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 prior, he attempted suicide from 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, 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

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. Here, they take the space of an empty room, seeping out through the entire gallery and overlaying the film in the adjoining space. 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.

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.”)³ 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...
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.” 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!”


5. Anders and Eatherly, Burning, 28.


At once a freestanding work and the epistolary postscript to Straight Flush, Corpse Cleaner exits the empty barricades 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.” 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.
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” 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 para-dises 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.

B. 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 approximately 2,400 square feet of broadloom carpet laid throughout the gallery is manufactured by Philadelphia Commercial, part of their “Call of the Wild” line. This 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 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. Others claim that the carpets are there to disorient and combined with the lack of clocks and exterior windows, to further cancel any sense that time passes outside the space of the casino and the rhythms of the game or machine 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.”

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.” 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. 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 carpet that spans the gallery derives from techniques of distraction, disorientation, and concealment, the gray paint that covers its walls 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. For all its differences, then, the gray circles back to an proximity to the casino carpet. 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 and binding with screen and software that permits one’s surroundings to fall away and cast no shadow over an activity able to forget the creeping passage of time.

Glass
The windows and glass doors of the gallery are coated with three shades of semi-transparent vinyl manufactured by Solar Graphics: Smoke 5, Rich Red, and RC-3. Unlike the internal ND filters of Act 1, these vinyls were not designed to generate an even reduction of light across the spectrum but rather to produce aesthetic and technical effects.

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. The first doors encountered from Washington Square are coated in RC-3, or “Rose Chocolate,” produced by a subsidiary of Solar Graphics, 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 second set of doors are coated in Rich Red, which claim no scientific properties but which, in both name and hue, analogically reproduce the casino’s fantasy of luxury and exception. The light that enters the gallery, both through the doors and the Smoke 5 of the windows, is 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 Casino Carpet Design,” Floor Daily, online at: https://www.floordaily.net/flooring-news/theres-a-reason-for-quirky-casino-carpet-design
—13BC
13BC is a research and production collective for moving images, founded and led by Evan Calder Williams, Lucy Raven, and Vic Brooks.

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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

Sound recording: Jeff Hall

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