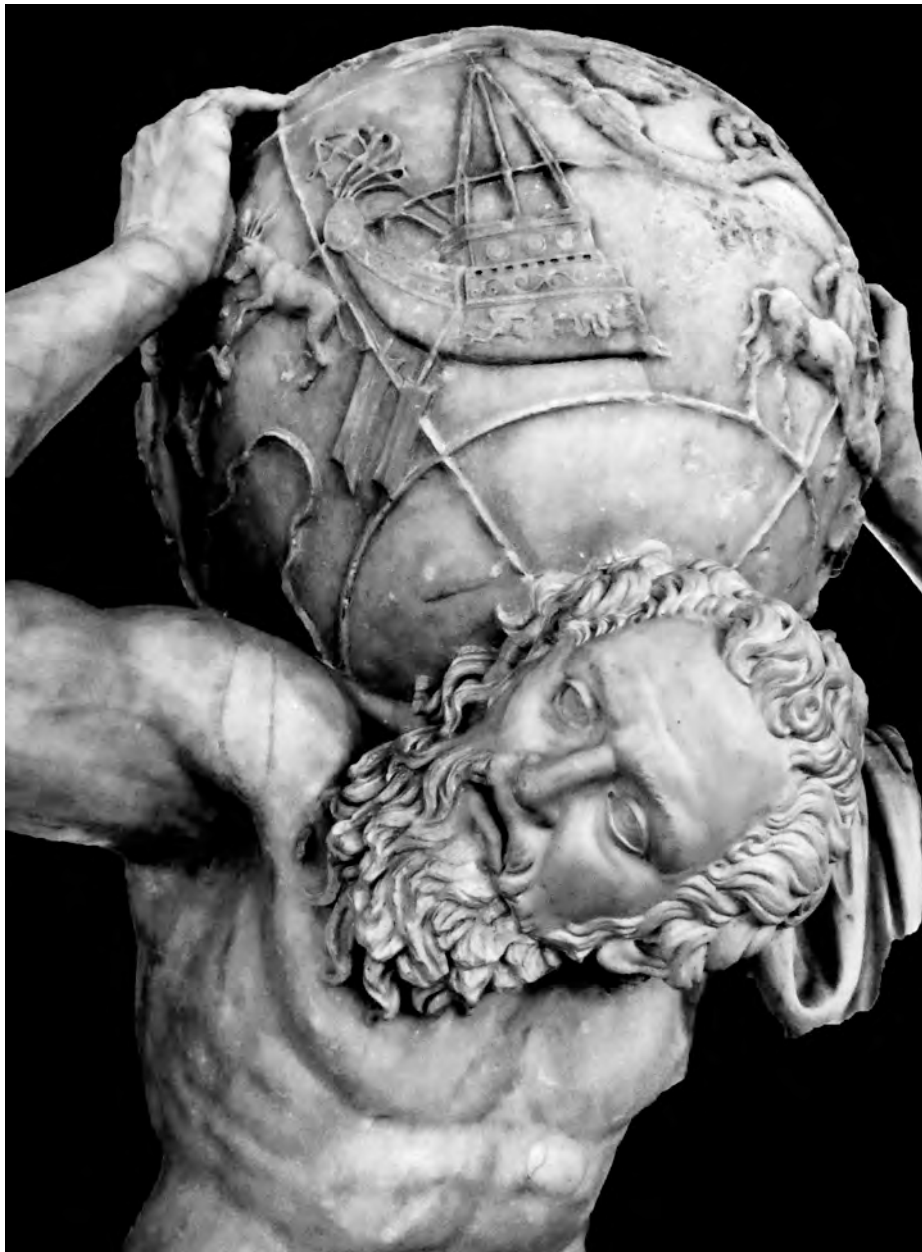


Kansas

Atlas



**C**onstructed of aerial footage of small towns and vistas, *Kansas Atlas* features Lebanon, Kansas, the geographic center of the lower 48 states. The video essay pairs transfixing split-screen images with a text by Marianne Shaneen that is a poetic discourse on ecofeminism, environmentalism and social justice. The undulating, unpeopled and uncanny views of the heartland are emblematic of America in an uneasy blend of earthly beauty and barely suppressed rage over the direction of the country. Kansas can be understood as a metonymy for the country as a whole, symptomatic of the changes that are being played out in the country, a schematic of the current political configuration of the US. *Kansas Atlas* juxtaposes the sprawling agricultural landscape of an American center known for religious fundamentalism against the asymmetrical distribution of diasporic beliefs that steal across man made borders and private property like genetically engineered seeds in the wind.

