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pothole,  
portal

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October 2, 2014–January 5, 2015

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## CRITICAL EYE



John Gerrard: *Solar Reserve (Tonopah, Nevada)*, 2014, digital simulation on LED wall, 28 by 24 feet. Presented by Lincoln Center and the Public Art Fund, New York. All images this article courtesy Simon Preston Gallery, New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London. Photo Iñaki Vinaixa.

## Here Comes the Sun

by Carol Becker

*To find a form that accommodates the mess,  
that is the task of the artist now.*

—Samuel Beckett

WHEN *SOLAR RESERVE* (*Tonopah, Nevada*) went “live” in the courtyard at New York’s Lincoln Center on Oct. 2, viewers gasped. Foot traffic stopped. Glamorous women positioned themselves in front of the shimmering depiction of a tower as if it were a backdrop for a fashion shoot. Men pushing baby carriages, bicycle messengers pausing en route and a group of Russian tourists all began taking selfies. This public sculpture was clearly a natural for social media. Everyone seemed entranced but confused. “What is it?” a woman asked, while clicking away.

*Solar Reserve*, very distantly akin to Jenny Holzer’s early LED pieces, is the newest moving-image installation by the 40-year-old, Irish-born, Dublin- and Vienna-based artist John Gerrard. Sponsored by Lincoln Center in association with the Public Art Fund, it remained on view until Dec. 1. Portraying the Crescent Dunes Solar Reserve in Nevada, the images are displayed on a freestanding 28-by-24-foot light-emitting-diode wall. Despite appearances, the pictures are not video recordings or live feeds. Instead, Gerrard used 3-D technology (often associated with computer gaming) to simulate the original site down to the smallest bolt, rock and plant.

The work is designed *as if* it were documenting how 10,000 mirrors, arrayed in the Southwestern desert, track the movement

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of Solar  
e (Tonopah,  
a), 2014.

of the sun. Like the Nevada complex, *Solar Reserve* awakens at dawn, as the mirrors break their “rest pose” and turn toward the rising orb to reflect its light to the central tower, which houses molten salt batteries. Slowing, they track the sun through its transit, while shadows shift gradually across the landscape. Each hour, the scene shifts from a wide shot at ground level to a steady pan up the 540-foot tower to highly stylized satellite views of the entire solar-power facility. At sunset, the mirrors “restow,” facing upward at the night sky, while the furnace at the top of the tower throws off a golden light.

Crescent Dunes produces enough energy to power some 70,000 homes. Although humans may use such technology to

illuminate the world of the future, at present the endeavor is still massively expensive and minimally effective. (According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, solar sources contribute only 0.23 percent of the current U.S. energy supply.) Yet Gerrard's installation, radiant amid the New York cityscape, generated hope with its enthralling, constantly changing presence. He compares the central solar tower to the Colossus of Rhodes, built as a tribute to the Greek sun god, Helios, adorned with spiky light rays emanating from his head—a motif echoed by the pointed crown of the Statue of Liberty.

At times the Nevada desert is visible on the *Solar Reserve* screen; at other times the images are abstract, with the 10,000 mirrors reading like a mandala, multiple decorative elements around the omphalos of a temple or a devotional carpet pointing to a new Mecca. Pictorially, the piece recalls earthworks such as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field* (1977). Seen against Lincoln Center's myriad arches, it also conjures de Chirico's *Red Tower* (1913) or *Nostalgia of the Infinite* (ca. 1912), paintings that endow Italianate piazzas and towers with enigmatic historical allusions and improbable juxtapositions of scale and perspective.

IN 1996, GERRARD encountered 3-D scanning, then used primarily for commercial or training purposes. He immediately saw the potential of such technology for art-making and began creating “sculptural photographs.” He now takes thousands of photos for each project and then works for six months to a year with a team of technical assistants in Vienna to construct, inch by inch, a computer model of the actual location and actions to be depicted. Governments employ this technology to help soldiers prepare for battle or deal with post-traumatic stress. Many of the



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*Composition II*, 1996, screenprint on Lanaquarelle watercolor paper, 35 1/2 x 44 7/8 inches

*Thinking Nude*, 1994, from the “Nudes” Series, relief print on Rives BFK mold-made paper, 42 3/16 x 62 inches



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innovations Gerrard has put to artistic use derive from such military research, and he has produced a series of works—*Infinite Freedom Exercise (Near Abadan, Iran)*, 2011; *Live Fire Exercises* (2012); *Exercise (Djibouti)*, 2012—based on combat exercises.

Hovering between past, present and an incalculable future, such works are performative, post-cinematic, and ultra-durational, prompting viewers to experience (not just watch) portions of actions that are either infinitely continuous or programmed beyond their lifetime. While gorgeously seductive, as the Lincoln Center crowd reaction attests, Gerrard's pieces have a somber existential undertone. I, for one, find myself captivated and disoriented, searching for a recognizable location, discourse, methodology or philosophical framework within which to orient myself. This loss of emplacement has been compared to the estrangement created by Beckett's bleak landscapes.<sup>1</sup>

In 2005, Gerrard produced a limited edition of six small tabletop flat screens that depict a man on a beach, watching the sun rise over the sea. The piece is called *One thousand year dawn (Marcel)*. What at first appears to be a still scene isn't; the sun is rising, albeit imperceptibly, at a rate that would require 1,000 years to complete its cycle.

Gerrard sometimes finds his image sources in desolate or isolated locations. *Oil Stick Work (Angelo Martinez, Richfield, Kansas)*, 2008, shows a tiny simulated worker painting a classic rural barn using only a solid oil crayon. Working six days a week, he will need 30 years to finish the project. *Cuban School*,

*Sancti Spiritus* (2011) is an eerie simulation of a dilapidated but still-functioning educational facility where, each day at dusk, an imaginary caretaker walks through the building to switch off the lights. *Sow Farm (near Libbey, Oklahoma)*, 2009, shows a factory farm where pigs are fed from silos, their lives completely controlled by computer systems, providing alarming insights into how our food is now produced.

Two very powerful early works were inspired by Depression-era photographs. *Dust Storm (Dalhart, Texas)* and *Dust Storm (Mantar, Kansas)*, both 2007, are virtual "portraits," as Gerrard calls them, of these locations as they stand today, with an animated 3-D model of a 1935 dust storm slowly creeping into the frame. The "black blizzards" of the Dust Bowl era caused absolute darkness, sometimes lasting for days. Caused in part by imprudent farming methods, they marked a moment when the human capacity to destroy land and livelihood became tragically apparent.

Gerrard uses technology to remind us that we are living in an increasingly simulated reality, one we have imagined into being and are continuously recalibrating. If we were truly to grasp this concept, we might also acknowledge that we have the tools to repair this world—even to dream it into a new iteration. Such a simple yet potentially transformative thought is often at the core of Gerrard's astounding and complex work. ○

1. Shane Brighton, "Simulation, Exercise, Operations," Oxford Round Table, July 11, 2012, p. 30. Unpublished transcript.

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