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A Subtle Kind of Beyond

THESIS

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A Subtle Kind of Beyond

By

Katie Shapiro

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Professor Kevin Appel, Chair

Using photography, I have attempted to document the ineffable and intangible matter of energy vortices by taking photographs at different sites that claim to have a vortex. What I am pointing my camera at, can’t be seen. The work in my thesis exhibition, A Subtle Kind of Beyond, consists of visual constructions born out of my visits to several different energy vortices. The sites I photographed are in Sedona, Ojai, Mount Shasta, Joshua Tree, and at the Oregon Vortex. Coming out of an experience of profound personal loss, I found myself searching in physical places, for sites where physicality was conceivably transcended. Photography is veiled in veracity, and the subject matter of energy vortices is completely wrapped up in truth and belief. The mystery of sacred sites will always be curious since there are no known answers. I believe they serve as a physical way to explore the internal realm of consciousness. This thesis is an investigation in the ineffable.
"I understand the spiritual as a way of living in the ordinary while sensing the extraordinary."

Lucy Lippard

Over the past year I’ve visited different energy vortices in places in the Southwest that are considered sacred. Sacred comes from the root word sacrum, which once referred to the spacial area around a temple. A vortex is a mass of spinning air, liquid etc., that pulls objects into its center.\(^1\) An energy vortex is an invisible entity that exists outside of sight, but is said to be felt – a vast magnet of energy.\(^2\) Using the energy vortex as a frame to look through, I’ve been able to explore ideas concerning the potential limitations of belief and knowledge. Coming out of an experience of profound personal loss, I found myself searching in physical places, for sites where physicality was conceivably transcended. I am driven by the inquiry into the subjective nature of lived knowledge that can’t be seen, and that which lies internally and among one’s own senses. The work in my thesis, *A Subtle Kind of Beyond*, is a reaction to my visits to these sites attained by employing my own interpretations by attempting to structure the un-structurable.

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\(^2\) "Sedona Vortex Tours :: Sedona, AZ." Sedona Vortex Tours :: Sedona, AZ. Web. 28 May 2015.
All of the sites I visited have historically been sites of power, healing and renewal.\textsuperscript{3} They are places visited by seekers and wanderers in search of a truth and personal transformation. This potential for transformation is stated in the advertising that surrounds such locations and generates a call to those in search of spiritual redemption. In Roland Barthes essay, “The Third Meaning”, he writes about the \textit{filmic} as a place where articulated language ends and another language begins. He writes, “The filmic, then, lies precisely here, in that region where articulated language is no longer more than approximative and where another language begins.”\textsuperscript{4} It is that which exists beyond our sight, outside the frame of the camera and subsequently out of ones perception. It is presence that one can feel, but not see. The energy of the vortex is \textit{seemingly} impossible to articulate or record in any visual medium.

In the field of Quantum Mechanics, physicists have discovered that “physical atoms are made up of vortices of energy that are constantly spinning and vibrating, each one radiating its own unique energy signature....If you observed the composition of an atom with a microscope, you would see a small, invisible tornado like vortex, with a number of infinitely small energy vortices called quarks and photons.... As you focused in closer and closer on the structure of the atom, you would see nothing; you would observe a physical void. The atom has no physical structure, we have no physical structure, physical things really don’t have any physical structure! Atoms are made out of invisible energy, not

\textsuperscript{3} "Arts and Religion," City of Sedona :. Web. 28 May 2015.
tangible matter.⁵ Since atoms are then invisible energy, my search for the energy vortex in different sites turned out to exist in my own body, in the atoms that make me up. The physical search is in fact the vehicle in which to access the internal search, and the two exist coincidentally.

Using photography, I have attempted to document the ineffable and intangible matter of energy vortices by taking photographs at different sites that claim to have or be a vortex. The work in A Subtle Kind of Beyond consists of visual constructions born out of my visits to several different energy vortices. The sites I photographed are in Sedona, Ojai, Mount Shasta, Joshua Tree, and at the Oregon Vortex.

