imagined threats, it is also, as Stephen Braun and Judy Pasternak have noted, a marker of “fear’s distant reach.”<sup>34</sup> Glistening with surveillance cameras and separated from the ‘mainland’ by a 160 acre-wide protective moat, the complex is a paradigmatic example of what architectural theorist Mike Davis has dubbed LA’s ‘fortress cities’.<sup>35</sup> Davis’ thesis parallels Aitken’s take on Los Angeles’ suburbia. In *blow debris*, tennis matches and morning strolls are seen as *de*

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<sup>29</sup> Heiser, 2002, unpaginated. Perhaps the key difference between European and American conceptions of the sublime lies somewhere in this gap between European paralysis and American mobility: static contemplation of the land versus mobile immersion in the sublime landscape. For a pithy breakdown of Kantian versus Burkeian sublime, see Ferguson, 1992.

<sup>30</sup> Aitken’s 1999 video installation *electric earth* also explored mobile immersion in the landscape.

<sup>31</sup> Leed, 1991, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 54.

<sup>33</sup> Braun and Pasternak, 1994, p. 42.

<sup>34</sup> Braun and Pasternak, 1994, p. 42.

<sup>35</sup> Davis, 1990.

*rigueur* for American suburbunites. However, the tennis game featured in *blow debris* is closer in tenor to something out of *Fight Club* than anything ever featured on *Desperate Housewives*. In this scene, one of the male desert wanderers (still naked) is pictured alone on the court, furiously returning volleys thrown across the net by an unmanned, automatic machine. In a series of abruptly edited close-ups, Aitken dwells on the extreme physicality of the man's actions: dripping in sweat and evidently exhausted, the player moves repetitively, completely at the service of his mechanical opponent. On Aitken's Island, *leisure time* is determined by technology and regulated by capitalism. The game necessarily tests his human limitations. Nothing could be further from play.

"Island" was also the metaphor used in the 1960s to describe the increasing proliferation of satellite cities around Los Angeles. Architectural theorist Francesco Careri notes that the increase of low density suburbs stretching out from the city's centre produced an aerial image of LA as "fractal archipelago":

As the islands grow they are transformed into centers in their own right . . . the result is a group of islands that float in a great empty sea.<sup>36</sup>

Careri picks up on Edward Soja's earlier description of LA as 'fractal', outlined in *Third Space*, a quality analogous to the complexity and instability of the city's cartography.<sup>37</sup> As Soja notes, LA "seems to break every rule of urban readability and regularity, challenging all traditional models of what is urban and what is not."<sup>38</sup>

According to Claude Levi Strauss, the more elaborate a given structure, the greater its potential for entropy and disintegration. Levi-Strauss characterised these complex organisations as "warm societies", epitomised by the United States and, most specifically, Los Angeles.<sup>39</sup> In *blow debris*, Aitken casts the architectural expansion and subsequent incursion of "urban voids" throughout LA as entropy at its height, an entropy which defines the way in which contemporary space is negotiated and subjectivities formed. The parallels with Smithson's earlier entropic landscapes are striking. However, Aitken's project does more than simply bring Smithson up to speed. In *blow debris* the visible, "external" relationship to central power structures has been displaced, mirroring the physical, architectural blurring of margin and centre ubiquitous to California. Soja argues that this recomposition of urban form into an archipelago of metropolitan islands alters the way we interpret both the meaning of

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<sup>36</sup> Careri, 2002, p. 181.

<sup>37</sup> Soja, 2000. However, whereas Soja utilises LA as a model for a globalised contemporary cityscape, I point to the specifically American characteristics of the environment, positioning LA within a similar field of entropy to the Western deserts. This is where Claude Levi-Strauss' contemporary characterisations of entropy in the US also find their historical markers.

<sup>38</sup> Soja, 1996, p. 300.

<sup>39</sup> As discussed in Careri, 2002, p. 170.

urbanisation, and psychological relationships.<sup>40</sup> “Getting a grip” on either physical location or psychological situation is impossible when the safety nets controlling the periphery are absent.

### **The Glass Horizon: against the contamination of geography**

there is no more surface . . . just a line, a skyline . . . the desert is getting bigger, the perspective of local space vanishing, and with it, not only the apparent skyline, but also the whole panoply of surfaces recording movement.

Paul Virilio: Open Sky.<sup>41</sup>

For Paul Virilio, the redundancy of geography in establishing ontological placement necessitates a new differentiation between figure and ground, time and space.<sup>42</sup> This requirement is met by his model of the “transparent horizon”:

The optical density of the landscape is rapidly evaporating, producing confusion between the apparent horizon of our collective imagination, which is the backdrop of all action, and the deep horizon of our collective imagination; and so one last horizon of visibility comes into view, the *transparent horizon*, a product of the optical magnification of man’s natural domain.<sup>43</sup>

The “transparent horizon” is proffered as a solution to a supposed *contamination* of the world’s “space time” by accelerated technology flows. According to Virilio, global tourism and instant spatial access (no matter the geographical distance) has forged a deep and imaginary horizon across the boundaries of virtual space. The inference being, of course, that movement and “being-in-the-world” are no longer “grounded” by solid, reassuringly physical points in real space. Aitken is undeniably influenced by Virilio’s speculations.<sup>44</sup> Sections of *blow debris* were even retitled *glass horizon I* and *glass horizon II* (2000) and exhibited in

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<sup>40</sup> Soja, 1996, p. 301.

