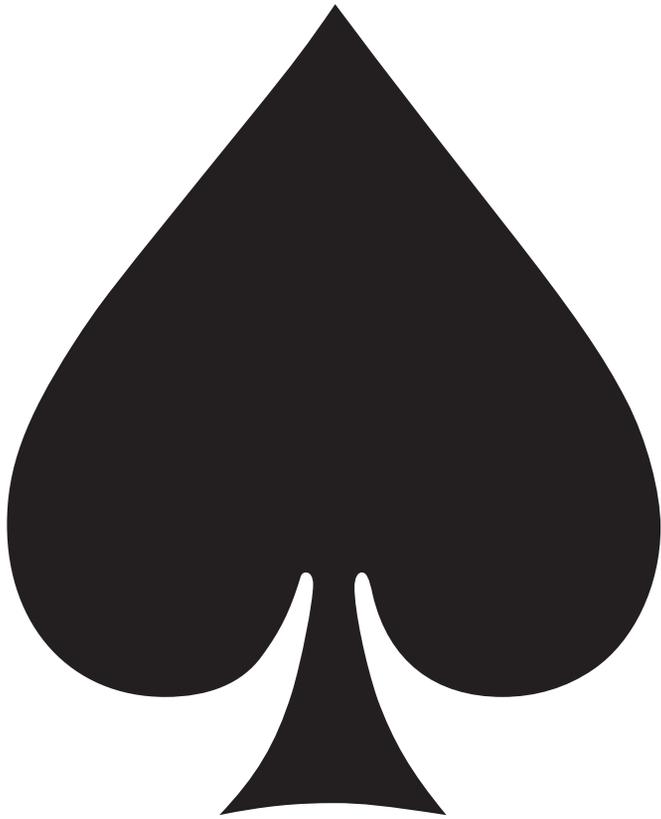
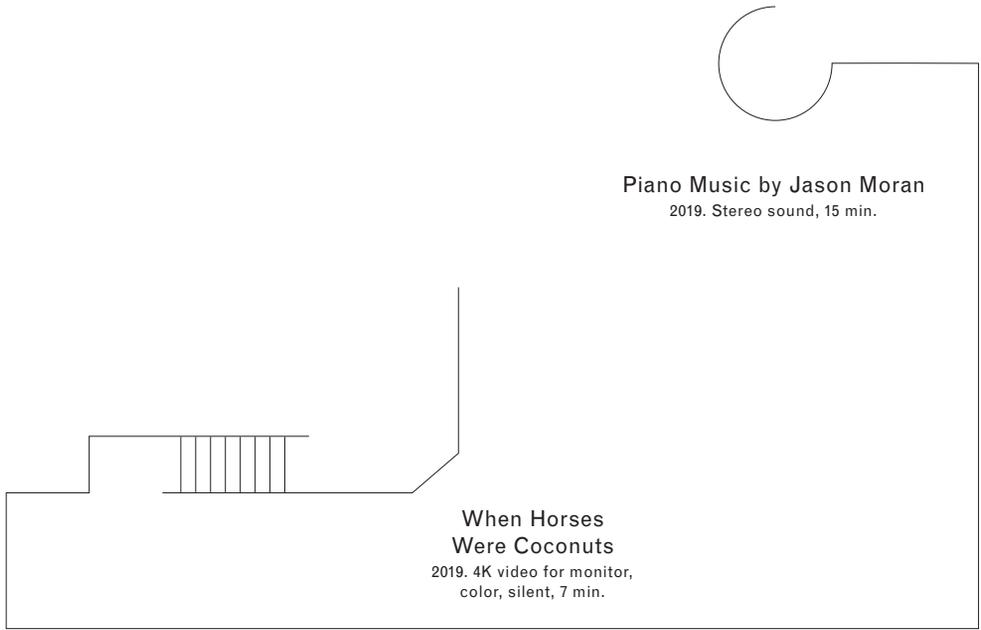


