THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC AND US CULTURE

EXPRESSION, ART, AND POLITICS IN AN AGE OF ADDICTION

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A tall tale is a narrative that is difficult to believe, a story with hard-to-swallow elements told as if they were truths. This form of storytelling is often associated with the Appalachian region of the United States, although it can be found in many rural areas. The underlying assumption of a tall tale is that there is something about the reality of a situation that leaves something to be desired, something to be rewritten, something better said another way. In my local community, tall tales informed everything from how people constructed their identities to relaying the details of banal daily occurrences. But beyond its role as a mode of communication, the tall tale is helpful for understanding the larger sociopolitical ecosystem of Appalachia at large, whose extraction-based economy operates at its core from truths so outlandish they are not believed by those outside and lies propagated as if they were truth to residents and workers of the region.

Growing up in a mining state taught me that what is underneath is as important as what is on the surface. Land must be understood as intersecting layers of history, institutional power, and cultural identity. In this context, extraction in Appalachia can be recognized as the result of generations of exploitive relationships between institutions, land, and people. I read the complex challenges of opioid addiction through this frame, as both symptom and repetition of extractive practices, where sustainability and community welfare are sacrificed—in this case by large drug manufacturers—for capital gain somewhere else. But sedative addiction is just one symptom of extractive late capitalism in the United States; this cycle of exploitation and consumption—whether of products, images, or painkillers—relies on sedation as both fuel

and byproduct. In this context, sedation and apathy are entwined—sedation is the result of consumption and oppression, and apathy is the resulting state of being that perpetuates this cycle.

This essay will focus on two manifestations of this concept: political apathy, numbness to the issues of others; and visual apathy, the blindness to images induced by fatigue and oversaturation. Addressing what it means to look in this context, I will focus on artistic strategies and modes of looking to create new ways of understanding the complex legacy of extraction, and now sedative addiction, in Appalachia. I will illustrate this through my own projects as a visual artist working primarily in photography. I understand the camera, like land, to be encoded with layers of cultural ideology, commercially produced and constructed to support the ideas of mainstream culture.[1] In our current oversaturated image ecology, it is necessary to disrupt the function of the camera itself or the context for viewing images in order to create investment in the content of the work. My projects highlight an intersectional approach to land, drawing connections among identities, histories, and people that might otherwise remain siloed and disconnected. In something of a call and response to what some have called a zombie state, my work creates new forms of seeing and causes disparate audiences to become engaged.[2]

To address extraction in a contemporary context, it is necessary to understand its larger history that includes generations of extraction. The first European settlers to West Virginia arrived in the eastern part of the state, having been pushed out of other more fertile geographies.[3] Their existence on this land was in itself a result of precarity. Most families established self-sustainable and, at times, communal structures for creating sustenance from the land, harvesting food, raising and butchering livestock, and creating a self-sufficient system.[4] In a pattern common to the entire United States, modernization drew agrarian communities to participate in mechanized labor, receive pay, and then purchase food from commercial vendors, extending their fiscal and food dependencies outside of the familial group, reliant on both company and capital. In West Virginia, when mining began in earnest in the late 1800s, workers became separated from the value of their labor.[5] Paid in scrip, miners were forced to recycle their pay back into goods purchased at the company store, without the ability to participate in a free market. With this kind of closed-circuit relationship, workers became completely dependent, from the house they lived in, which was owned by the company, to the pay they received, which was only viable at the company store. Workers were paid based on the amount of coal mined at a rate that comprised a small fraction of the coal's market value.[6] This equation

reflects on the value of both human resources and mineral resources. It also evidences extraction's true violence, not simply as a model where something is taken out of the earth, but a model where value—human, mineral, or otherwise—is taken elsewhere, leaving behind a void when depleted.

In the 1970s, mining began to mechanize as the larger underground coal seams began to be depleted. Because of both of these shifts in the industry, new ways of mining coal were invented to more efficiently mine the last deposits of mineral from smaller seams closer to the surface.[7] These new mining models were many times more destructive to both land and people, destroying and subsequently restructuring much of the topography of West Virginia.[8] With the advent of these strategies, first surface mining and then mountaintop removal, most miners lost their jobs as they were replaced by large machines.[9] These extreme and shortsighted mining practices were at their height in the early 2000s, but, by 2010, even the last seams were drying up, and mining operations began closing completely.[10] Mining corporations were evading earlier promises, declaring bankruptcy to avoid environmental standards and compensation for job-related injuries.[11] The region's role in a larger system of industry and extraction became increasingly clear: mining companies only cared

Fig. 11.1. Jonas N. T. Becker, *Thank G-d for Mississippi: Green Hole, WV* (2009), digital C-print on Fujiflex, 44 × 55 in. Courtesy of the artist.

about the end of the line, the value miners' labor and our land would have somewhere else to someone else.

