

# Technical Landscapes: Aesthetics and the Environment in the History of Science and Art

A Proposal for the 2016-17 Mahindra Humanities Center Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference  
Thursday, April 6-Saturday, April 8, 2017

## Conveners

Leah Aronowsky and Brad Bolman (Department of the History of Science, Harvard University), and Walker Downey (History, Theory, and Criticism of Architecture and Art, MIT)

## Conference Theme

Over the past century, land has become at once a technical and aesthetic object across art and science. On the one hand, scientific and technical programs have emerged—from the testing of atomic weapons in the American West to cobalt mining in the Congo—that occupy vast swaths of the planet. On the other hand, new “technical” approaches to the landscape have emerged in the visual arts: from the land art movement of the 1970s to urban public art installations, artists have positioned the land as the site, theme, and medium of artistic inquiry.

Our conference is concerned with these “technical landscapes”: sites where global knowledge practices and aesthetic categories have converged to literally transformed the physical fabric of the land. Land has always been a site of human design and transformation, but the vast scale of these twentieth-century engagements, we argue, constitutes a new kind of environmental formation, one in which conventional terms—“nature,” “culture,” “art,” “science,” “local,” “global”—no longer exist as clearly delineated categories. Instead, as implied by “technical landscapes,” these sites must be understood by scholars as the entangled meeting points of a multiplicity of relations between power, knowledge, history, and nature.

Technical landscapes are a rich area for interdisciplinary analysis, and the conference is an opportunity to consider these sites through the alternating lenses of art history, media studies, environmental humanities, literary studies, anthropology, and history of science (among others). At a moment when the monumental scale of global climate change and its meaning for humanist modes of inquiry have been the subject of vigorous debate across a wide number of disciplines, we feel our conference is a particularly timely one that can provide a space for new insights into the shifting relationships between humans, knowledge production, and the environment.

## Proposed Structure and Feasibility

The three co-conveners are uniquely positioned to convene a conference on technical landscapes. We developed the idea during a trip to the American West in August 2016 to visit several land art, nuclear and military history-related sites in conjunction with two seminars in our respective departments this fall: Technical Lands (Harvard History of Science, Peter Galison), and Landscape Experience: Seminar in Land/Art (MIT History of Art and Architecture, Caroline Jones and Rebecca Uchill). The juxtaposition of the sensorial field experiences with more traditional scholarly and film analyses of these sites profoundly altered our scholarly approaches to them, and convinced us of the importance of site-specific research and theory. We thus see the Mahindra conference as an exciting opportunity to invite the broader scholarly community into ongoing interdisciplinary conversations at Harvard and MIT, and to further develop these novel forms of graduate education.

The conference will consist of four panels of graduate student presentations spread out across two days. The panels will be organized around themes that emerge from the paper proposals we receive, with commentators from the local faculty and graduate student communities. While student papers comprise the core of the proceedings, the conference as a whole will take shape across multiple events intended to introduce participants to a range of research practices that critically engage technical landscapes:

*Opening Keynote:* The conference will open on Thursday afternoon with a collaborative keynote address by Peter Galison, Joseph Pellegrino University Professor, Harvard University, with Caroline Jones, Professor of History of Art and Architecture, MIT, and Rebecca Uchill, Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at the MIT Center for Art, Science,

and Technology. Galison will frame the theoretical understanding of “technical lands,” a concept he has pioneered, and will briefly introduce his vision of graduate education beyond the classroom. Jones will speak to decades of scholarship on land art and, with Uchill, interlocking pedagogies crafted in the recent MIT/ Harvard seminar collaborations. For nearly the entirety of their careers, Galison and Jones have been committed to questions related to scale, selfhoods, technology, and studio/lab practices in the “natural” world. They are the authors of numerous monographs and co-edited volumes that address the complex intersections of aesthetic and scientific practices. Galison’s most recent film (co-directed with Robb Moss), *Containment*, for example, is a visual meditation on nuclear waste storage as a problem that exceeds human notions of temporal and spatial scale, but that also produces “wasteland wildernesses:” places that, because of their contamination, paradoxically become pristine. Jones has published on the multiple contexts for Robert Smithson’s “earthworks” and other post-studio art practices; her forthcoming book, *The Global Work of Art*, explores how the art object materializes and critiques its global circulations. Uchill developed the field trip that inspired this conference. As cofounder of Experience Economies, she has developed a sophisticated event-based research and curatorial practice. Her research investigates the notion of landscape as it reveals shifting conceptions of subjectivity and collectivity. The collective keynote will provide the theoretical, methodological, and conceptual foundation that orients the conference, and will be open to the public.

*Opening reception and performance:* On Friday evening, we will host a reception for participants at the Waterworks Museum in Chestnut Hill, MA. Ernst Karel, a sound artist and professor in the Harvard Anthropology Department, has agreed to give a performance of his site-specific recordings during the reception. The dramatic structures of the Waterworks Museum and Karel’s acoustic interventions are exemplary of the juxtaposition of art, place, and history of science our conference addresses. The Waterworks Museum has responded positively to our proposal.

*Lunchtime experience workshop:* Rebecca Uchill will offer a workshop, details in process, that may include visiting artist contributors or a tour of the upcoming futurefarmers exhibition at the Carpenter Center (for which she is the guest curator) that examines “wandering” as a research practice.

*Closing Keynote:* Our proposed closing keynote speaker is Lucy Lippard, a noted art historian, critic, and activist whose recent publication *Undermining* (2014) addresses collisions of land, art, and industry in the American West. We will also invite a grad student respondent who can engage Lippard in questions of environmental justice that have recently been brought to land art projects. Funds and venue space will come from the Council for the Arts at MIT to support Ms. Lippard’s travel and speaker’s fee. Holding the closing keynote at MIT as a public event will further our goal of inviting local scholars to participate in our conference conversation. (Other potential candidates will be explored if Lippard is unavailable.)

## Budget

Funds and in-kind contributions have been secured or requested from the Harvard Department of the History of Science (\$500) and the Council for the Arts at MIT (\$6000).

|                                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Speaker Honoraria</b> (C. Jones, R. Uchill): \$500 (x2) = \$1000                                                                                          |
| <b>Lucy Lippard Keynote/Respondent Expenses</b> (Honorarium, airfare, ground transit, lodging): \$6000*<br>*To be covered by the Council for the Arts at MIT |
| <b>Student Presenter Travel Subsidies</b> (\$150 x10): \$1500*<br>*To be subsidized by History of Science Department                                         |
| <b>Meals</b> (Morning coffee and light breakfast x2, catered lunch x2, afternoon coffee x2, dinner for organizers and keynotes): \$1,250                     |
| <b>Reception expenses</b> (Shuttle bus and driver to/from Cambridge, Waterworks Museum facilities fee, catering services, performer honorarium): \$2,200     |
| <b>Presentation expenses</b> (A/V, security, and custodial services): \$800                                                                                  |
| <b>Conference promotion costs</b> (Poster and program printing, Crimson ad, office supplies, postage, and incidentals): \$435                                |
| <b>Coordinator stipends</b> (L. Aronowsky, B. Bolman, W. Downey): \$1500                                                                                     |
| <b>Total Budget:</b> \$14,685                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Total Mahindra:</b> \$8,185 (less \$500 Harvard History of Science; less \$6000 Council for the Arts at MIT)                                              |