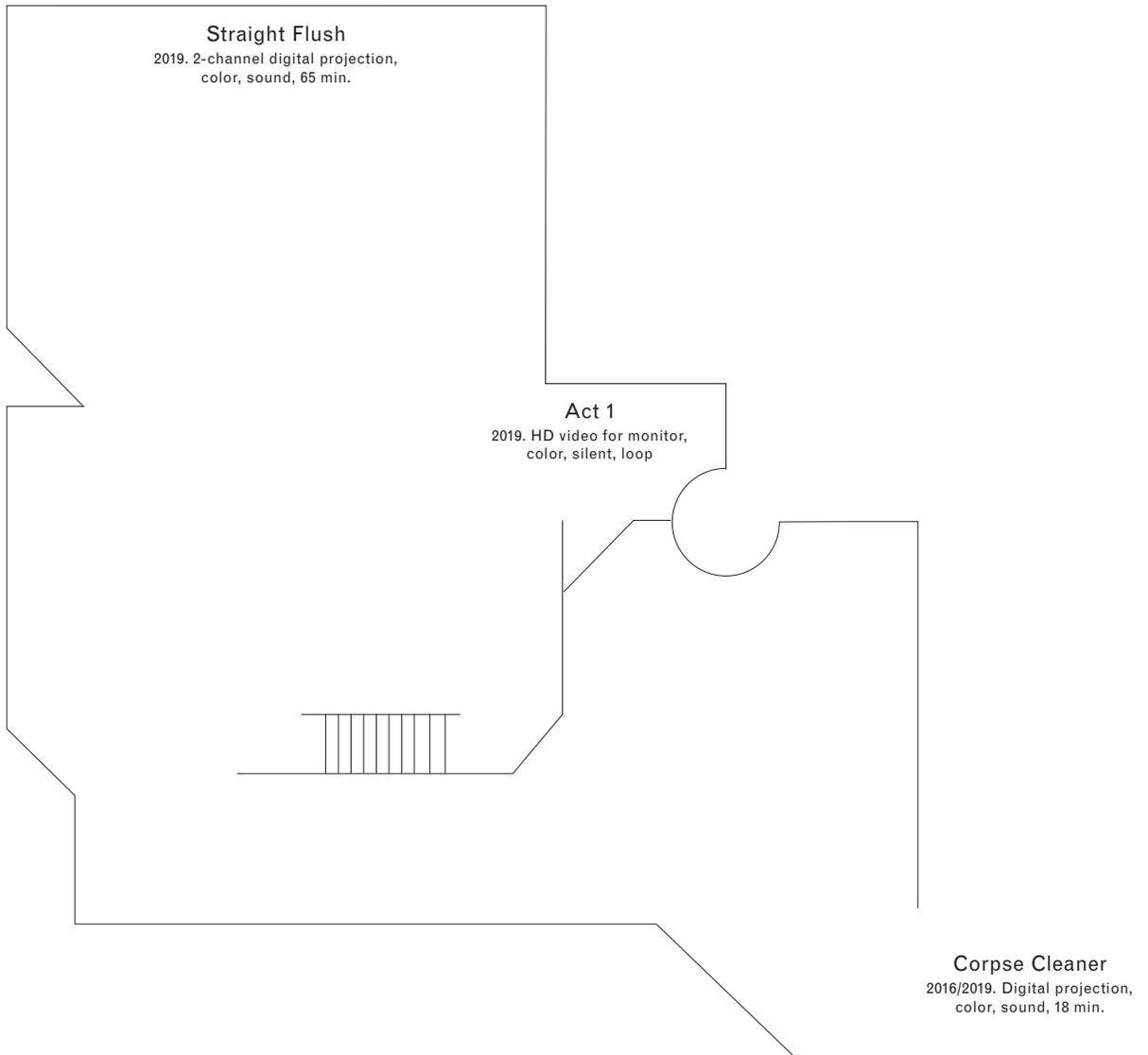


13BC
FATAL ACT





ENTRANCE LEVEL



LOWER LEVEL

Straight Flush

In 1959, ex-U.S. Air Force Major Claude R. Eatherly was in the Veterans Administration Hospital in Waco, Texas. It wasn't his first stay. A decade and a half of botched robberies, hot checks, and harebrained schemes resulted in court-ordered commitment to the hospital multiple times. He was alternately diagnosed as schizophrenic, depressed, and "devoid of any sense of reality," and he underwent insulin coma and electroshock treatments. Eatherly's case received far more media attention than other veterans whose symptoms wouldn't be formally recognized as PTSD until 1980. A narrative had emerged in the trials, newspaper articles, and made-for-TV movies that began to run with, and to fictionalize, the "Eatherly affair": that his crimes, attempted suicides, and general incapacity to become a productive member of society was the consequence of a profound guilt over his role as the military weather pilot whose "all clear" report enabled the atomic destruction of Hiroshima. Others were unconvinced, seeing him as nothing more than a con man, fraud, gambler, and liar who dodged jail time by feigning madness and remorse.

A letter for Eatherly arrived at the hospital in 1959 and offered a different explanation: that his crimes were not just the expression of an individual guilt asking to be punished, but also the symptom of a general condition. This was the condition of living amongst technological systems of production and destruction that had eclipsed the human capacity to adequately imagine their consequences. The letter was written by Günther Anders, a German philosopher and anti-nuclear activist for whom atomic weapons epitomized and made unmistakably visible this broader situation, pushing the human species and the world at large into a "time of the end" that could not be exited as long as the threat of nuclear proliferation remained. He and Eatherly began a long correspondence, which discussed the work of anti-nuclear organizing, attempts to lobby for Eatherly's release from the hospital, and a film that never came to be: Bob Hope's attempted biopic of the life and crimes of Eatherly, a film that Anders warned stridently against, arguing that it would replace him with a facsimile and falsify the most "fatal act" of the century.¹

