

The Interview: Red, Red, Future

MPA // CONTEMPORARY ARTS MUSEUM HOUSTON

By Ruslana Lichtzier



[THE SEEN]

A MISSED CALL

Since the 1910 Thomas Edison movie *A Trip To Mars*, Orson Wells' radio-drama *The War of the Worlds* in 1938, to Ridley Scott's 2015 film *The Martian*, modern culture has manifested a preoccupation with the planet Mars. *THE INTERVIEW: RED, RED FUTURE*, a solo exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston by the American artist known by the moniker MPA, is another coordinate in this lineage.

Curated by Dean Daderko, the museum website describes the exhibition as a stage for the artist's ongoing research concerning Mars' future and, more broadly, for the consideration of its "colonial implications of settling the planet, how scientific and mythical beliefs can co-exist, and imagination as a source of power."¹ This, accompanied by dark red documentation images that resonated with low-fi, retro-futuristic aesthetics, promised an enticing experience in contemplative and investigative environment. I decided to visit the exhibition.

Upon entering the lower level where the exhibition is held, viewers are faced with an angled wall that blocks out ambient light from spilling into the rest of the space. The wall text guides to enter through the dimness on the left—passing through the narrow entrance, a photograph with a thick black frame is hung on the wall. The image captures two spotlighted circles moving over a pitch-black background. I learn that the photograph was taken by MPA in 29 Palms, CA, where she relocated from New York City three years ago, to focus on the body of work that led to this show; it captures an "unexplained celestial event in the night sky above."² On the floor beneath the photograph, I notice the beginning of a long, broken line of red wooden stakes that will define, in many ways, the spatial experience of the exhibition. This is *Long Line* (2015), a sequential assemblage of wooden stakes, bits of weathered plastic, metal, Styrofoam, rubber, and ceramic shards, that were gathered by MPA in the desert near 29 Palms.

Following the line, I am reminded of Richard Long's sculptural formations of found natural materials—in slate or limestone—and their arrangement in circles and lines. However, whereas Long's installations were a resolution of a walking-as-art practice that considered the natural landscape as its medium, MPA's take on

the landscape is of its performance as a post-apocalyptic stage. After all, the weathered plastic, Styrofoam, and ceramic shards are all human-made waste that will remain long after our disappearance. But this "post-apocalyptic" gesture is minor, elementary in context; the effect is mostly referential—"this" recalls "that." However, while the judgment against these aesthetics is questionable—it is always a partial, subjective judgment—the work resists revelation; it has no alchemy.

Following this path is the installation of *ISS Clock* and *CODEX* (2015)—a floor piece, consisting of square glass tiles,

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arranged in a slightly scattered composition, that fragment a large black & white aerial photograph. The photograph depicts a segment of the ancient geometric Nazca Lines, geoglyphs located in Peru's desert.³ Slowly swinging above hangs the *ISS Clock*, two computer-programmed theatrical lights that follow the twenty-four hour cycle of sixteen sunrises and sunsets that astronauts see from the International Space Station (ISS). The lights, which are equipped with ultraviolet bulbs, affect the *CODEX*'s glass plates, which are coated with a photochromic dye. When the UV rays hit the glass, it produces a purple shadow, slowly moving over the fragmented floor piece. As with *Long Line*, the formal elements fail to coalesce—the heavy placement of the two works in relation to one another collapses under MPA's decision to

give two titles to one installation. In practice, the work is mute without the data that supports it. While the work uses information, it does not create it.

Following *Long Line*, installed on the far right is *Mars*, a large red pigment print. In front of and adjacent the print is a large red wooden frame, placed on the floor, echoing and magnifying the dimensions of the print. The print is a composite of what looks to be Planet Mars and the landscape of 29 Palms. The overlay of the two worlds, Mars and Earth, is powerful, radiating alarming possibilities. In front of the print is a long red wooden seating structure—it is very low, and the back of it is on wide angle; it seems uncomfortable, and if there was an invitation to sit, I resisted it—next to a red pedestal with a red telephone. This work, which invites participation, reiterates the title of the show, and appears to be its gravitational center. *The Interview* (2016) is a direct telephone line to the artist. The exhibition's online text reads: "During their intimate conversations, MPA and visitors will speak about life on Mars... *The Interview*'s one-on-one exchange is an opportunity for mutual imagining that creates the possibility of a subjective counter-narrative. Who is interviewing whom? The artist? The visitor? In this open exchange, two beings come together to imagine with one another." Again, I resisted the invitation, and did not pick up the phone. Perhaps, I was momentarily an introvert, though the act of enforcing a specific verbal conversation felt exploitative in this context. The setup obstructs any possibility of an "intimate" conversation with the inherent hierarchy between the two sides of the line—one is the artist, voice of elected control, the other an anonymous voice of the public. Intimate conversation tends not to follow one topic, and can be spontaneous, complex, and go sideways, not directive.