Opioids entered the state as the mining industry was declining, and the rise and fall of these industries are entwined.[12] There are direct corollaries: the opioid epidemic was ushered in by the type of labor and the social conditions of a precarious, single-industry mining economy. Mining is among the most dangerous occupations in the United States, and the coalfield regions have higher than national average rates of job-related injury, unemployment, and addiction. When OxyContin entered the market in the 1990s, it was prescribed heavily for work-related injuries, falsely promised to be less addictive than previous drugs.[13] Opioids spread quickly, and their sedative effect had a significant impact on individuals and communities struggling with lack of jobs, recreation, and options for the future endemic in postindustrial regions. A testament to the causal relationship, studies of the US opiate overdose epidemic indicate that rural coal country is one of the epicenters of the drastic increase in fatal use of the drug.[14]

The opioid and mining industries can also be understood as exchangeable forms of extraction—where value is taken out leaving little in return. Mining extracts minerals from the earth and labor from workers' bodies, exporting the value of both outside the region. In similar formation, after the decline of mining, the opioid industry continues to extract profit from the unemployed and injured, following the previous generation of extraction. Both industries masked the one-directional nature of this dynamic, instead marketing their benefit to communities. Mining companies promised economic development on former mine sites, and Purdue Pharma, OxyContin's manufacturer, promoted that the drug was a safe way to get people back on their feet with slogans like "Get in the Swing with OxyContin."[15] Meanwhile, mining towns remain toxic, and newly available evidence clearly shows Purdue Pharma's intent to withhold safety information to increase the widespread growth of the drug. Addiction feeds a new generation of extraction; a booming pharmaceutical industry headquartered in Connecticut is built on income and livelihoods taken from Appalachia and the Midwest, leaving behind broken communities.[16]

I first encountered opioids in a recreational context in the late nineties, just as mountaintop removal mining was reaching its height. At the time, I was active in the electronic music scene. Ironically, one of the leveled peaks, now a meadow marred like a surface from outer space, made a great landing pad for outdoor music festivals. These festivals prospered in a way that was distinct from their urban cousins, fueled in part by a West Virginia libertarian bent—don't tread on me, and I won't tread on you—and, as a consequence, we

were mostly left alone. Drugs played a huge part in the utopian aspirations of these huge parties. We all wanted to get somewhere else. The early drugs, mostly acid, ecstasy, and other psychedelics, were meant to extend the human sensory palate: see more, feel more, do more. But things shifted. Newer drugs mostly included sedatives; in 2000, the drug of choice was ketamine, a horse tranquilizer. And it was around this time that I was first offered an opioid, with the suggestion that, similar to other popular drugs at the time, I would feel euphorically sedated. This occurred to me as an odd alignment—equating sedation with pleasure. In years since, opioid painkillers have become endemic, and in addition to the popularization of sedative drugs, there has been a broader cultural shift to naturalize the pairing of sedation and pleasure. In this context, opioid use can be read as part of a larger cultural turn toward sedation.

The widespread pursuit of sedatives—whether drugs, products, or activities—and corresponding apathy have proliferated in the United States under late capitalism. Economists and sociologists point to a host of root causes including anxiety related to widening income disparity and precarious labor, individualism, and media saturation.[17] Evidence of the shift is wide-ranging. In health and wellness, the meditation, yoga, and supplement markets have experienced atypical growth—for example, an increase in the number of Americans meditating from 4 percent to 15 percent from 2012 to 2017.[18] Other prime examples include the apparel market rebranding shopping as therapeutically sedative "retail therapy" and the television industry restructuring to promote binge watching. Increased appetite for sedation is closely tied to our changing relationship to images and technology. Images have become so pervasive, intruding in all elements of both public and private life, that theorists such as Lev Manovich argue that images have transcended text to become our primary language.[19] Extending this, ubiquitous devices such as cell phones ensure ever-present points of connection to a world of visual content, enveloping us in an infinite image ecology comprised of everything from news photographs to friends' memes. Many media theorists have marveled at how, given these circumstances of being more connected to the culture and realities of others than ever before, we don't care more.[20] To the opposite effect, we care less, a phenomenon named in pop-theoretical terms like "compassion fatigue."[21] Perhaps the Situationists, an art movement in France in the 1960s, predicted this best, describing how the saturation of images would dull the masses.[22] Whether we have become lost in an image ecology and numb to content or have become physically sedated by pharmaceuticals, our current cultural moment must be understood through the operations of sedation and apathy.