Straight Flush takes shape in the negative space of this unmade film, extending Anders's rejection of the proposed movie and articulating a broader refusal of the iconic images and atomic aesthetics that shaped public memory and sought to nullify revolt against nuclear proliferation, pollution, and the exploitation of indigenous land. It was filmed in the barracks of the decommissioned Wendover Air Force base, just north of Dugway Proving Ground, one of the largest weapons testing site

in the United States, and straddling the Utah-Nevada state line along which casinos crowd, capitalizing on their location as the eastern-most gambling town in the state. For three nights prior to the shoot, the military carried out exercises, blacking out the electrical grid and laying fake minefields, as 300 paratroopers dropped from helicopters to practice variations on the recapture of a civilian airport taken by enemy forces. In the days of the shoot, Civil Air Patrol Cadets marched and carried out drills to the shouts of their commanders, and on the final day, a storm surged across Wendover where, as luck would have it, the clouds split around the airport, saving the set from the worst of the weather. These sounds carried into the space of the barracks and the film, where Lily Gladstone, Bill Sage, and Dana Wheeler-Nicholson kill time, gamble, smoke, and read the screenplay, traversing histories of land use, Hollywood, and military testing. They play actors, scenarists, and script supervisors in the process of a rehearsal and revision of the script. Two characters appear in sound alone. Patrick Winczewski, a German director and actor known for providing the dubbed voices of the American stars Tom Cruise and Morgan Freeman, takes up the words of Anders, while pianist Jason Moran composes and performs as Charlotte Zelka, the American pianist and partner of Anders who typed his letters when his arthritis prevented him from writing.

Borrowing from the conventions of documentaries and feature films alike, *Straight Flush* remains provisional and disarticulated, left midway through a process of production. It gathers the shots, soundtracks, texts, and lighting effects that together might constitute the building blocks of a film, yet attempts to hold them in tension and arrhythmic synchronization. As Eatherly writes, drugged from the hospital, "please excuse the continuity."²

1. Günther Anders and Claude Eatherly, *Burning Conscience: The Case of the Hiroshima Pilot, Claude Eatherly, Told in His Letters to Günther Anders* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1962), 28.

