

Alan Michelson

This interview was conducted with Alan Michelson over email in June 2020.

Curators Linear perspective, which is a Western invention, can also be seen as a technology of domination. Much like surveillance technology, vision itself can be said to be a certain kind of technology and, historically, has emerged alongside the military-industrial complex. How does your work destabilize the tenets of linear perspective and perhaps lend itself to an evocation of what Jolene Rickard calls “visual sovereignty”?¹

Alan Michelson Linear perspective is a centralizing system of representation that privileges the single viewpoint. Its political analog would be monarchy—its psychological one, narcissism. It is a technology developed during the Renaissance, also the era of European exploration and colonization which helped finance it. Like Cartesian projection, perspective is a cultural mapping of space that renders it uniform and quantifiable, facilitating its exploitation or expropriation. From the nautical chart to the land survey, such projection was a major tool of Western colonialism, and in its military application—artillery, for example—assisted in the projection of deadly force against non-European peoples.

I am drawn to the extended horizontal format of the panorama, one shared by the wampum belt, the Haudenosaunee/Eastern Woodland cultural feature employed in diplomacy. Panoramic art complicates and expands perspective, as does the art of diplomacy. In some of my works, I inject Western panoramic space and media, including video, into Haudenosaunee templates of space and relation, like the Two Row Wampum, which graphically symbolizes an ethical model for sharing space. A wampum belt is a woven matrix of purple and white shell beads arranged in a culturally

¹ See Jolene Rickard. “Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors.” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 2 (2011): 465–482.

legible design—an Indigenous analog to digital video’s matrix of pixels. I suppose you could say that my work destabilizes the tenets of linear perspective by eschewing it—and the destabilizing effects of colonization it has helped foster—in favor of a visuality anchored in Haudenosaunee philosophy and materiality, which certainly comports with Jolene’s notion of visual sovereignty, who included my work in her essay on the subject.

C Since 2001, your videos, and more recently your augmented reality, or AR, work has used technology as a means to surface the multiple, layered temporalities embedded in a site and to critique the conditions which contributed to their erasure in the first place. In these works, light is often used as both material and subject, again thinking about light as a mechanism of domination and also a fundamental, perhaps universal, tool in art. Can you talk about your turn to video in 2001 and to AR and your usage of light in these works?

AM *Mespat* [2001] was my first video installation and consisted of panoramic video projected onto a large screen of white turkey feathers. More recently, in *Hanödaga:yas (Town Destroyer)* [2018], I projected video onto a white replica bust of George Washington and, in *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum (Theatre of the World)* [2019], onto four white globes. Projecting video onto still solid objects creates tension between the object’s materiality and video’s materiality, which is moving colored light and sound, and also between the object’s iconography and the video’s content—dialectical tensions I exploit. Each informs and distorts the other. Setting up that tension is a creative strategy of mine, and I’ve used it over a range of media, most recently in two AR works with Steven Fragale in my Whitney show. Through its technology, nothing short of magic, AR allowed me to manifest in the museum what Manifest Destiny destroyed or rationalized, a Lenape tobacco field in the lobby and Washington’s scorched-earth campaign against our Haudenosaunee home-

lands, which became the bulk of New York state, in a fifth floor passageway.

My first experiment in using light as a medium was in *At Sea* [1990], a site-specific installation at Snug Harbor Cultural Center, in which I installed a pair of diapositive photomurals and dozens of colored acetates in the two rows of windows of an architectural hyphen between two historic buildings at the former home for sailors. One mural was an enlargement of an 1893 image of the sailors seated on the benches in the hyphen and the other was a contemporary photograph of a group of homeless people on benches in Tompkins Square Park. It was a contemporary version of stained glass, referencing the nautical paintings on glass in one of the buildings, and created a chapel-like effect. Because the murals were transparencies, they took on the color and texture of their external surroundings—the yellow brick of an adjoining building, for example, and the changing light of day. I used light similarly in *Third Bank of the River* [2009], a much later public art piece, a large, transparent, etched-glass mural, which is also both front and backlit and changes with the daylight.

Light was used as a metaphor in American landscape painting, including that of the Hudson River School. In *Shattemuc* [2009], a video panorama commissioned for the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson’s exploratory voyage that was shot at night from a boat, I trained a marine searchlight onto the riverbank on a section where Hudson’s crew had a bloody skirmish with the local Native people. It was a powerful light whose square beam illuminated the passing landscape, seeming to paint it out of the darkness. I was referencing the Hudson Night Line boats which once plied the river and illuminated monuments for tourists, but also the sinister aspect of light as a tool of surveillance and control, aspects heightened by the fact that our boat was a former NYPD patrol launch skippered by a retired state trooper.