![Green and Yellow Sedona](image)

Colored gels, or filters, interrupt the landscape photographs and serve as representation of the presence of a vortex, as well as a screen through which one

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views the landscape. I layered the gels over the photographs to visualize a proposed form of how the energy vortex might appear. These colored layers point toward limitations in our perception and propose what might exist beyond our immediate understanding of being present in a physical location.

*Light Box Energy Vortex* (2015) holds different colored acrylic pieces in triangle and rectangle shapes, energy trinkets, stones, and transparencies of images made with Kirlian Photography. Kirlian Photography is named after Semyon Kirlian, who in 1939 accidentally discovered that “if an object on a photographic plate is connected to a high-voltage source, an image is produced
on the photographic plate....Kirlian believed that images created by Kirlian photography might depict a conjectural energy field, or aura, thought, by some, to surround living things. Kirlian and his wife were convinced that their images showed a life force or energy field that reflected the physical and emotional states of their living subjects.”

Aura photography is one technique that tries to picture energy. Combining objects, light and color that conduct electromagnetic energy, the light box becomes my own proverbial energy vortex.

The video, *Sedona Vortex Roundabout* (2014), is a looped sequence that presents my figure walking around a traffic roundabout in Sedona, Arizona. Located outside of the known vortex sites, but within the constructed landscape of the town itself, I’m seemingly caught in my own inner vortex. The site of

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Sedona in part can be seen as an extension of the vortex narrative in that it is a site of touristic pilgrimage for those in search of the redemption that the surrounding desert is said to offer. “The only journey is the one within,” writes Rainer Maria Rilke. The journey I’m walking is looped; in the same way the video endlessly repeats itself. Like the traffic circle, I am walking my own spiral voyage. I may not be traveling far physically, but internally I am searching, searching for something outside of myself, not aware that it’s already inside. The central location of the traffic circle also implies misdirection, a commercial version of the spiritual site I am seeking and therefore a nod to the difficulty in attaining personal connection to such ineffable locations.

The video is accompanied by the sound of Tibetan Singing bowls, which are often used for meditation, relaxation and personal well being.\(^7\) As Lucy Lippard writes in *Overlay*, “the imposition of human habitation on the landscape is an overlay.”\(^8\) Like the gels and acrylic that lay over the photographs and light box, the built environment is also an overlay on the landscape within the video. The sounds of the bells overlay the video, and the exhibition as a whole.

The *Informationless Pamphlet* (2015) is a pamphlet that employs the style of an informational brochure, but the piece presents no concrete information. There are drawn diagrams of the energy vortex taken from an informational booklet bought at the Oregon Vortex, as well as a Kirilian photograph made of the energy from a used Kleenex. The intrinsic function of the informational pamphlet – to

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provide information – is collapsed, and is instead used as a template for displaying other forms of enigmatic information. The paper pamphlet is a take away for the viewer. Presenting no answers or clear information, the pamphlet is questioning the validity of such information and posing the notion that the ability to articulate this type of ineffable information is suspect.

*Informationless Pamphlet (2015)*
The light and sound in the exhibition are integral, as I wanted to create an emotionally affecting environment in which to view the work. I set this tone as a kind of filter though which one experiences the work, and also to operate as a mirror of the subject matter. The light is dim, and the images are spot lit. The sounds of Tibetan singing bowls fill the gallery space. Tibetan bowls emit pure tones. The sound creates a cocoon inside the contemplative space. It is a tiny sanctuary that brings about a calm and meditative atmosphere. I wanted to create an immersive environment that would affect the viewer and move them; to have them enter another world.

The works exhibited are disparate in form but all stemmed from the core idea of interpreting something deep and indescribable. Deleuze and Guattari use

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the word rhizome to speak about entry points in terms of representing data and
the interpretation of it. Rather than narrativize history and culture, the rhizome
presents history and culture as a map or wide array of attractions and influences
with no specific origin or genesis, for a 'rhizome has no beginning or end; it is
always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo.' \(^{10}\) The works in my
thesis exhibition are all contingent upon one another but manifested in different
ways. The way Deleuze and Guattari explain their theory exemplifies the way the
works in the show exist together as a whole, and also how it was created. The
works exist in a liminal space, and like their description of a rhizome, is in-
between. Like the walking in the video, the movement is circular and never
arrives anywhere; there is no answer.