2. Anders and Eatherly, *Burning*, 77.

A video from 1987, one year after Chernobyl, shows Günther Anders reading “Die beweinte Zukunft” (The Weeping Future), a story he wrote in 1961, when his published correspondence with Claude Eatherly comes to a close. The tale reworks the fable of Noah and the flood, offering a version in which Noah designs a massive fleet of arks to safely bear all of humanity through the coming disaster but is unable to convince the rest of his species to take the threat seriously. In this pointed parable of nuclear annihilation, Anders again insists that it is our incapacity to adequately *imagine* that dooms us to inaction and to simply waiting for the “day after tomorrow”, warning (in the words ascribed to Noah) that when the flood comes, “it will be too late to remember and too late for mourning.” In the video, Anders sits at a table, bent over the text he reads from. Other books are scattered in front of him, along with a small glass of wine. When the camera pans slightly to keep him in the frame as he leans and speaks, the microphone of the audio engineer juts into the shot, until the camera corrects once more and hides it from view. One can’t help but notice his hands. They are so wracked with arthritis that the fingers splay diagonally across each other as if broken. Between one frame and the next, the wine glass is suddenly emptied, the cut hiding the interval in which a pause was taken and the hands grasped the glass.

Anders already struggled with arthritis during the time of his letters to Eatherly, so much so that many of them were typed by his wife Charlotte Zelka, an American concert pianist. Zelka is briefly mentioned in the correspondence. In addition to concerns over her health (“it is a scandal how much one depends on one’s body,” Anders writes) and her translation into “American” of his *Commandments of the Atomic Age*, he also acknowledges how he is “exploiting her as a typist, although she belongs to the piano.”³ Zelka studied with Artur Schnabel at Julliard as a teenager and performed with the influential new music ensemble Die Reihe [The Series] in Vienna. When she returned to California in the 1970s, having separated from Anders, she co-founded the Almont Ensemble, commissioning new works and performing the compositions of Frank Campo, Friedrich Cerha, Alban Berg, Ernst Krenek, and others.

In this commission of original piano music, which also forms part of the soundscape of *Straight Flush*, American artist and jazz pianist Jason Moran plays Zelka, in two intertwined senses. He plays her as a sonic actor, making audible the person whose voice does not appear in the correspondence yet through whose hands the exchange was made possible, an off-screen interlocutor and translator continually inflecting what will rarely bear her name.

In *Straight Flush*, the recordings are interspersed amongst the recordings of Winczewski’s readings of Anders’s letters, slipping between practice sessions caught in the background and fragments of a score that shape the pathos of any given moment on screen. Moran also plays Zelka in the sense that his music articulates a set of tentative compositions and recombinations which draw on her performances and the composers she played. Like *Straight Flush* itself, these are neither finished independent works nor a supplement intended to score an already completed film. Rather, they are provisional efforts that remain unresolved, rehearsals in search of a theme.

3. Ibid. 85.

The moon rises to the east over the barracks of the decommissioned air base, and the internal filters of the ARRI Amira camera slot into place one after the other. The resulting shot passes from dusk to day, day to night, and back to dusk, a relentless loop of a process usually hidden between takes.

A digital camera gathers information by translating light into the electrical charge stored by its sensor. This information can be processed after shooting to radically transform the appearance of what has been recorded, such as by applying a LUT (Look Up Table), a set of numbers that change the RGB color values of an image. But such processing can also take place even before the light reaches the sensor, as the neutral density (ND) filters inside the Amira show. An ND filter aims to reduce “the amount of light reaching the sensor, with no other visible effect,” in the words of ARRI’s own promotional materials: to diminish light evenly across the spectrum, leaving no discernible trace in the distortion of expected color. Unlike chemical film, however, which does not register red within the visible spectrum, digital sensors “require a small amount of this ‘far red’ light to render skin tone as healthy and vibrant,” binding this fantasy of neutral vision to social precepts and racial hierarchies outside the camera, of what constitutes *the healthy, the vibrant, and the correct*.