<sup>41</sup> Virilio, 1997, p. 125.

<sup>42</sup> Virilio, 1997. See also Virilio, 1986, pp. 14-39.

<sup>43</sup> Virilio, 1997, p. 22. (emphasis in original)

<sup>44</sup> Aitken also shares Virilio’s fascination with speed and acceleration. *I am a Bullet*, the collaborative book Aitken produced with Dean Kuipers, argues that “Speed is more than a cultural obsession. Speed is who we are.” The line could be straight out of a Virilio passage. Kuipers and Aitken, 2000, unpaginated.

separate shows.<sup>45</sup> However, rather than locating this vertiginous experience of space-time relations as a symptom of recent global phenomena, the affect can, as I have argued, be attributed to a peculiarly American condition located within an identifiable historical matrix. The disappearance of geography is continuously paralleled in experiences of the American landscape as an entropic field. A tiny landscape featured on the wall of an apartment at the conclusion of *blow debris* could even be seen as a visual pun on the concept. The horizon line in this scene is literally flattened behind glass, the physical space of the “external” world compressed into distant illusion. It is difficult to tell whether this image is a window or a painting. And under the claustrophobic grid of the interior’s ceiling, this is the only horizon we have left.<sup>46</sup>

For both Virilio and Aitken, the implications this holds for the subject are catastrophic. The final scene of *blow debris* is pure apocalyptic chaos. Inside the apartment, a woman carefully positions herself on the couch. The man remains seated at the table, expressionless and waiting. Close-ups of flesh buried in sand flash past. Objects are spontaneously set in motion and explode. A cloud of dust seeps beneath the doorframe, obscuring the bodies. Glowing above is the white grid of the ceiling in triplicate. With a sudden intensity of light the couple are reduced to dust. Dust is, as Shapiro reminds us, “the inescapable residue left by all processes, signalling the entropic tendency toward disorder.”<sup>47</sup> But, in this case, from disorder comes regeneration at the expense of human life. The turbulence is played in reverse, and the objects quickly implode: a glass of water and a lamp are re-fashioned from shards of debris and resume their original positions. As calm is finally restored, Aitken offers us a slow pan of the empty room on all three screens. The figures have vanished.

On a very literal level, the scene is an anti-urban alienation drama in which nature and culture appear to collaborate in the elimination of humanity. Anxiety stems not only from the “natural” cyclonic turbulence: the inanimate, domestic objects are also ominously threatening. But the moral is not so simple. There is no framework of “us versus them” to allow for interpretative negotiation. Figure and machine are ambivalent forms rather than catalysts for destruction or regeneration. Emotional determinants which may have created empathy or antipathy towards our protagonists are absent from the start. What remains, however, is a line, extending from right to left, east to west, and then stasis. We hear a sound akin to a heart monitor, or is it a radar? The final trajectory of *blow debris* is not ground zero. It is more like a flight path, or a flatliner. Geographical and biological journeys both terminate at the edge of the frame.

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<sup>45</sup> *Glass Horizon* was exhibited as part of Aitken’s installation at the Vienna Secession in 2002. For reviews, see Heiser, 2002 and Romano, 2001, pp. 121-2.

<sup>46</sup> This sequence may also be referencing minimalist art’s relationship to the natural world. Robert Smithson notes that dwelling on “abstract mental images of flat planes and grids and single lines . . . tends to exclude the whole problem of nature.” In other words, the grid deconstructs physical matter into mental constructs, just as Aitken transforms geographical space into metaphorical space. A full discussion of Aitken’s relationship to minimalist art practice and phenomenology must unfortunately be deferred. Smithson, 1979, pp.152-155.

<sup>47</sup> Shapiro, 1995, p. 14

Ed Ruscha once said: 'I'm a victim of the horizontal line, and the landscape, which is almost one and the same to me.'<sup>48</sup> One might argue that the two are critically incompatible. The line which might best describe the contemporary American landscape is more akin to Deleuze and Guattari's "nomad line": a line experienced phenomenologically rather than visually, a vector which passes *between* rather than toward points and defines no contour.<sup>49</sup> This was the line physically marked out in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by explorers, writers and artists such as James Fenimore Cooper, William Henry Jackson and Carlton Watkins in their desolate, random treks across the Great Western Deserts. It is the line which winds across the Great Salt Lake in *Spiral Jetty* towards an empty centre. And from the outset, it delimited nothing but loss. Time, memory and placement all vanished amid directionless wanderings in the Bad Lands. Aitken remarks, "I think there's something about growing up in America that makes you feel nothing is ever really stationary. Home can be motion at times."<sup>50</sup> In other words, the search for the frontier may continue, but in America, no man's land is everywhere.

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<sup>48</sup> Edward Ruscha, in Beardsley, 1994, p. 164.

<sup>49</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, pp. 495-497.

<sup>50</sup> Aitken, in Sharp, 2002, p. 15.

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