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## Nothing stable under heaven at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

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## Nothing Stable under Heaven at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

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At its best, it is carefully-constructed chaos. At its worst, it is equally chaotic but less carefully constructed. Nothing Stable under Heaven (<https://www.sfmoma.org/exhibition/nothing-stable-under-heaven/>) is an exhibition that bombards you from all angles as it forces you to juggle different and sometimes jumbled social issues and themes. Running at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from 3 March through 16 September 2018 and curated as a large-scale joint effort by five SFMOMA departments,[1] this exhibition takes its name from a line in James Baldwin's 1962 essay 'The Creative Process', in which he states that 'a society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven'.[2] The featured artists of this show certainly live up to the Baldwinian archetype in pointing out underlying instability, as this exhibition attempts to tackle scores of 'social, ecological, and civic issues' and asks 'provoking questions about systems of power, mass surveillance, and environmental degradation'.[3] Ambitious in its scope – and presenting itself more effectively at first than in the later rooms – Nothing Stable under Heaven highlights a new problem at every turn and raises a new concern on every wall.

The first room in the exhibition is anchored by two well-devised and well-curated three-dimensional pieces. Suspended from the ceiling of this room is An Te Liu's *Cloud* (2008), an amalgamation of 'air purifiers, ionizers, sterilizers, washers, humidifiers, and ozone air cleaners' that emits a continuous series of somewhat-audible, high-pitched whirs as the many machines cycle through and purify the air of the gallery.[4] The bulky purifying systems jut out sharply, crawling across the gallery's overhead space like blocky tentacles while providing a cleansing service to the museum-going public.

*Cloud* is not natural, not a wispy cirrus or a fluffy cumulus; rather, it is machinic, an embodied harbinger of mechanised artificiality. It offers not the pitter-patter of rain falling from a nimbus but instead the hums and whizzes of a sanitised future.



Fig. 1: An Te Liu, *Cloud*, 2008. Air purifiers, ionisers, sterilisers, washers, humidifiers, and ozone air cleaners; various dimensions. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Purchase through gifts of anonymous donors. © An Te Liu. Photograph: An Te Liu.

In the work's seemingly expanding mass of utilitarian architecture, I cannot help but be reminded of Moshe Safdie's *Habitat 67* complex, built for the 1967 World's Fair (Expo 67) in Montreal. Both Liu's *Cloud* and Safdie's *Habitat 67*, with their sprawling aggregations of angular, cubic forms, exist at the boundary of promise and threat; in looking at either of them I do not know whether to marvel or tremble at a scene that is simultaneously utopian and dystopian. Just as *Habitat 67* thrusts upward into the Montreal sky, its blocks of manmade modularity repeating themselves ominously even as they provide living space for the apartment complex's tenants, *Cloud* hovers over the gallery floor, its humming household appliances casting foreboding shadows even as they purify the room's air.

Across from *Cloud* is the other three-dimensional centrepiece of this first room: Hans Haacke's *News*. This installation, created originally in 1969 and updated in 2008, features a printer that rests upon a table and intermittently adds to a never-ending stream of newsfeed. It physically prints out news from various media outlets in not-quite-real-time onto one long sheet of paper, which accumulates in flowing loops on the ground of the exhibition

space. Visitors are invited to touch the paper, picking it up to read a recent story from ABC or CNN or FOX News. Installing *News* in such close proximity to *Cloud* is a brilliant curatorial decision, for these pieces simultaneously pull at and push back from one another. Both works are expansive – *Cloud* offers the illusion of sprawling growth while *News* literally grows by the minute – but in such distinct ways. *Cloud* expands rigidly, angularly, and in the sky; *News* expands with looping mounds and coiling curves on the ground. Both works also make mechanical sounds, but they are different in their timbre. The soft, regular buzz of the filtration systems finds a shrill rejoinder in the sporadic, piercing cries of the printer. And as these two sculptural installations engage in this visual and auditory tension, they create the exact chaotic instability that this exhibition sets out to reveal. From above, the machinery of purification looms over you. From below, the logorrheic cascades of the physicalised 24-hour news cycle pool at your feet. There is no stable calm; there is no escape; there are no answers.

