

The Archiving of Threat- Monitoring the Spaces of Never Lopez's Seelonce by Heys & Hennlich

Threat Level: Green (Low) ***Bunker Space***

Seelonce is a photographic installation by Never Lopez of an abandoned NORAD radar bunker in North Bay, Canada, which formerly monitored the Canadian Arctic, Atlantic and Pacific coasts during the Cold War for potential security threats. The city of North Bay constructed a new above ground radar base in 2006 to replace the one represented in Lopez's images. This closure marks the first time in 43 years of 24/7 operation that the bunker was not in constant activity. Nicknamed 'the hole' the Under-Ground Complex (UGC) remains ready for use at any time if conditions should necessitate it.

The NORAD space- itself an awkward dual national space serving both the United States and Canadian governments- lies dormant; it has been abandoned as a tool of detection, for which it served through most of the Cold War. Becoming a victim of the end of a global struggle for economic power, the UGC now becomes hollow and blinded for the purposes it was originally intended for. Subsequently we can see the suspension of this NORAD centre representing a low threat level for the first time in the history of the building. A space constructed to always be vigilant to threats, dispatching fighter planes to intercept them, now in itself is no longer in danger nor engages in the global terrain. To witness its spatiality is to witness the decline of its covert functionality, unable to dispatch weapons or to detect risks to its existence or those territories that it guarded for 43 years.

Threat Level: Blue (Guarded) ***Photographic Space***

Lopez documents the UGC in 8 large-scale photographs, each of the images in rich color detailing the stasis outlined in the previous section. What is shocking about these images is not the crumbling they represent- the urban degeneration of contemporary life already reminds us of this fact, it is that Lopez is able to document this once hidden facility with such transparency and clarity. This openness on the behalf of both NORAD and the Canadian government to allow Lopez into a space that surely would have been a highly protected and a secretive locale at the height of the Cold War reflects an unguarded sense of threat to the UGC. This notion extends further to explicate the fact that the base is now quite literally without military guards.

When NORAD reached the decision to close the bunker and open an above ground facility they effectively 'moth-balled' the underground bunker- leaving open the option of returning to the base at any time for military use. This sense of suspended space and utility is heightened in Lopez's images. Showing empty white corridors shining from reflective light, drab brown lecture halls, and entranceways with antiquated Coke machines, the artist constructs the space as empty, hollow and deathly but with the knowledge that the UGC can remerge from its preservatives. Lopez's photographs reflect this condition; through the process of documenting, he represents the same process of freezing that the UGC is framed in.

Threat Level: Yellow (Elevated)
Sonic Space

The title of the exhibition *Seelonce* refers to a distress signal used in air and sea rescues; an American phonetic rendering of the French word 'Silence'. When the phrases 'Seelonce Mayday' or 'Seelonce Distress' are repeated three times in a crisis situation, it means that a given channel can only be utilized by the coastguard, the vessel in distress and any other vessel assisting in the emergency. This means that the channel is closed to any other types of information transmission until the phrase 'Seelonce Feenee' the phonetic translation of the French word 'Finis', meaning finished, is iterated three times; denoting the conclusion of said crisis and that the normal working functionality of the channel can be resumed.

Hanging from the low slung false ceiling, elevated above its regular functional position, a CB radio microphone awaits interaction, a call, a sound, any type of noise, which will break the silence of the gallery's sonic landscape. The spatial emergency channels the aural cartography of a gallery in distress and all is quiet. Awaiting assistance the CB microphone begs a question of presence, it begs to be used, but by whom? The silence itself becomes the documentation of the abandoned NORAD space captured in the photographs. This in turn elevates levels of curiosity. What does the bunker sound like with no signals of presence or absence? Maybe, as in J.G. Ballard's essay *The Sound-Sweep*, the walls of the space have recorded and captured the sonic history of the subterranean facility rendering the bunker not as an empty architecture but as an archive, a storage facility of threatening sounds.

Threat Level: Orange (High)
Office Space

The office space of *Seelonce* is decorated with the tropes of excess and chaos. The stacked office chairs (reflecting the images of the empty lecture hall of the UGC), piled boxes of files, and tipped over bookshelves containing old copies of *Playboy* magazine suggests a restrained notion of surplus intent. Chaos seems likely in this context but not eminent; it is a space of high expectancy. These stacked boxes represent files pushed off to the side and forgotten, chairs without people to occupy them in a working space, magazines left in the haste to abandon- also reveal a sense of desertion in the images of the UGC.

When the end of the Cold War reduced the necessity for a NORAD station in Canada, a decision was reached to relocate the air force wing responsible for the UGC facility to Winnipeg. Fearing a loss of jobs the city of North Bay entered into a cost sharing agreement with the Canadian Air Force to help service the base, ultimately resulting in the construction of the above ground facility. Both the photographs and the installation aspects of Lopez's work refer to the high threat of unemployment in towns like North Bay and others dependant upon military or other industrial economies. Empty spaces and unengaged equipment proliferate in the images, as though the space of the office has been taken out of Lopez's photographs and placed inside the gallery.

Threat Level: Red (Severe)
Gallery Space

When you walk into the gallery the first thing that hits you is a disaster- something is not right here. The photographs are grounded, leaning somehow dejectedly against the wall, filing boxes and stackable chairs are shoved in a massive tower of detritus in the corner of the space, florescent tube lighting sprawled across the floor and a cheap office drop ceiling is placed lower than the usual overhead surface of the room so that the verticality of the gallery space is severed. This is the sight the viewer encounters walking into the exhibition; the room is in chaos.

The audience becomes witness to the emergency situation, but depending on how the spatiality of the gallery is read they are caught between modes of reaction and recordings of time. There are plush leather seats in the gallery suggesting we should be comfortable with the role given to us by the work as that of a voyeur. Is this an appropriate way to act in a time of crisis, or do the chairs in the gallery suggest that there is nothing else to do but sit back and watch the disaster unfold? The notion of the modernist gallery as a space of reflection and contemplation is abandoned here renovating the site to be a spectacle of complicity and abjection; a place where our deep-seated gaze speaks of our contentment with the content of crisis, a cultural facility listening to and monitoring our severe threats to do nothing.

Authors Bio's

Andrew Hennlich is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Manchester; his research examines the use of optical tools in the work of South African artist William Kentridge, and its relationship to historical narratives and witness in a post-apartheid culture.

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