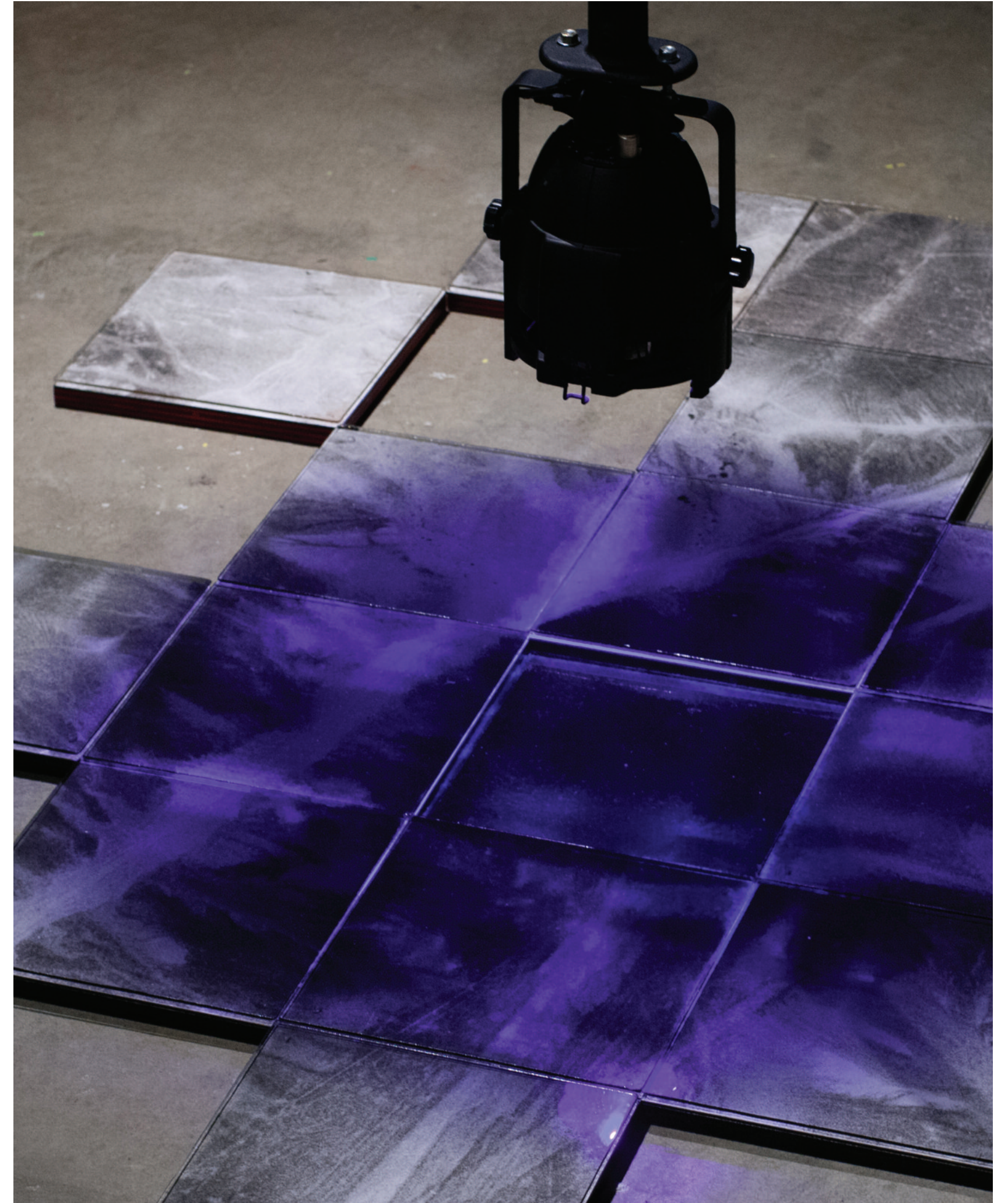
Across this installation, a red light emanates from an exit door. The door is closed and guarded by a museum worker. When I try to cross *Long Line*, which circumscribes my access to the door, I am stopped—MPA wants us to see the closed door and the red light from afar, as if to contain the magic, but this breaks the spell. Being barred access, and provided with only the limited perspective, the exhibition reveals itself as an unsuccessful manipulation of data, that does not transform matter itself.