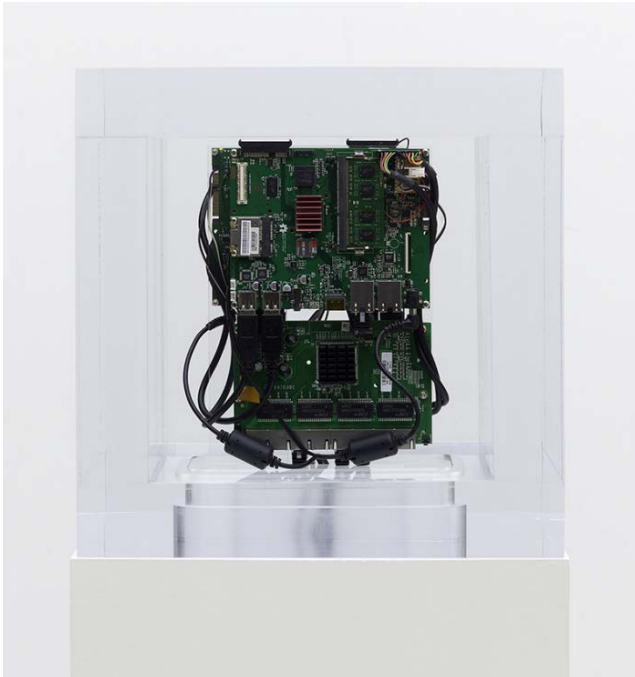


Fig. 2: Trevor Paglen, *Autonomy Cube*, 2014. Plexiglass cube with two functional motherboards, W-lan server; 13 1/2 x 13 1/2 in. (34.29 x 34.29 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase. © Trevor Paglen. Photograph: Katherine Du Tiel. Courtesy of the artist; Altman Siegel, San Francisco; and Metro Pictures, New York.

Adding to the chaos of this first room are the invisible reverberations of one other piece – a piece which is, in my opinion, the most singularly compelling work of the show. In a darkened side gallery to the right of the main room, Arthur Jafa's seven-minute film *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* (2016) plays on repeat. The montage – which splices together sports highlights, vertically-oriented iPhone videos, police dashcams, and various other forms of archival or found footage – is simultaneously a celebration of black pride and accomplishments and a lamentation of institutional racism in America. This luminous film of agony and ecstasy is riveting, with images and juxtapositions that sear themselves into the minds of viewers. In one haunting moment, a Civil Rights Movement-era clip of policemen unleashing gallons of pressurised water from fire hoses onto a scattering group of protestors is followed immediately by a slow-motion shot of NFL quarterback Cam Newton smiling as he charges straight toward the endzone. The triumphant pumps of Newton's powerful arms echo the frenzied pumps of the arms of a scared protestor who, seconds before, appeared fleeing on the screen. The film relishes in these visual rhymes, conjuring an array of emotions and creating diachronic conversations about the black experience between disparate figures, famous and anonymous alike.

But in the context of *Nothing Stable under Heaven* perhaps even more interesting than the content of Jafa's remarkable work is what the film adds to the ambiance of the exhibition's main gallery. Because of the thinness of the film screening room's wall, the soundtrack to the montage – Kanye West's 2016 song 'Ultralight Beam' – can be heard from the main hall. And at this particular moment in time the soulful melodies of 'Ultralight Beam' that resound through the gallery take on a very unique character. In a way that Jafa could not have predicted when he selected the song in 2015, West has become a lightning rod of political controversy due to his peculiar endorsement of Donald Trump. Almost serendipitously, then, do the fraught dynamics of celebrity, politics, race, and discrimination further mark West's rap-gospel hymn as it wafts into the exhibition space. The loud resonances of 'Ultralight Beam' compound the cacophony of the faint hum of *Cloud* and the sharp screeches of *News*. At times, when 'Ultralight Beam' is blaring and *News* is printing and visitors are congregating to ooh and aah at the new article emerging from the printer (for *News* does, in Bourriaudian fashion, create a momentary community of museum-goers who huddle together in front of the printer each time it comes alive), it can become difficult to hear yourself think.

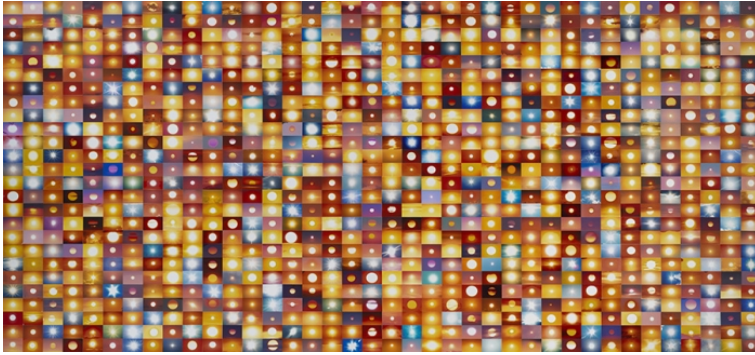


Fig. 3: Penelope Umbrico, 5,377,183 Suns (from Sunsets) from Flickr (Partial) 4/28/09, 2009, 1440 chromogenic prints; dimensions variable. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Members of Foto Forum purchase. © Penelope Umbrico. Photograph: Ben Blackwell.