This pervasive malaise has extended beyond popular culture and media

to visual art. Art is often thought of as a powerful tool for questioning larger issues not visible in more commercial media. But in some ways, the contemporary art world, funded by industry tycoons and built on a similar capitalist structure to consumer luxury goods, has not escaped the larger cultural move towards sedation.[23] Over the last twenty years, art viewing has shifted dramatically to focus on large-scale fairs, where hundreds of galleries exhibit work at once. These fairs are physically exhausting—visitors clock miles in viewing the work—and visually exhausting beyond anything we have experienced. Viewing in this context must be reduced to categorical filtering by genre, as well as brand recognition for artists. Everything else fades into the larger experience of being at an art fair. In other viewing contexts, fine art is apprehended with a similar approach—the task of looking is supplanted by recognition—and our preexisting assumptions about mediums, contexts, venues, and artists provide most of our understanding of the artwork, allowing fast absorption and a quick exit. And so, fine art is not immune from the impact of visual fatigue and sedation.

Though images have become part of the problem, perhaps in recognizing this, artists still have the capacity to refocus us. The evidence is compelling. Art has historically been at the edge, the avant-garde, capable of capturing a zeitgeist, even one of mass apathy, and somehow reframing our moment,

Fig. 11.2. Expo Chicago, 2019. Photo by Jonas N. T. Becker.

leaving us with questions. For example, postwar movements such as Dada and Surrealism highlighted the impact of mass trauma on a still-forming generation.[24] Political cartoons, poking fun via allegory, said things that the other pages of the newspaper were not able to. Perhaps visual culture, particularly art, still has the capacity to create reactions antithetical to apathy, instead encouraging criticality and raising awareness. In our current context, is it possible to turn pervasive image saturation on its head to create moments of connection? In the specific geographies and culture of Appalachia, framed by generations of extractive economies, can visual work create new links between the people and resources extracted and consumers? Extraction has proliferated widespread apathy—the condition of living and the condition of looking; perhaps aesthetic work can be a medium to resituate, if not to outright jolt, viewers from sedation to concern, from new normal to new questions.

In my art practice, I use visual work to examine these questions. My projects make visible the layers of identity, culture, and politics that intersect in landscape. In addressing these layers in my images, I see a parallel between the ways that photography and landscape have often been misrecognized as neutral, only seen for their surface. In a context of both political and visual fatigue, it is necessary to disrupt the way the camera makes meaning; my projects call attention to the surface of the image, disrupt consumptive and exploitative models of viewing, and instead create connections between viewers and socioeconomic issues. Embracing an intersectional approach to land, my work seeds the ground for criticality and concern by connecting interrelated histories of oppression and reconfiguring new ways of seeing.

My most recent work, *Better or Equal Use*, visibly binds generations of extractive practices in Appalachia, from mining to incarceration and consumerism, and connects urban art audiences to the economic and social systems at the other end of their light switch. The series of photographs of former mining sites printed using coal dust began when I first visited Federal Correctional Institution McDowell, built on the former Belcher Mountain. Driving down the prison's driveway, we cut markedly through the former walls of a mountain, the scars in the topography evident. The road ended at the prison, where this isolated hole with high walls on all sides became a perfect geography for incarceration. There, I was struck with the realization that the extraction of mining was not a singular event. Instead, what I was looking at was an insatiable cycle, one that had started with the extraction of coal and that has continued through the extraction of labor and value in other ways, such that I could not see the end of it.