The problem of how to modulate the light that reaches an eye, film, or sensor is central both to the history of atomic weaponry and testing, and to how the visual record of such tests became some of the most circulated images of the twentieth century. Photographs of bomb viewing parties on the outskirts of Las Vegas show rows of spectators in dark sunglasses staring at the none-too-distant blast with cocktails in hand. Advanced camera technologies developed by the US military sought not only a spectacularly high frame rate able to freeze the unfolding detonation but also to handle an excess of light so great that it could not be recorded as a legible image. When it is captured photographically, this excess can produce moments of inversion, the disarming flip of tone into its opposite. In Minor White’s 1955 photograph *The Black Sun*, we see that titular sun over an Oregon barn in winter, as though an impossible eclipse still bathes the harvested crops in cold light. (Of the photo, White writes: “The sun is not fiery after all, but a dead planet. We on earth give it its light.”⁴) The inversion is the result of overexposure solarization, caused by so much light passing through the lens that the silver-halide crystals of the film are destroyed, leaving that brightest area of the shot with zero density of metallic silver and thereby inverting its tone. White claimed that *The Black Sun* was an accident rather than an intended effect, as the cold caused the

shutter to remain stuck too long in the open position. Yet this accident and its resulting defamiliarization of a stereotypical American landscape manages to give oblique image to something harder to capture than an atomic blast. Namely, the toxic effects of industrialization and military testing, including infrastructural networks and large scale extraction and manufacturing, which often remain invisible other than in their delayed malign effects on living organisms. In the case of weapons testing and war games, this invisibility is further cloaked by the test sites' default locations on indigenous land and in zones, like Dugway Proving Ground just south of the Wendover Air Base, wrongly considered to be at a "safe" distance from human habitation. In case anyone wishes to get closer, they are blocked by fences, barbed wire, and threats of reprisal or felony trespassing that keep the fatal technologies out of view, glimpsed only when a convoy rolls through town.

Yet fences able to keep humans out are notoriously incapable of keeping in the particulate and liquid drift of fallout, nerve gas, or toxic rain. And the fact that such tests continued largely unimpeded throughout the twentieth century, in spite of strident protests, is a sign of just how effectively their consequences were excused by the discourse of accident, as if reducible to single and regrettable instances of mismanagement or unforeseen disaster, individual human errors or tricky shifts in the wind. This discourse of contingency and mishap is itself no accident. It serves to cover over the careful planning and decisions involved at every stage of weapons testing and development, the calculation not only of the lethality of the arms deployed but also of who will bear the brunt of its effects and the degree to which it might be publicly tolerated. Ongoing preparations for war hinge not only on the production of willful accidents but also on a battle over visibility. They seek to restrict the images produced to single spectacles with no fallout, as if effects can be produced without leaving a trace.

4. Quoted in Herbert Blau, *The Dubious Spectacle: Extremities of Theater, 1976–2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

When Günther Anders cautions Claude Eatherly against accepting the offer from Bob Hope Productions to make a film of the pilot's life, he claims that he speaks from experience: that he lived in Hollywood for years and knows how the industry works, insisting that it will distort Eatherly's efforts into something unrecognizable, a falsified copy starring a "smiling, good looking actor."⁵ What Anders doesn't tell Eatherly, however, is the specificity of his experience with Hollywood. Because in addition to writing a script for Charlie Chaplin that never came to fruition, Anders worked in the margins of the film industry, including as a janitor in a costume and prop house called Hollywood Custom Palace. In his diary in March 1941, he notes that, "Even though I am classified as an enemy alien and as an unskilled worker, I have nonetheless found a job. Although the job is rather odd. I have become history's corpse cleaner." There, in a "twelve-story colossus, the palace where I spend my working days, a museum of the entire costume past of humanity," he found himself carrying out a truly ironic labor: cleaning replica "German attack" boots at a time when he had fled Europe to avoid persecution by the Nazis. "We flee the original," he writes, "and then run the risk, a few years later on the opposite side of the world, to have to clean the duplicates for pay!"⁶