The curatorial goal here, of course, is not to evoke Bourriaud's relational aesthetics in creating a micro-utopia (that is, a momentary community produced when works of art offer a space of shared activity), but rather to establish a Baldwinian awareness of our own instability. In this charge, this room is wildly effective. You experience a visceral instability through the variety of noises pelting you from one side or another or suffusing themselves into the gallery space. But also, you experience a social instability through the barrage of challenging questions that the individual works – the angular fog of mechanical advancement, the ever-growing lake of newsprint, the spectres of institutional racism and celebrity culture – ask about our sociopolitical climate.

I would thus consider the first room quite a triumph in the auditory and visual chaos it is capable of creating. But while this room actualises Baldwin's phrase in all the right ways, from here I believe the exhibition begins to take a downward turn. The next few rooms lack the exhibition's initial sonic energy and feel like a chaos that is more disjointed than carefully constructed. To begin with the most obvious point about the rest of *Nothing Stable under Heaven*, there is nowhere beyond the first room where you are faced with anything resembling the cacophonous din of *Cloud, News, and Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* all working in discordant synchronicity. In fact, there is only one other piece in this exhibition that makes any sound at all – a single-channel video by the director and graphic designer Mike Mills, far quieter and less grand than Jafa's montage, tucked away into an alcove behind the exhibition's second room, inaudible to all but those sitting in close proximity. Make no mistake, I do not believe that there is anything inherently

wrong with art that is not noisy, but in this specific instance, the sonic dissonance of the first room so effectively evoked the instability central to the exhibition's thematic thrust that I was disappointed when it died down in the following galleries to nothing more than the characteristic murmurs of a well-populated museum. If there is a redeeming quality to this auditory fade-out, it is that it perhaps draws even more attention to the chaotic clamor in the first room. I grant that I may not have singled out the genius of the first gallery's noisiness if the next two were equally noisy – in which case, I would probably instead be praising a more unified curatorial vision.



Fig. 4: Jim Campbell, *Tilted Plane*, 2011. Custom electronics, LEDs, light bulbs, wire, and steel; dimensions variable. Gift of the artist and Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco. © Jim Campbell. Photograph: Ruth Clark.

But sound is not the only thing that subsides in the final two rooms of the exhibition, for the show's coherence trails off as well. Coherence may seem like a strange concept to be striving for in a show about instability, but the chaos in the first room is so compelling precisely because it coheres. *Cloud* and *News* converse with each other dynamically; *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* feels like it is meant to be heard but not seen in that first room. This type of chaos, this deliberate clamorous polyphony, gives way to a cheaper chaos as the exhibition begins to resemble less a thoroughly-planned uproar and more a *wunderkammer* of various pieces of art and social criticism that are vaguely thematically grouped.

The most immediately eye-catching work of the second room, Trevor Paglen's *Autonomy Cube* (2014), does little to dispel this thought. Perched atop

a tall white pedestal, *Autonomy Cube* features a motherboard housed inside of a one-and-a-quarter foot cube of thick acrylic vitrine. The piece, resembling a relic in some space-age cabinet of curiosities, provides anonymous Tor Wi-Fi capability to all museum-goers, commenting on government internet surveillance and the erosion of privacy in the Information Age. On the opposite wall, Penelope Umbrico's *5,377,183 Suns (from Sunsets) from Flickr (Partial) 4/28/09* (2009) tackles some different aspects of the online experience via an aesthetically appealing arrangement of 1440 Flickr photographs of sunsets, and Glenn Ligon's *We're Black and Strong (I)* (1996) screenprint finds itself somewhat randomly on the room's back wall.