Each of the redevelopments that I visited—prisons, golf courses, shopping

Fig. 11.3. Jonas N. T. Becker, *Better or Equal Use: Belcher Mountain* (2019), ground coal, gelatin, paper, 20 × 24 in. Courtesy of the artist.

malls—were ushered in under the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977 (SMCRA).[25] The act mandates that, after mining, a company must restore "the original contour of the land" or redevelop the site for an "equal or better economic or public use."[26] From an optimistic perspective, it is possible to view this legal doctrine as an attempt to put a stopper in the unidirectional flow of extraction. And certainly, this legislation provides more specific standards than those that exist in many parts of the world. But at its core is a flaw: the idea that replacing one form of capitalist extraction with another can fill the gap left by the first. Strip malls provide local employment, but the labor terms of big-box chains are designed to extract as much value as possible to company headquarters, paying as little as the market will bear (minimum wage in the vacuum left by mining) and evading benefit premiums through part-time employment.[27] These developments, instead of stopping the flow, perpetuate oppressive labor dynamics and consumerism, replicating previous extractive models.

Better or Equal Use animates this moment of recognition of the deep ties that bind these histories of extraction. The project is a series of photographs; each image depicts one redevelopment rendered in coal collected from its site.

Fig. 11.4. Research photograph of former mining site redeveloped as a strip mall in Louisa, Kentucky. Photo by Jonas N. T. Becker.

Fig. 11.5. Coal sample from Pickering Knob Business Park. Photo by Jonas N. T. Becker.

The photographs are printed through an invented process that uses coal dust as pigment, based on a historic carbon printing process. This process, valued in the early 1900s for its tonal qualities to depict both untouched nature and industrial innovation, references photography's longstanding romanticization of both landscape and industry.[28] In *Better or Equal Use*, the photographs represent the redevelopment through its image, while they also represent the mine that preceded it through the physical trace of coal. The prints *depict* the site and are also *made of* the site, connecting form and material to highlight the continued cycle. The redevelopments replace one system of extraction, a mine, with another, a prison or mall.

SMCRA does provide an alternative course of action to redevelopment. In lieu of finding a better or equal use, a mining company may choose to rebuild the mountain to match its original facade. Through this equation, Congress makes a rare foray into aesthetics, suggesting that something that *looks* the same *is* the same. According to this act, a human-made mountain built with rock and filled with toxins is an equivalent substitute for the previous biodiverse mountain created by the movement of tectonic plates. The act is built on a mimetic misrecognition common to the photograph: when we see a photograph of a prison, we say, "This is a prison." We mistake the photograph for an unmediated representation of reality. To resist this misrecognition, the images in *Better or Equal Use* make their surfaces apparent, uneven and dimensional, obviously constructed of black dust. The surfaces point to the photographs' construction and draw viewers' attention to their own act of looking, their own process of making meaning out of what they see. The images say that how things *look* and how they *are* are not the same. Instead, asking viewers to consider the layers of history and representation informs a practice of active looking in lieu of apathy or passive spectatorship.

Often, the detachment induced by images and social issues has a direct relationship to scale: sedation by overwhelm. It is hard to understand a set of politics whose numeric representation goes beyond anything that we have a relationship to in our own lives. An artist I know once spent days tallying over two million marks in the pages of a journal after realizing that she did not know what it meant to have such a large number of people incarcerated in the United States. The scale of such statistics makes them difficult to understand, overwhelming to consider, and as a result, often paralyzing.

My photography series *Thank G-d for Mississippi* is a direct response to this kind of sedation by overwhelm, focusing on the individual effects of these larger socioeconomic conditions and resituating the viewer's act of looking to a one-on-one exchange. In this project, I returned to the most common sites

Fig. 11.6. Jonas N. T. Becker, *Thank G-d for Mississippi: Summersville Lake Possibly on Whippoorwill Cliffs, WV* (2009), digital C-print on Fujiflex, 44 × 55 in. Courtesy of the artist.

of fatal jumps in West Virginia. To photograph these sites, I constructed a boom to extend my camera twelve feet out over each ledge, capturing a view you could only see after having decided to jump. The photographs demand that the viewer leave their position of safety and distance in order to embody the gaze of the other.