*Video & install*

Peggy Ahwesh

*Text & voice*

Marianne Shaneen

*Aerial cinematography*

Keith Sanborn

*Premiere in cleave exhibit*

Microscope Gallery, Brooklyn, New York 5/17- 6/16, 2019

*Production thanks*

Microscope Gallery, Ben Coonley, Glen Fogel, Collin Leitch, Keith Sanborn, Zach Layton,  
Marc Schreibman

*Quotes in the text*

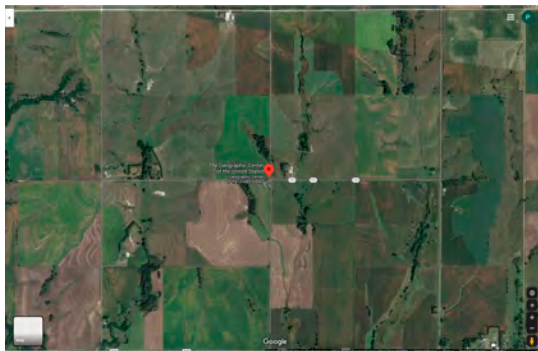
Brian Massumi, Jean-Luc Nancy, Michel Foucault, Denis Cosgrove, Donna Haraway

*Installation elements*

2 synced wall projections, video 17 min loop with sound.

2 iPads under glass domes seated on pedestals, video 5 min loops without sound

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Google map coordinates for Lebanon, Kansas



I'm flying over the Kansas town where Amelia Earhart was born. In one of her last transmissions she said, *running out of gas*. She said, the center cannot hold. I'm flying over Lebanon, Kansas, the geographical center of the United States, a spot determined by balancing a cardboard cutout shaped like the US on the head of a pin.

The vestigial need for the center, demarcating the boundaries against external chaos and the threat of the other. A site of order, sacred navel at the center of the world, the Axis Mundi, the Pole Star around which we rotate. But how do you map a location that only exists in the imagination? For even true north, the magnetic pole used to navigate for centuries, is shifting.

Establishing a center relegates all else to the periphery. The panopticon's central observer keeps watch over the inmates in its periphery. My GPS system continually recalibrates to place me at the center of the universe. Surrounded by blank fields on a grid. I see myself, reduced to a blue dot moving along a line.

I'm flying over huge land tracts divided into rectangles that cut across animal habitats, smoky bluffs, and undulating prairies. I fantasize about jumping out of the plane, eager to make contact with the loamy soil, to impose my body's curves onto the rectilinear fields.

Floating up, like a passenger in my own body. A Traveler. Being lifted above empty places that I had never been or seen before, places of sublime vastness, wide absent spaces, no houses, no buildings, no parking lots, no shopping centers, devoid of signs of human habitation. Over fields and forests, over oceans, over deserts, over prairies, massive

herds of buffalo, antelope, woolly mammoths, and in these open expanses, among the nameless fields, for the first time, I feel completely at home.

What is a border in relation to a seed that crosses it? Wind does not respect borders. Neither does dust. Dust from the spores of molds and fungi, from dead skin cells, from soil displaced by driving, grazing, plowing, and mining. Dust from burned fossil fuels, pollen, animal dander, decomposed bodies, desert sand. Dust from decayed insects, lint and fibers, exhaust and soot, pesticides, lead, asbestos, arsenic, DDT that's still in the air even though it was banned in the 70s, the Twin Towers, the library of Alexandria, particles still swirling from the Great Dust Bowl. Fine snows of cosmic dust continuously falling to Earth from space, dirtying my shelves and photographs, in my nostrils, dust of dinosaurs.

I'm flying across borders that extend from the ground to infinity.

I'm flying between public controlled airspace and private air rights, through the subdivided classes of sovereign airspace, through Prohibited areas, Restricted areas, Warning areas. Through a sky invisibly crossed with lines of rapacious conversion from land to property. Of the commons divided into private domains. The delineations inscribed by the occupier are embedded in the perimeters of every garden.