This is not to say, of course, that there is nothing of value beyond the first room of the exhibition. In fact, one of the best works of the entire show hangs quietly, almost understatedly, in the hallway between the second and third galleries. It is a selection of small (28 x 37 cm) untitled photographs from a series shot by Richard Misrach in and around New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. These framed pictures – of houses, cars, and other personal property – are all devoid of any human figures, seemingly set in a barren post-apocalyptic wasteland, but each photograph depicts a spray-painted message left by the residents of the home or the owners of the property. Some show a strong sense of gallows humor, like the one with 'YARD SALE' written on a tree that stands uprooted next to garbage cans overflowing with rubble and debris; others, including a picture of 'BROKEN DREAMS' sprayed onto a tall wooden fence obscuring a dilapidated house, are heart-breaking. These disembodied photographs depict the instability of houses, neighborhoods, and lives. They show, in all shades of spray paint, the ways – humor, anger, grief – that battered humans cope with the realization that there truly is nothing stable under heaven. Nevertheless, in spite of bright moments like Misrach's photographs, the exhibition begins to feel lazier after its tour de force of a first gallery. In the second room, it seems as though the curators dug up some contemporary pieces in their collection that relate to digital culture (e.g. Paglen's, Umbrico's), interspersed them with a few other works (e.g. Ligon's), and called it a day. The result is a more haphazard and unsuccessful chaos than the calculated chaos of the first room, and it only gets less cogent from here.

The last room of the exhibition features mainly three-dimensional works and is the least dynamic of all. Even the crowds gathered around Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled* (1992-1993) and rolling up their newly-acquired posters do little to offset the strange and stilted stillness of the gallery. Tony Feher's



sculptural *It Seemed a Beautiful Day* (2002) hangs with an intentional home-made aesthetic on the back wall; the opposite corner houses Jessica Jackson Hutchkin's rough newspapered *Couch for a Long Time* (2009); Tobias Wong's *Bulletproof Quilted Duvet* (2004), in its thick textile blackness, occupies the centre of the space. Alone, none of these works is necessarily a failure, but together they turn this gallery into a somewhat sparsely-populated resting place for inert found objects and detritus. Chaotic, indeed, but not particularly energetic, compelling, or well-crafted.

The lack of energy in this room manifests itself most prominently with Wong's piece, *Bulletproof Quilted Duvet*, which is displayed atop a large white box not unlike the pedestal on which Paglen's *Autonomy Cube* sits in the preceding room. Situating the *Bulletproof Quilted Duvet* (which is exactly what it sounds like, a quilted duvet 'made of ballistic fabric'[5]) atop the crisp, anti-septic, museum-grade white box inhibits us from even beginning to experience Wong's work as a raw, affecting art object. Instead, it looks like an artifact in some sort of anthropological museum, dwarfed by the furniture on which it stands, defanged by the sterility of the white box below. And so, in this way, *Nothing Stable under Heaven* progresses from the pulsating sonic discord of the first room to the ossified inertness of the last.

Setting aside this gradual decline in curatorial quality through the course of the exhibition, I believe that one of the larger overarching problems of *Nothing Stable under Heaven* is the way that the show can at times be (mis)read as pandering to sensationalism. I must admit that this complaint is not altogether fair, for much of it centres on a piece that is not technically part of the exhibition, but it is something I would like to mention regardless. Just beyond the final gallery of the exhibition is a large darkened room housing Jim Campbell's *Tilted Plane* (2011). This immersive installation is technologically complex and all-encompassing, allowing museum-goers to navigate a flickering 'angled image plane' of 'hundreds of lightbulbs whose filaments have been replaced by light-emitting diodes (LEDs)'. [6] The experience, I believe, is best summed up by a response I overheard from a middle-aged man in jeans and a Nike t-shirt as he walked out of *Tilted Plane*: 'Woah, that was f\*\*\*\*\*g cool!'

*Tilted Plane* is certainly cool, but that feels like pretty much all that it is. It seems wrong to encounter a piece like this at the end of an exhibition that is about so much more than Instagramable aesthetics and 'f\*\*\*\*\*g cool' traversable landscapes. Although, as I said before, *Tilted Plane* is not part of *Nothing Stable under Heaven*, that fact is not made abundantly clear by any signage

or placards, and I got the sense that many visitors entered into the LED grid thinking that it was the climax of the exhibition they had just seen. And as I retraced my steps back from *Tilted Plane* through Nothing Stable under Heaven, I realised just how much of this show could be experienced as mere interactive sensation. I saw a family laughing as they each rolled up one of Gonzalez-Torres' posters to take home as a souvenir; a teenager striking a cheeky pose as her friend snapped her picture in front of Umbrico's wall of sunsets; a few boys excitedly unlocking their iPhones as they read Paglen's wall text about how to log onto the Tor network; a man cracking a surprised smile as a security guard informed him that, yes, he was actually allowed to bend down and pick up some of Haacke's newsprint to read for himself. It is not these works' fault that they tip their cap – intentionally or not – to a sensational or at least interactive impulse. In fact, it is only against the backdrop of *Tilted Plane* that this dynamic truly begins to emerge. I will not go so far as to blame the curatorial staff for the way *Tilted Plane* interacts with the works in Nothing Stable under Heaven (after all, *Tilted Plane* is not part of the show, and I understand that curators must work within an existing museum floor plan), but the nearby presence of a work as spectacular and aestheticised as *Tilted Plane* does undoubtedly undermine some of the urgency and social commentary of the art in the exhibition.