Thank G-d for Mississippi, the series title, references annual state rankings on socioeconomic conditions. It is a phrase I grew up hearing that roughly means "it could be worse" and references the commonplace occurrence that West Virginia would fall low in the rankings—but Mississippi would be lower.[29] The work arose from my experience of the ways that these conditions translate into individual lives in nuanced and complicated ways. My mother worked as a social worker for the state of West Virginia, through which I witnessed how one socioeconomic condition may actually be a symptom of another—for example, how family employment and substance abuse may impact a child's education. Tagging along on my father's weekly drives around

Fig. 11.7. Jonas N. T. Becker, *Thank G-d for Mississippi: Bull Run, WV Also Called Blue Hole* (2009), digital C-print on Fujiflex, 44 × 55 in. Courtesy of the artist.

the state as an extension agent for West Virginia University, I further came to see the ways these conditions are experienced differently across race, class, and gender.[30] These experiences of the nuanced personal realities of living within larger socioeconomic conditions drew me to the sites I photographed in *Thank G-d for Mississippi*, identified by local and state records as the most common locations of fatal falls. While often understood as suicides, the reality of these deaths is in fact much more complicated; many were related to high-risk behavior or accidental slips while under the influence. This simple misconstruction, the flattening of these deaths to suicide, exemplifies the inadequacy of abstract social language to accurately reflect and honor the experiences of the people whose lives they describe. In returning to these sites of individual trauma, the project attempts to resituate large abstract modes of understanding the complicated layers of class, race, and economics within individual decision making.

Photographers and other artists frequently explore larger social issues

through their work but often through portraiture and documentary formats that replicate extractive models. In the most egregious examples, such images exploit the experiences and circumstances of others, reduce them to symbolic expressions of suffering, and distribute them for mass consumption through the Associated Press or frame them to be viewed as objects of otherness on museum walls.[31] As with massive statistics, these images are consumed from a distance, the complex experiences of others reduced to an archetype. Within this framework, I understand the history of photography in Appalachia, where these types of images have historically followed the same lines already cut by the extraction of coal. In the 1930s, FSA photographers traveled through Appalachia to find families living in the most extreme poverty and distributed images that helped create the hyperbolized Appalachian image. This continued during the War on Poverty in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, this time in vivid color. And most recently, during the 2016 presidential election, documentarians brought back the horror-movie-inspired image of the rural other, often depicted in barbaric social formation, mouths agape in protest, as if to suggest their otherness and inhumanity.[32] Regardless of political views, it is important to understand how image mining continues to function in Appalachia, following a long history. This extractive model of documentary photography not only takes the value of identity elsewhere, leaving little or nothing in exchange, but it also creates a dynamic of urban viewership in which the experiences of others are reduced, simplified, and consumed or passed over when the week's news is thrown out.

My series *Thank G-d for Mississippi* upends this relationship between subject and viewer. While my work focuses on similar socioeconomic issues with an arguably similar intent to reach distant, unfamiliar audiences, there is a crucial difference in my approach. The images use the camera to directly place the viewer inside the perspective of the other. In constructing the image, instead of shooting the view I could see safely from behind a guardrail, I photographed a view one could only achieve after having jumped, straight down. When look-ing at the photographs, the viewer is positioned as if they too have already committed to jumping. The images replace the relationship between detached viewer and simplified other with one that collapses the distance between us and them. This disruptive perspective has another function; it inverts the normative upright vantage point from which we view images, established when a baby learns to walk, making it difficult to determine up from down, foreground from background. By disrupting the act of looking, these images interrupt the indifference of passive spectatorship to encourage a deeper consideration of the experiences they embody.

Fig. 11.8. Jonas N. T. Becker, *Thank G-d for Mississippi: Birch Run, WV* (2009), digital C-print on Fujiflex, 44 × 55 in. Courtesy of the artist.

In the context of *Better or Equal Use* and *Thank G-d for Mississippi*, photography can be seen as a medium that can break its own rules, pushing the viewer from passive to active looking. In *Better or Equal Use*, the work calls our attention to the mimetic quality of photography, highlighting that what is pictured is not the same as what is. In *Thank G-d for Mississippi*, the shift in perspective to embody that of the subject forces the viewer to inhabit the position of the other rather than consume their image. A pivotal professional moment early in my career demonstrated to me the potential social and political impact of this way of working in photography. I was working with an art dealer who was identifying potential acquisitions for a wealthy Southern mega-chain. She presented *Thank G-d for Mississippi* as part of the proposed acquisitions. The family was ecstatic—I can imagine that in many ways the luscious landscapes, rocks, and rivers felt like home to them—and expressed interest in acquiring a portion of the series. As the deal was negotiated, they inquired more about the background of the work, and after learning the details of the work's premise,

the deal fell apart. For me, this moment highlighted precisely the success of the work: that in depicting poor socioeconomic conditions through landscape images, the work operated like a Trojan horse of sorts. Masquerading in this way, the work's aesthetic qualities collide with its political content to create a productive moment of misrecognition; the process destabilizes the viewer's assumptions in order to generate a more layered examination of both form and content.