C You mention the distinction between human and geological

time and how you're interested in bridging those different temporalities. How does your work intervene in these distinctions and what is the role of duration in your video work and, as a concept, in your practice in general?

AM Geological time is the cosmic history of the Earth—measured in millions of years, dwarfing human time. In many of my works, I am surfacing the unmarked and unexpected history of a particular site, history that's possibly instructive. One such work is *Earth's Eye* [1990], which addresses the death by pollution and burial by landfill of Collect Pond, a large, deep, spring-fed pond in Lower Manhattan in the early 1800's. A pond created by geologic forces eons ago, which sustained many Indigenous forms of life for generations, settlers ruined in barely two hundred years and built a notorious prison and execution ground known as the "Tombs" on its infill. That sequence, from pond to Tomb, I find heartbreaking and noteworthy. On Manhattan Island, and all over America, "progress" transformed the landscape beyond recognition, levelling hills, converting streams into sewers, damming and polluting rivers, and wiping out wetlands. We are all paying for that progress now with climate change and other environmental disasters.

The temporal is always present in the spatial, even if only latently so. Through its ability to photographically capture time, space, and sound, and its compelling immediacy, video is an effective medium with which to ponder and translate history. Duration is built in, and can express real time, or through editing, whole periods or cycles. In *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum (Theatre of the World)*, shown in Venice last year, I compressed five hundred years of colonial history into less than twelve minutes of video.

C Although your works sound bold condemnations of settler colonialism and critiques of art history and institutions, they seem to also have a special attention to sensorial pleasure. The gesture of evoking or registering things with, say,

the camera or the reliefs, carries a sense of both denunciation and beauty. In a work like *Shattemuc*, for example, there is the reference to the violence of settler colonialism, its continuation through tourism, and also art history (e.g. the Hudson River School)—but the images and the music give the viewer an eerily pleasurable experience. How do you see the tensions between the critical and the more alluring or sensorially pleasing aspects of your artworks?

AM Art can express both, which is one of its unique powers. Watching a Shakespeare drama, one simultaneously registers the beauty of the language, both verbal and non-verbal, the actors and the set, and the depth of tragedy unfolding. The beauty establishes grounds for the tragedy and conveys its pain in visceral ways that engage and move audiences.

C Can you talk about how you are appropriating and transforming Western artforms, genres, and practices, and what these modes of appropriation effect in your work? For example, you reference the Hudson River School in your work *Twilight, Indian Point* [2003] and moving panoramas in *Shattemuc* and *Mespat*.

AM I love many Western art forms, genres, and practices, but not the ideology they often express, even by default. Hudson River School painters bought into Manifest Destiny. Their luminous, ethnically cleansed landscapes, like those of photographers who succeeded them, romanticize the Americanization of the continent, dismissing as collateral damage the expropriation and genocidal removal of Native people from their homelands. Moving panoramas—landscape or sea-scape paintings on miles of canvas unspooled for paying audiences—were a proto-cinematic, virtual form of tourism to exotic locales colonized by Europeans or Americans. In-visible in both of these genres is the violent, tragic, criminal history underpinning them, something that my appropriation of them reveals.

C In the sixties, land artists became known for their ambitious interventions into natural settings. Your public artwork *Mantle* [2018] references Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* [1970], but unlike Smithson your work takes into consideration the history of the land and the symbolic importance of the form of the spiral, which in *Mantle* is based on the spiral shell embroideries on the historic Powhatan's Mantle [c. 1608]. Works such as *Earth's Eye*, *Cult of Memory*, and *Permanent Title* address issues of land ownership, settler colonialism, and environmental degradation via industrialization and urbanization specifically in the setting of Lower Manhattan. Can you talk about how you approach land and how that's distinct from the practices of canonical American land artists?

AM *Mantle* references the spiral as an ancient Indigenous form and the form of the shell embroidery on Powhatan's Mantle, thought to represent the nations of his confederacy. As a large contemporary earthwork embedded, via cut and fill, in the slope at the foot of Richmond's Capitol Square, *Mantle* references Native mounds. Despite the prominence of *Spiral Jetty* in contemporary art, it is a secondary reference at best, since Smithson's work and the work of the other land artists owes an obvious but unacknowledged debt to the Indigenous mound builders.

Their practices are ahistorical and despite a dystopian undercurrent, largely formal. I approach land from the standpoint of an Indigenous artist, honoring its beauty, lamenting its history, decrying its theft and abuse, and the ongoing abuse of Indigenous people by settler colonialism.

Standing up for the land is another form of beauty.

Alan Michelson's biography can be found in the first booklet of this catalog.