Richard Mosse’s *Broken Spectre* (2018–2022)

Frances DeVuono


**After recent years of unprecedented rains, droughts, deadly heat waves, tornados in unlikely places, flooding and other unusual weather events, climate change should be uppermost on people’s minds. But apparently for many in the United States, it isn’t – yet. A Pew Research poll taken last year indicates that climate concerns in the US population lag significantly behind the**

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1 Richard Mosse’s *Broken Spectre* (2018–2022) has also been shown at 180 Studios, London (12 October 2022 – 9 April 2023), at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV International) in Melbourne, Australia, and in ‘Convergence 45 – Social Forms: Art as Global Citizenship’, the contemporary arts biennial in Portland, Oregon (from 24 August 2023). *Broken Spectre* was co-commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; VIA Art Fund; the Westridge Foundation and the Serpentine Galleries; with additional support from Collection SVPL and Jack Shainman Gallery.
populations of the UK and Europe.² There is a neologism that describes this phenomenon: *agnotology*. In the 1990s, after tobacco companies had for years attempted to seed doubt about the link between their product and death in the mid-twentieth century, Stanford University professor Robert Proctor coined that word to describe what they were doing. Agnotology is the deliberate, public promulgation of uncertainty and doubt – usually for profit. In the United States, oil companies, along with some politicians in their pockets, have been using that same strategy to sow doubt about the causes of climate change. While this past summer’s extreme weather may start to clarify uncertainties here in the USA, it will take a multi-faceted approach to bring denial and doubt to rest and begin real action. Art is part of that.

After this summer’s most recent record-breaking heat, record fires and record flooding, *Broken Spectre*’s premiere in the United States is more than timely. It is an ambitious, seventy-four-minute, seventy-foot-long video installation by Irish artist Richard Mosse. The installation opened at San Francisco’s Minnesota Street Project and its subject is one of the largest environmental disasters in-the-making: the destruction of the Brazilian Amazon.

*Broken Spectre*’s conceptual scope matches its scale. Mosse’s poetic but broad illustration of the Amazon region today gives viewers an inkling of the complicated web of interests underlying the problem, such as corporate/industrial and state malfeasance, ranchers and mining. The resulting imagery shows the environmental degradation and human rights abuse that characterises what has been termed ‘the lungs of the world’. Mosse is an artist who has long straddled documentary filmmaking within the conventions of the artworld. He uses a variety of techniques and forms, choosing different media to specifically connect with his ideas. This video installation is made with infrared film, recalling twentieth-century warfare, multi-spectral sensors that immediately convey twentieth-first-century scientific scanning, and what appears to be old-fashioned, 35mm black and white film. With the size of the screen and the surround sound by composer Ben Frost, who used ultrasonic recorders, the results are compelling. *Broken Spectre* carries the abstract, associative power we expect in the arts, along with concrete documentation in a package that is as visceral as an IMAX movie.

It does not make for easy viewing. Designed as a loop, the installation is a four-channel video, and the entire piece morphs back and forth in both scale and the number of panels shown, with imagery that alternately appears non-representational to painfully real. The results create an unpredictable rhythm augmenting the layered story of the Brazilian Amazon that Mosse wants to tell.

There is only one sequence containing dialogue, so the viewer’s experience is largely based on changing visuals and sounds. When I first entered the installation in San Francisco’s Minnesota

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Street Project, the video was focused on a protest in Brasilia. Crowds of demonstrators, with many wearing face paint and feathers, are shown against the modernist backdrop of that city protesting the genocide of the Indigenous people. The sound is a cacophony of shouts and drumming, and then suddenly the video switches to quiet. The next section was in two panels, with, on the left, two gauchos riding horses on a country road next to a desiccated landscape on the right. At another point, Mosse takes us into the interior of an enormous, industrial slaughter-house where workers are shown cutting carcasses with what look like chain saws. Later the installation switches to an endless sea of cattle. We see a river being pummelled by water through a sluice. In one of the more poignant scenes, a dirty bottle labelled ‘mercúrio’ is shown in close-up; it is followed by the image of an ungloved human hand slowly and laboriously swishing itself around in a pan of viscous liquid until at last there emerges a small lump – presumably of gold. Mosse tells this story largely like a silent film, but instead of inter-titles he intersperses the very human stories with large, aerial views of the region in vibrant hues. Most of these views were created by a ten-channel multi-spectral drone camera that turns the landscape of Broken Spectre into colours instantly associated with the scientific data used in geo-mapping. The bright turquoises, pinks, reds and greens alter our notion of the earth in a manner that is at once beautiful but cautionary. The caution is one of access and use. Just as the artist was able to use high level technologies, multi-levelled data collection is now not limited to researchers but is commonplace enough to be used by corporations, large scale farmers and the illegal, often armed gangs of gold miners. Mosse explains: ‘As an artist I was entering the visual language of scientists analysing the forests using remote sensing multispectral cameras carried on
sateiles in space such as those used over the Amazon by INPE, Imazon and MapBiomas. But the technology is also widely used by fazendeiros [farmers]. You see billboards and signs advertising drone-borne GIS services to farmers in almost every town along the Trans-Amazonian highway. These images of the land seen from afar – its rivers and sky, as well as the roads running through it – are a central and repeated motif. While Broken Spectre tells a tale of human destruction and its costs, the sweeping views of the land itself, seen through the scope of high technology, are the installation’s connecting thread.