But this observation about sensationalism in Nothing Stable under Heaven points to a paradox in this show's relationship with media and mediation. An artist's shrewd use of media and visual culture allows for what I think is the single greatest work of the entire exhibition, and yet the way that visitors interface with the show's art through their own personal media devices brings out the worst in the show. Jafa's *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* operates as an affecting tapestry of emotions stitched together from the fabric of mediated images – the shaky footage of a startled black teenager in a bathing suit being thrown to the ground by a police officer, with the YouTube username of the person who uploaded the clip in a large font at the top of the screen; the TV coverage of Serena Williams' victory dance at the 2012 Olympics, with the network's 'LIVE' graphic in the video's upper right corner. But in the main galleries of the exhibition, as the audio of Jafa's film fades slowly from earshot, scores of similar mediated images are created daily – the out-of-focus iPhone video of Haacke's *News* printing out a fresh set of headlines, a clip that could soon be making its way onto YouTube; the selfie snapped in front of Umbrico's *5,377,183 Suns*, a photograph that will probably be run through a filter or two before popping up on Instagram. For

these images, though, there is no Arthur Jafa to spin them into a poignant montage, and they instead stand (at least, for someone who has walked out to *Tilted Plane* and back) as accumulating testaments to the filtering, aestheticising, and defanging of a show that has something to say.

I recognise that my comments about mediation within the gallery space are not groundbreaking, nor are they necessarily unique to Nothing Stable under Heaven. Moreover, I hope not to come across as a curmudgeonly spoilsport penning a polemic against the museum in the age of Instagram, because I do feel that personal digital culture can and should have its place in the gallery, but I think that this exhibition is unique in that media simultaneously lifts it to its greatest heights and contributes to its undoing. Nevertheless, as an exhibition of contemporary art, Nothing Stable under Heaven is certainly a success. It does resound more effectively in some places than others, and its initial deliberate sense of overwhelming chaotic instability sputters as the exhibition presses on. Still, it is a show that the curators can be proud of – and a show that I could see Baldwin, at least based on his musings on ‘The Creative Process’, being proud of too.

Justin Ross Muchnick (Stanford University)

## Further reading

James Baldwin, ‘The Creative Process’, c. 1962: <https://www.sfmoma.org/read/creative-process/>. (The essay that inspired this exhibition.)

Aaron Betsky, ‘An Te Liu and Memorials to Waste’, *Architect Magazine*, 2016: [http://www.architectmagazine.com/design/exhibits-books-etc/an-te-liu-and-memorials-to-waste\\_o](http://www.architectmagazine.com/design/exhibits-books-etc/an-te-liu-and-memorials-to-waste_o). (A short article on An Te Liu’s practice.)

Arthur Jafa and Tina Camp, ‘Love is the Message, The Plan is Death’, *e-flux journal*, 2017: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/126451/love-is-the-message-the-plan-is-death/>. (*e-flux* interview with Jafa.)

## References

Baldwin, J. ‘The Creative Process’, Library of America, c. 1962: <https://www.sfmoma.org/read/creative-process/>.

‘Nothing Stable under Heaven’, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2018: <https://www.sfmoma.org/exhibition/nothing-stable-under-heaven/>.

## Notes

- [1] Nothing Stable under Heaven, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2018, <https://www.sfmoma.org/exhibition/nothing-stable-under-heaven/>. The departments that collaborated are Architecture + Design, Education + Public Practice, Media Arts, Painting + Sculpture, and Photography.
- [2] Baldwin 1962.
- [3] Wall text for Nothing Stable under Heaven, SFMOMA, 2018.
- [4] Wall text for *Cloud*, SFMOMA, 2018.
- [5] Wall text for *Bulletproof Quilted Duvet*, SFMOMA, 2018.
- [6] Wall text for *Tilted Plane*, SFMOMA, 2018.