After a short visit to Sedona, Arizona last year, I decided that I would return
to make work. I witnessed the culture and tourism that was built around the
phenomena of energy vortices, and was fascinated by the way an unquantifiable
idea could be sold and measured in some way. I had been working with objects
that refracted (or bent) light as a way to depart from the representational work I
had been making. I was using prisms, plastics and various translucent materials
to create experimental images in the darkroom and on a scanner. Many of the
objects were crystals, and I found myself in new age stores in town and online
hunting for objects to use. *Cracked Bulb* was a piece from my 2\(^{nd}\) year show that

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was made from cracked fluorescent light bulb pieces, dust, and square pieces of pink and coral gels placed onto a scanner bed.

_Ghost Prism_ (2014), another piece from that show, is a black and white photograph made with a prism and a flashlight, most of the frame is filled with black, except for a small moment where the prisms shadow is reflected onto the light sensitive paper.
Working in abstraction touched upon the ideas that I have further explored with more depth in the current body of work, trying to picture something that exists in the abstract.

Between the end of 2013 to the beginning of 2014, I lost two people in my life. They were both profound relationships, and the undulations of those losses went deep, and entered into my psyche in a deep way. The experience of mourning and confronting these relationships created some large internal shifts. The ideas in my work began to point toward notions of presence and the desire to express or picture something that perhaps I wasn’t completely attuned to or able to readily access. I found myself running away from the representational, and needing to explore something greater, something from the gut, intuition, and from the heart. The vortex was an ideal subject to frame my ideas and interest around the indefinable.

I made plans to return to Sedona and make work there, and began researching other sites that also claimed to have energy vortices. For my research, I turned to the Internet and to people’s reports on where vortices existed. The Internet is a curious site relative to belief, as it’s a place people often turn to for answers or information. The Internet is a place where truth, belief, knowledge and lies all become overlaid. I found myself doing research and reading online about personal accounts of visiting these spots, or specific directions on how to get to these places, and sites that explored the energy vortex phenomena. The places I ended up visiting for this project are located in the
West and South West, but the phenomena of energy vortices extend all around the globe.

Over the years I've been drawn to certain artist’s practices that I consider within my field of work. Liz Deschenes is one artist who has pushed the medium of photography forward in ways that go beyond the scope of representation, and have dealt with the materiality of the medium. She has also created photographic installations such as *Tilt/Swing (360 field of vision, version 1)* (2009) where she installed a ring of photograms around the viewer. Taryn Simon has pushed social documentary into a new territory that has created some openings within the broader context of that photographic genre. Her *Contraband* series is social documentary, but presented from a different angle. She didn't photograph people whose belongings got confiscated at the airport, or the process, she distilled it to the belongings themselves. There was a specificity that spoke to larger issues of consumerism and security. Zoe Leonards’ camera obscura works resonate most with me. The way she creates a space and an environment from reflections of what’s across the street from the gallery space really allows the viewer to exist within a photograph, and in a liminal space. The work speaks to me about personal projection and perception in ways I’m working with my thesis installation. Carol Bove’s shelf pieces served as inspiration for the *Light Box Energy Vortex* (2015) piece as a strategy of display.

Using photography to make most of this work was necessary, and inherent in the work because historically, photography has been interwoven with evidence
and truth. If somebody claimed that something happened, and had a photograph to prove it, there wasn’t much question about it. After the advent of Photoshop and digital photography, the factual status of photography was essentially wiped away and with it went much of the authoritative weight that the medium held. That being said, the history, and the truths that photography has represented for many years, is imperative to producing a part of this project in photographs. What I am pointing my camera at, can’t be seen. It’s un-recordable to our eye, and is only able to be expressed through personal accounts of ones experience.