This experience made me reconsider the importance of repurposing specific contexts of reception toward political ends, particularly in an oversaturated image ecology and, by extension, an oversaturated art ecology. Each context of visual communication carries its own language and structure of meaning, whether advertising, news media, or documentary. News media are produced under the promise of objectivity. Advertising is designed to prompt purchase. Popular media like YouTube claim to present DIY expressions of users' authentic selves. Visual content is interpreted through the assumptions, histories, and expectations of the specific context it is presented within. In recuperating these forms, artists can perform the aesthetics or structure of commercial media, inserting artistic concepts within more mainstream frameworks. But these masquerades are never seamless; there is misalignment between what you expect to see and what you actually encounter. The misrecognition prompts reconsideration and, in the process, creates space for new meaning.[33]

My ongoing series of work, *Mountain is a Mountain*, embodies this intermodal approach, creating works that perform elements of fine art, popular culture, and commercial media through their aesthetics. The premise of the project connects two sites, a little Switzerland in Appalachia and the Swiss Alps, as a way to consider issues of value and environment. The first work in the series is an interactive installation called *Please Enjoy . . . .* The work, originally installed in Switzerland, is comprised of two mini refrigerators containing bottles of clear liquid. A sign above the installation reads, "please enjoy a drink fresh from the mountains." The installation's provocation centers on the dramatically different mountain economies referenced by the project. In Switzerland, water running off mountain cirques is bottled and sold for a high price, whereas in West Virginia, you would be better off drinking moonshine than mountain water.[34] Extending this comparison, a video in the series, *Holographic Mountain*, uses the language of corporate design innovation to suggest that, on sites where Appalachian Mountains have been leveled by mountaintop removal mining, we should project holographic Swiss peaks in their place. The script for the video, narrated by two detached corporate voices, is based on George W. Bush's speech-writing techniques, which included trademarks like the double negative,

Fig. 11.9. Jonas N. T. Becker, *Mountain is a Mountain: Holographic Mountain* (2017), single-channel HD video with sound, 2:45 minutes, looping, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

euphemisms such as the War on Terror, and gross exotifications of culture.[35] Situating its rhetoric in this context, the video slips in and out of propaganda, design proposal, and artwork.

In exhibiting these works, I have created installations that further blur the context for art viewing, composing the works within the architecture of commercial and corporate venues. This recontextualization allows viewers to reconsider the content of each installation through the connotations of commercial spaces and prompts them to question what is perceived as real versus artistic fabrication. In the Miami installation *Please Enjoy a Drink Fresh from the Mountains*, I converted a mall storefront into a corporate office, replete with boardroom table and water coolers, blending with the architecture of the mall. However, in the installation, *Holographic Mountain* was projected on the wall like a consultant's pitch while the floor slowly flooded with water. The film and flooding present an odd intrusion in the otherwise familiar commercial scene. Their outlandish, yet conceivable, proposals (holographic Alps and flooding Miami) draw links between corporate America, consumerism, and environmental destruction. More recently at a Los Angeles art fair, the video appeared on an iPad atop a podium-like sculpture accompanied by rows of water bottles labeled with abstract pictures of mountains. Formally referencing the aesthetics of a trade show, the work acts as a totem to the commercial expos normally

Fig. 11.10. Jonas N. T. Becker, *Please Enjoy a Drink Fresh from the Mountains* (Exterior view, Mana Contemporary at 777 International Mall, Miami, Florida) (2018), single‑channel HD video with sound (projected), 3:00, water, water pump, office furniture, water tanks, sculpture in basement below, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

housed in the same convention centers as art fairs. Unlike the paintings hung neatly on the high walls of each gallery's booth in order to disguise the space as a luxury experience, this work ruptures the façade and points to the relationship between the art market and other forms of consumerism. Both the Miami and Los Angeles installations destabilize the architecture of art consumption, instead borrowing the frame of corporate structures to create connections between consumption, art, and the environment.