At once a freestanding work and the epistolary postscript to *Straight Flush*, *Corpse Cleaner* exits the empty barracks to descend into the crowded jumble of a working prop house and its arsenal of replicas and leftovers. Swapping Long Island City for Hollywood, the gradual sweep of the camera through *Encore/Eclectic Props* becomes the occasion to return to what was left unasked by *Straight Flush*, with that film's Script Supervisor (again played by Dana Wheeler-Nicholson) picking up loose threads. She composes letters back to Anders and Eatherly, moving through the gaps of their exchange to further trace the logic of the copy and the stand-in, drifting from fake German towns built to be bombed in the Utah desert to contemporary redemptive blockbusters about art historians saving artifacts from Nazi hands.

The film was shot on a hot summer day in the windowless space of the prop house, rearranging the disparate materials found within to construct a path for a continual Steadicam shot. Rather than an edit of archival footage cut together in order to sketch a way through these scattered histories, the slow passage of the camera is a montage without cuts, a compression and set of disjunctions, collisions, and echoes assembled in physical space. The inanimate props at *Encore/Eclectic* are gathered in loose categories within the prop house: *cemetery, Christmas, dinosaur, postal service, safari, arcade, Hollywood*, and on from there, mixing

together original objects and facsimiles with no distinction between them. Like Siegfried Kracauer's description of a German film studio in 1926, "the old and the new, copies and originals, are piled up in a disorganized heap like bones in catacombs."⁷ They are meant to be seen only to be rented and dislocated to other sets and settings, to help transpose a scene from 2019 in New York to whatever time and place. In *Corpse Cleaner*, the props become the stars themselves, bathed in lighting set-ups that derive from pulp genres, from erotic thriller to fantasy, horror to noir. And the Steadicam and its operator glide through it all, pivoting and winding amongst the cheap duplicates that themselves require the unseen work of cleaning, maintenance, and upkeep.

5. Anders and Eatherly, *Burning*, 28.

6. Quoted in Paul van Dijk, *Anthropology in the Age of Technology: The Philosophical Contributions of Günther Anders* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 10–11.

7. Siegfried Kracauer, "Calico-World: The UFA City in Neubabelsberg," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 282.

In 1951, CBS News was on location for the atomic bomb tests at Frenchman Flat, Nevada. Camera operators, positioned at a great enough distance from the blast site to avoid damage, were able to capture a usable image, but the sound made by the explosion was inadequately recorded. According to differing accounts, this was because the sound equipment was ruined by the shockwave, because it was too far away to get a good recording, or because the resultant audio didn't sound properly cataclysmic. In his various memoirs, writings, and oral interviews, Robert L. Mott, an influential Foley artist for television, radio, and film, also relays varying and incompatible accounts of how, given three turntables, 20 minutes, and the CBS sound library, he created the sound to accompany this first televised footage of the bomb.

The central element he used was a recording listed in the CBS sound effects library as the "Mogambi Waterfall." This "African"⁸ waterfall was the go-to record that sound engineers used for many purposes, but which here Mott "sweetened," playing it backwards, slowed down, and combined with other explosion recordings, forming the basis of the slow roaring sound we still associate with the bomb. Although a Mogambi watercourse does exist in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the tributary tends to only be referred to by that name in nineteenth-century accounts by European missionaries and explorers. This colonial construct is unsurprising in the context of a Foley library, given the entertainment industry's fast and loose use of very specific sites across the African continent as sets and stand-ins for generic colonial paradises or sites of exotic danger. One such "African" outpost is portrayed in the John Ford picture *Mogambo*, a film released two years after the Frenchman Flat tests. Titled by its producer after a Hollywood nightclub but falsely translated as "the Greatest" in its 1953 trailer, *Mogambo* was filmed on location in such varied African countries as the DRC, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, as well as at the British MGM studios. Perhaps more unusually for Hollywood, however, its soundtrack was not scored by a Western composer appropriating supposedly "African" melodies, but rather featured original recordings of musicians in the DRC.