Ben Frost’s score matches this mixture of the organic and synthetic. Viewing a scene of wealthy tourists cruising a river, we hear insects and birdcalls with uncanny and calming clarity, yet when the video turns to an aerial view of an industrial plant, the sound becomes a screech. In another sequence where two loggers are shown singly, each in their own panel and each sawing down an enormous tree, the sounds of the two chainsaws increases with almost deafening density. Frost, like Mosse, is creating a pastiche, using sounds that are both familiar and alien, comforting and repelling. At one point, while viewing a small cattle rancher’s modest homestead, a familiar melody plays, sampled from Ennio Morricone’s score for one of Sergio Leone’s most famous spaghetti westerns, Once upon a Time in the West.

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3 Email correspondence with the artist, 18 July 2023
4 Mosse also used Frost in creating Enclave (shown at the Irish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2014). About Broken Spectre, Mosse says: ‘Then there’s Ben Frost’s score. He used ultrasonic recorders and pitched the sounds down into the audible space. Basically what we’re doing with the UV imagery, but sonically.’ (Email correspondence with the artist, 18 July 2013)
5 Email correspondence with the artist, 18 July 2023
Richard Mosse, *Broken Spectre*, 2018–2022, four channel video installation with 12.2 surround sound, 74’12”, installation view, NGV International, Melbourne, photo by Tom Ross

Mosse’s photographic methods are equally layered in cultural reference. Unlike the large aerial views, almost every image of human beings is filmed in black and white, a nostalgic touch that recalls a time when photographic technologies were equivalent to veracity.

The longest single scene (also filmed in black and white) is a speech by Adneia, a young Yanomami woman. Surrounded by other Yanomami, she is subtitled in English and this is the only dialogue we hear in the film. Amidst silence and cheers, for over five minutes we listen to Adneia as she cries out against the destruction of the Amazon through mining residues and the violence that accompanies it. ‘We are dying from dysentery and malaria’, she says, calling former president Jair Bolsonaro a ‘parasite’. Towards the end, she turns to the camera (and the viewer) admonishing: ‘We are not here looking courageous, for no reason, telling you to film us… Don’t talk gallantly and do nothing… If you’re just here to film us, that’s bad.’ She ends with ‘Who will help us live in peace? We are really thinking about who will help us do this.’

If the core of the current crisis is unarguably one of greed, whether state, corporate capital or of the individuals that make up those entities, the fact that ‘[c]lose to one-third of Brazil’s critical minerals wealth – including one of the world’s largest deposits of rare earths – lies cached beneath the Amazon Basin’ does not bode well.6

6 In a completely short sighted, binary and capitalist fashion, Foreign Policy magazine published this article headlined ‘Will Brazil Destroy the Amazon to Save the Climate?’, although the authors’ point about the wealth of minerals in Brazil is widely accepted; see Robert Muggah and Mac Margolis, ‘Will Brazil Destroy the Amazon to Save the Climate?’, Foreign Policy, 22 April 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/22/brazil-lula-amazon-climate-environment-mining-minerals-energy-transition-electric-cars-ev-batteris-metals-rare-earths, accessed 20 July 2023
Certainly the ecological destruction of the Amazon, like climate change itself, is not new news. By 1988, Brazil’s Amazon policies were already under international scrutiny, including by such unlikely critics as the World Bank. And while outrage at the destruction of the Amazon’s Indigenous peoples may be more recent in popular consciousness, it, too, is well documented – even in the artworld. I am thinking here of the photographer Claudia Andujar, who photographed and lived among the Yanomami and has made defending their rights a key part of her work for nearly fifty years. Agnotology is clearly still at play here, as the same article that gave statistics on Brazil’s mineral wealth was headlined ‘Will Brazil Destroy the Amazon to Save the Climate?’, presumably suggesting that high-tech companies’ need for rare earths is the only way to slow global warming. It is a fallacious binary designed to sow confusion and doubt, and the very strength of Mosse’s work is that it is unequivocal.

Broken Spectre is a beautiful, engrossing work. That Mosse shows us the Amazon in a manner that does not ignore complex, competing interests while adamantly taking a stance against their ecological and human costs is its strength.

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