The context and medium of visual communication often determine whether we trust the source or believe the message. In expanding *Mountain is a Mountain*, I am creating new elements of the series that include community engagement, social practice, and documentary forms. In working in these formats, I am invoking each one's relationship to authenticity and truth. Over the next few years, I will be working with community organizations in West Virginia and Kentucky to create performances and other site-specific interven-tions on sites of former mines. I will document the brainstorming and creation of these works alongside participants. The documentation will be exhibited with Holographic Mountain, placing the community-generated proposals for reclaiming mine sites alongside my own artistic fabrications.

Installing these elements together complicates the relationship between documentary and fiction, making the familiar seem strange and the improbable seem possible.

In working across many modes of creating visual knowledge, the works in *Mountain is a Mountain* directly oppose the fatigue of looking. Overwhelmed by the excess of images, we understand most of what we take away from art through what we already know about its context. We don't see; we recognize. Much of the preexisting information that frames our viewpoint is created through institutions that reinforce cultural ideology. Art in a museum is assumed to be historically important and vetted. Paintings in a thrift store are understood as decorative and sentimental. *Mountain is a Mountain* disrupts these assumptions about context and medium. Each work in the series breaks the rules for the media format in which it masquerades, performing and failing at sculpture, public engagement, performance, and advertising. But in the failures, the works rupture the kind of hermeneutic echo that each of these mediums rely on to produce seamless meaning: *Please Enjoy . . .* is at once an austere sculpture and participatory work made to be touched and consumed. The *Holographic Mountain* video embodies the format of a design proposal but instead suggests a provocative fantasy that highlights the problematics of large, international design projects. The impact is a subtle alienation. We are at once familiar and unsure. The works in the series defamiliarize us from what we think we know. Instead, we see anew. Loosened from the histories we are taught, we create relationships and interpretations independent of institutional ideology.

Sometimes, when we change what we see, we change who we are and what we think. José Esteban Muñoz describes in his theory of disidentification a process of scrambling, exaggerating, and repurposing dominant cultural representations, not only to expose their seams, but also to create the possibility of new, more radical reconstructions.[36] In considering disidentification in the context of land and politics, art can remix the normative representational tropes and beliefs inscribed in specific geographies, such as Appalachia: reimagining traditional photographic forms, such as documentary, landscape, and historic carbon printing, as well as situating images outside of art contexts in corporate spaces or commercial media. Through these reconfigured forms, we can imagine reexamining how land is valued or taken advantage of and complicating narratives around poverty and addiction that are associated with the

Fig. 11.11. Jonas N. T. Becker, *Mountain is a Mountain: Please Enjoy . . .* (Installation view, Saas Fee, Switzerland) (2017), two Electrolux mini refrigerators, clear bottles with "moonshine" and "water" labels, clear liquid, sign, 72 × 26 × 72 in. Courtesy of the artist.

region. Above all, in breaking out of the repetitious molds, reconstructed forms and content not only break through endemic visual and political apathy but provide pathways for creating new meaning. The possibilities of working in this way are encapsulated in responses to my recent work, *Holographic Mountain*. In contrast to my social media posts about regional issues—particularly among urban art audiences—the film's hyperboles and remixed content broke through visual fatigue and political apathy to provoke a reconstitution of beliefs about Appalachia. Often, in response to *Holographic Mountain,* people would ask me if it was true. This question confirmed the strategy I had executed—creating a reality so jolting it demands questioning its truth and plausibility; but its likeness to things we know makes us in turn question everything.

The extraction of mineral resources in Appalachia left a hole that made way for the opioid crisis, both by creating community structures cantilevered precariously, supported by a single-industry economy, and also by demanding dangerous physical labor, often resulting in injury and requiring pain management. Opioids offered to suppress both the physical pain and emotional unrest of communities and individuals struggling to cope with an evacuated industry. Parallel to this visible social violence, an extractive model of looking has a similar injustice, one in which the movement of the image is one-directional. We consume images en masse but rarely consider their context and implications, dulled by an oversaturated image ecology. But artists and other visual producers can disrupt this, reconfiguring new ways of seeing and connecting viewers to socioeconomic issues to cause disparate audiences to become engaged. Addressing what it means to look in the context of the sedative opioid epidemic, aesthetic production can break cycles of apathy to incite larger social and political change.

NOTES

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