Yet, I do not give up. I buy the catalogue. I want to know who failed. Was it me or the exhibition? The catalogue, beautifully designed, begins with sixteen pages of red and black minimal images. The first text is a letter exchange between the artist, Stefano Harney, and Fred Moten. The text begins with the concept of *THE UNDERCOMMERS*, that will be familiar only to a few, because many have not read the book in which Harney and Moten developed the concept. I struggle; I bought the exhibition catalogue to understand the exhibition better, but I understand less and less. On the second page, responding to MPA's image *Mars*, Harney and Moten write: "maybe the cool thing about this picture, maybe about pictures in general, is that if you linger your vision doubles, interacting with irreducible blur that's already there anyway in a way that solicits certain assumptions regarding (the relation between) ontology and representation."⁴ This is the first time MPA's work is being addressed in the catalogue; I am lost. The language, and reasoning behind the soft generalization of one specific picture to all pictures is difficult to understand, but moreover, it is dangerous. The assertions in the catalogue alienate those that are not fluent with the specific jargon, producing

instead an elitist conversation that marginalizes itself, and has little effect in reality. Secondary, it utilizes art as a prop in a philosophical thought experiment, which is, well, not the purpose of art.

— This brings us back to the beginning: while the exhibition's online existence proposes a complex, sensitive endeavor, it delivers a different experience in reality. This exposes a hidden structure: the exhibition-production machinery that exploits the online platform to create an archive of shows that are "tagged" with the right wording: in this case, the history and the future of colonization. Sounds good. Though there is no visible correlation between the colonization plans of Mars and the bloody history of white colonization on earth, as MPA attempts to convey, because, well, there are no living beings on Mars. This misuse of the term not only de-politicizes the artistic discourse surrounding exhibitions, but also runs the risk of converting the contemporary art on view into a "tagged" commodity.

— *THE INTERVIEW: RED, RED, FUTURE* is on view at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston through June 5, 2016.



TITLE PAGE:

MPA, *Mars*, 2014-15. *THE INTERVIEW: Red, Red Future*, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Houston, TX, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Photo: Max Fields

PAGE 22 TOP:

MPA, *Eye*, 2015. *THE INTERVIEW: Red, Red Future*, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Houston, TX, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Photo: Max Fields

PAGE 22 BOTTOM:

MPA, *The Interview*, 2015, *Red Frame*, 2014, and *Mars* 2014-15. *THE INTERVIEW: Red, Red Future*, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Houston, TX, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Photo: Max Fields

PAGE 23:

MPA, *ISS Clock* and *CODEX*, 2015. *THE INTERVIEW: Red, Red Future*, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Houston, TX, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Photo: Max Fields

BELOW:

MPA, *ISS Clock* and *CODEX*, 2015. *THE INTERVIEW: Red, Red Future*, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Houston, TX, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Photo: Max Fields

- 1 <http://camh.org/exhibitions/interview-red-red-future#.VvQAC5MrK34>, visited on March 24, 2016
- 2 Ed. Rose D'Amora & Patricia Restrepo, MPA, *THE INTERVIEW: RED, RED FUTUTRE*, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 2016, p. 10
- 3 Geoglyphs are immense ancient designs, dating to between 500 B.C.E. and 500 C.E. and can span hundreds of feet across
- 4 Ed. Rose D'Amora & Patricia Restrepo, MPA, *THE INTERVIEW: RED, RED FUTUTRE*, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 2016, p. 3



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