When Horses Were Coconuts was also filmed on location at a waterfall, although this time on a cold June morning in upstate New York with a consumer-grade underwater handheld camera. Thus the film, like the attempt to produce sound for one of the most iconic images of the postwar period, is also analogical. It once more displaces and recreates the visual effect of the bomb, but this time it refuses the infamous image of the mushroom cloud. This proxy footage is made strange and

literally inverted, flipped 180 degrees so that the surface of the river becomes a quicksilver sea.

8. Mott repeatedly describes the specificity of this "African" waterfall as the Mogambi in all of his books. We use his writing not only as the basis of *When Horses Were Coconuts*, which is paraphrased from one of his titles, but excerpts from each of the following books by Mott are also read aloud by the cast in *Straight Flush*, *The Audio Theater Guide: Vocal Acting, Writing, Sound Effects and Directing for a Listening Audience* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009); *Radio Sound Effects: Who Did It, and How, in the Era of Live Broadcasting* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005); *Radio Live! Television Live!: Those Golden Days When Horses Were Coconuts* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2003); *Sound Effects: Radio, TV, and Film* (Waltham, MA: Focal Press, 1990).

Floor

The installation as a whole takes its name from the approximately 2,400 square feet of broadloom carpet laid throughout the first exhibition of *Fatal Act* at 80WSE. Manufactured by Philadelphia Commercial, the particular pattern is called *Good Times*, with the *What a Blast* color-way. Both its 20-year commercial warranty and its dizzying scatter of particles suggest its intended purpose as "hospitality carpet," to be installed in high-traffic areas that seek to amplify the experience of being in a space away from work or home, an exceptional site of leisure, travel, or play. Along with hotels and movie theaters, casinos are the most extensive users of such carpets, flooding their floors with notoriously garish patterns to produce a visually riotous ground which cries out to be seen yet is supposed to be ultimately ignored, just one component part in an overall plan for the derangement of the senses.

There are varying accounts as to why casino carpets are so busy, colorful, and tangled that they become almost painful to look at. Some in the industry suggest that the carpets derive from a projected image of shoddy luxury and opulence: casinos were referred to as "red carpet joints," a history invoked by the patterned carpet tiles covering the lower galleries of the Douglas Hyde in this iteration. (These tiles also echo perhaps the most famous contemporary use of red carpet, its ubiquitous role in major film premieres, to be walked on by stars who pass through the flashing cameras of paparazzi on their way into the dark of the theater.) Others suggest that this ugliness is wholly intentional, driving the eyes upwards towards the screen or table at hand to consolidate focus on the process of gambling itself. According to Bill Friedman, author of *Designing Casinos to Dominate the Competition* (the Bible of casino design), the lack of outside light means that carpets become a crucial element to bolster brightness and feed into the excitement of players, "because the only time visitors see the floor in front of them is when they are walking around the casino. Reasonably intense colors amplify players' excitement as they approach the gaming equipment. Players do not look down at the carpet while playing, so the coloring is not a distraction."⁹

However, the most commonly cited reason for the chaotic patterns is also the most practical: to hide dirt and wear and therefore retaining the image of permanent newness. As Bill Hughes, the Director of Marketing Operations at the Peppermill in Las Vegas puts it: "You don't want a real plain carpet because people drop cigarettes on it and spill drinks on it."¹⁰ Friedman concurs on this point, insisting that carpets "should have a small or tight pattern, so the inevitable nonremovable stains will be less likely to show." But

his continual emphasis on excitement — as in his claim that gamblers “are high-energy people [...] looking for thrills”— belongs to an industry model that has rapidly declined. The bulk of profits no longer comes from high-risk, high-reward games like blackjack and poker that resulted in familiar images of the card counter or hustler aiming to beat the system and strike it rich. Instead, contemporary casinos profit not from volatility but from volume, from the “slow-bleed” grind of video poker and virtual slots that promise no big score but hours and hours in what Natasha Dow Schüll calls “the zone” of interaction with rigorously tuned and adaptive software.¹¹ Spectacular as they may be, the carpets are no match for the chaotic system of information displayed on the screens themselves, interfaces that cause the surrounding world to vanish, leaving a space where time is measured by adrenal flow, declining funds, and how many cigarettes fill the ashtray.