Paradise is the dwelling place of both human and God. That is why its borders can be closed to those who are expelled. To those whose freedom drove them out of its enclosure. Exiled from Paradise, we are all illegals.



There are no straight lines in nature. Rivers run in winding courses, like our own intestines, like the wavy structures of mitochondria in the cells of living organisms. I'm flying over the gridlines of Eden's monocrops. Over rectilinear edges of diminishing ecological diversity, species diversity, and cultural diversity.

In the airport security line I take off my shoes. I raise my arms. They scan my body. I wonder about my flight risk assessment rating. The US Automated Targeting System calculates it according to information it gathers about my birthplace, my travel records, my name.

An alien leaves his parched planet, falling to Earth and its wealth of water. He descends the tower of a Kansas town's first water supply, the World's Largest Hand Dug Well. He has to act fast, before global warming desiccates this planet as well. Before borders start teeming with climate change refugees seeking water, no longer an abundant natural resource, but an increasingly scarce commodity.



Digging down to mine earthen treasure of minerals, oil, and water, digging deeper than the deepest-dwelling worms and microbes, deeper than the burrowing Nile crocodile, deeper than the roots of the Shepherd's Tree. More than any other organism, humans have altered the planet's subterranean realms, and all our boreholes if connected would span from Earth to Mars. Tunnels from resource extraction will remain for tens of millions

of years, protected from weathering that will erode human alterations made above. Of everything humans will have left behind, the most enduring may be the holes they've drilled.

Heaven needs Hell. The Rapture needs those Left Behind. Those left behind, along with the serpent, damned to slither so close to the ground that their bellies nearly become one with the earth. Marked as bound to the corporeal, feminized body and mother earth, in the lowly realms of domestic space and the barefoot birthing body—a woman's place is on the ground. In praise of The Man Who Fell to Earth. The man in a small Kansas town, who built his own garden of Eden. His Paradise attempts to redeem the fallen commons. I'm flying over a terrain upon which I project idealized abstractions of Nature. Of Eden as a landscape that I'm standing in front of, excluded from. Cleaver and cleave.

I gaze up, like the floating eye of Odilon Redon, like Hildegard von Bingen in her rapturous flight. Like the levitating Saint Cupertino, who was so enflamed with the love of God, rising in the air to fly with the lightness of a bird, that he was deemed patron saint of airplane passengers, pilots and astronauts.

The line of the horizon both joins and disjoins earth and sky. At once a closure of space, and a flight into infinity. When you get to the place where heaven and ground converge, in The History of the Sky it will be written that you punctured a gap between the star-laden firmament and the earth. That you stuck your head, shoulders, and right arm through it, to spy a realm of circling suns and clouds, wheels within wheels. Or, it will say that having traveled to the end of the earth, you stopped, stooping under the celestial vault, to run your finger along the edge where sky and earth are sutured.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

***Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right***  
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***Inside the Koch Brothers' Toxic Empire***  
Rolling Stone (2014) Tim Dickinson  
<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/inside-the-koch-brothers-toxic-empire-164403/>

***What's the Matter with Kansas :How Conservatives Won the Heart of America***  
Metropolitan Books (2004) Thomas Frank

***Garden of Eden***  
entry from Roadside America  
<https://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/2103>

***Westboro Baptist Church is Arguably the Most Obnoxious and Rabid Hate Group in America***  
The Southern Poverty Law Center  
<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/westboro-baptist-church>

***Six Teenagers are Running for Governor in Kansas, and Suddenly this Doesn't Seem so Preposterous***  
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[https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/six-teenagers-are-running-for-governor-in-kansas-and-suddenly-this-doesnt-seem-so-preposterous/2018/03/02/e70495de-11b8-11e8-9570-29c9830535e5\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/six-teenagers-are-running-for-governor-in-kansas-and-suddenly-this-doesnt-seem-so-preposterous/2018/03/02/e70495de-11b8-11e8-9570-29c9830535e5_story.html)

***Mike Pompeo, the Secretary of Trump: How he became a Heartland Evangelical—and the President's Most Loyal Soldier***  
New Yorker Magazine (August, 2019) Susan B. Glasser  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/08/26/mike-pompeo-the-secretary-of-trump>

***A tornado erased their town, so these Kansans did what Kansans do***  
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<https://www.kansas.com/news/weather/tornado/article147226009.html>