The history of photography is imbedded in these images. I shot the landscapes with film, scanned the film, made a print, added gels to the print, and scanned that print to make a larger print. Both analogue and digital means were used to make the final photographs, and in that process lays the history, even if only technically speaking. The sites themselves contain a history as well holding stories of the people who believe in their power. Photography is veiled in veracity, and the subject matter of energy vortices is completely wrapped up in truth and belief. Photography is the ideal medium to address these ideas and push them further due to the intrinsic truth-seeking qualities of the medium. I am thus cast in the role of the spectral photographer of the indescribable trying to use photographic fabrications to convey the ineffable nature of spiritual belief.

There is mystery to the energy vortex. Speaking about ancient sites, Lippard says they “confirm[s] the human need to touch, to hold and make, in relationship to natural forces and phenomena. Even as we as individuals are cut
off from any communal belief system or collective work system, something seems to flow back to us through these places – which we see perhaps as symbols of lost symbols, apprehended but not specifically comprehended in our own socioreligious context.”¹¹ Within these sites lies something powerful that humans have been drawn to for centuries. The mystery of sacred sites will always be curious since there are no known answers. I believe they serve as a physical way to explore the internal realm of consciousness.

When I began to ruminate on my thesis and the ideas I wanted to explore, my initial desire was to figure out how to combine the social documentary practice that I had developed before coming to graduate school, with abstraction, a part of my practice I discovered over the course of my time in graduate school. One project I completed before coming to graduate school centered on climate change and class issues that collided on a beach in Malibu. *Malibu Sandbags* (2010) is a series of photographs of the sandbags that were erected in front of the beachfront homes to protect them from the rising tide. The photographs were presented traditionally, hanging on the wall, and were shot the form of a series.

When I started at Irvine, one of the first projects I finished – *Stranger Tides* (2013) – was covering an entire closet, essentially wallpapering it, with close up images of waves, intended to invoke an immersive dissociative experience. My

challenge for my thesis was figuring out the best way to unify these two seemingly opposing practices.

Malibu Sandbags (2010)

Stranger Tides (2013)
I was most interested in pushing my social documentary practice into a new realm. I wanted to move into a space where I was asking more philosophical questions then simply laying out facts. My solution was to combine the two, but not in a seamless way. I wanted to show the clumsy merging of the two, and display the layers, which like the rhizome, are in a liminal space. Stepping away from the perfection that photography has the ability to create, I was more excited by showing the underbelly or lining to my process.

Photography has the evidentiary power to manufacture belief. In Camera Lucida, Barthes writes “the Photograph’s platitude becomes more painful, for it can correspond to my fond desire only by something inexpressible: evident (this is the law of the Photograph) yet improbable (I cannot prove it). This something is what I call the air (the expression, the look).”\(^\text{12}\) I will apply the air, to the literal air that exists in landscape photography, as I see it as just the same as the air in a portrait. What exists as the experience of being in the landscape, the “energy” or the overwhelming vastness that being in nature can bring, is also evidence that can’t be proven. So how does one know, or represent this air of felt experience? It’s there, but not there – felt, a subtle kind of beyond. Barthes also writes that photography “authenticates the existence of a certain being.”\(^\text{13}\) It can also be truth making, as events can be presented in a photograph, but not be true. So therefore, photography acts as a source of evidence – of truth telling, or truth making. But if this is so, if photography authenticates, then can it show us the

\(^{13}\) Ibid.
real even if that lies outside of our field of perception? My interest is not so much in the answer to this, as in the opening of possibility. In the search for the real, the truth, how do we portray it and how do we present experience in a visual way?

We are always searching, never arriving.

In the beginning of Camera Lucida, Barthes calls the punctum “a kind of subtle beyond – as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see...”¹⁴ I interpret Barthes words as describing a mystical or emotive expression. These ideas wrap together in a vine around one another to speak about the elusiveness and the desire that photographs and films create. To truly express the experiential quality that I as an artist hope to convey is my drive and my desire. That which lies outside of language is the jouissance of art making and viewing, not ever able to pin it down exactly but sensing it on some other level – one that is beyond.

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“Art itself must have begun as nature – not as imitation of nature, nor as formalized representation of it, but simply as the perception of relationships between humans and the natural world.”

Lucy Lippard

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