Walls

If the red carpet derives from techniques of distraction, disorientation, and concealment, the gray paint that frames *When Horses Were Coconuts*, *Corpse Cleaner*, and *Act 1* emerges from a history predicated on opposite tendencies, promising focus, neutrality, and the clear visibility of desired effects. Its tone is known as “Middle Gray” or achromatic gray, a reference standard in photography used to calibrate light meters and in conjunction with a spot meter to achieve adequate exposure. Posed precisely between absorption and reflection, Middle Gray works to produce a flatness against which technologies of vision and recording can be tested neutrally. In this way, the gray hinges on the prospect of carefully mediating an intended outcome without introducing any interference that will skew a result. This is the reason that the gray is also used extensively in digital image work, to calibrate LED screens and to coat the walls of color correction and editing rooms, seeking to create a bracketed space that will avoid any distortion. It is a tone designed to target the point of intersection between a technology and those who make use of it, facilitating a duration of total focus that permits one’s surroundings to fall away and cast no shadow over an activity able to forget the creeping passage of time.

At the Douglas Hyde, the Middle Gray paint is echoed by the gallery’s Brutalist concrete architecture, designed in 1978 by Austrian London-based architect Paul Koralek of ABK Architects. The high ceiling tiles of its main lower gallery were hand-cast and painstakingly assembled by Chartered Builder Liam Foran, as were the concrete spiral and cantilevered staircases. Each level of the internal staircase was poured in a single day, stretching out the building process step by step, measuring the

stairs’ *rise and run* in intervals of time, while tethering the indefinite duration of the building’s life to the fixed period defining the labor and craft that went into its making.

Gallery

To enter the gallery, one passes between two sets of red doors, similar to the light-lock double doors of the Rainbow Casino in Wendover just northwest from the barracks. These doors and all the windows of the gallery are coated with a semi-transparent vinyl. Unlike the internal ND filters of *Act 1*, this color was not designed to generate an even reduction of light across the spectrum but rather to produce aesthetic and technical effects.

The color is based on RC-3, or “Rose Chocolate”, a vinyl manufactured by the US-based company Lightgard Spectral Control Window Films. It is a carefully calibrated hue intended for “manipulating light transmissions in Vivariums,” filtering out “the UV blue-green spectrum” to create lighting conditions that will not disrupt the diurnal sleep cycles of nocturnal creatures under laboratory containment and observation.

The red vinyl also analogically reproduces the casino’s fantasy of luxury, exception, and separation from the world around it. The light that enters the gallery, both through the doors and the windows, is thus doubly processed, its brightness canceled and restored only by the projections and monitors that fill the space. No matter the weather or time of day outside, it’s always twilight within.

9. Quoted on Anthony Curtis’ *Las Vegas Advisor*, online at: <https://www.lasvegasadvisor.com/question/2005-07-31/>

10. Quoted in “There’s a Reason for Quirky CasinoCarpet Design,” *Floor Daily*, online at: <https://www.floordaily.net/flooring-news/theres-a-reason-for-quirky-casino-carpet-design>

11. Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 199.

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Written, directed, and edited by Evan Calder Williams, Lucy Raven, and Vic Brooks

Starring: Lily Gladstone, Bill Sage, Dana Wheeler-Nicholson, and Patrick Winczewski
Piano: Jason Moran
Cinematography: Nicolas Doldinger
Executive producers: Robert Rosenkranz, Nicola Lees, and Alex Smith
Production assistants: Eva Cilman, Cooper Campbell
Sound mix: Florent Barbier
Assistant camera: Scott Surman
Gaffer: Wayne Dahl
Grip: Dan Nestel
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Hair and makeup: Jodi Gleave

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Voice: Dana Wheeler-Nicholson
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