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## Interview with Greg Allen

*Greg Allen, a writer and filmmaker in Washington, D.C., has organized [Exhibition Space](#), an exhibition at apexart in New York that revisits images, objects, and perspectives from the early days of the Cold War space race. Included in the show are a ten-foot-diameter re-creation of a Project Echo satelloon and two photographic series created for utilitarian purposes that blur the lines between science and Conceptual art. The exhibition is on view through May 8. For more on the overlaps between science, exploration, and photography, [subscribe now to Aperture magazine](#) in order to receive the forthcoming Summer 2013 issue on the theme of "Curiosity." —Brian Sholis*



Photographer unknown, *Echo I over South Dakota*, August 31, 1960.



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Brian Sholis: Your exhibition uses scientific, press, and amateur photographs to demonstrate a shift in Americans' conception of outer space, a shift conditioned in part by the escalation of the Cold War. Will you elaborate on this idea and tell us whether you see a connection to more explicit links between culture and Cold War propaganda, such as those uncovered by Frances Stonor Saunders [in her book *The Cultural Cold War*]?

Greg Allen: The short answer is yes, I do see links to the cultural Cold War, though I was originally drawn to these things largely for their aesthetic value. I was looking at how these scientific and astronomical artifacts might bear on the art historical discussion, in particular, of the beginnings of conceptual photography and minimalism.

Despite having written on my blog many times over the years about both the NGS–Palomar Observatory Sky Survey and NASA's Project Echo, I had never considered either of them in terms of each other, nor of the Cold War, which was the overriding political dynamic of their time. Project Echo figures only marginally in it, but I found Walter McDougall's 1986 book *The Heavens and The Earth: A Political History of the Space Age*, to be really useful for understanding how space became a site of political conflict.

BJS: How did that understanding of space evolve?

GA: In some real way after World War II, space became “the next frontier,” the natural successor to the American West, the landscape onto which American dreams of expansion and dominance were projected. But after the launch of Sputnik in 1957 and a few years of US failures and setbacks, space was seen as “the next front,” a site of Cold War conflict where US supremacy was uncertain or faltering. While there were direct military and technological implications for the space race, there were also significant propaganda impacts when space-related achievements were considered alongside cultural production as evidence of the superiority or failure of national ideological systems.

Saunders has a great analysis of how the US-Soviet ideological rivalries and de-Nazification efforts in occupied Germany laid the groundwork for the Cold War's cultural competition. That's the same milieu in which the Allies were each scrambling to secure for themselves as many German V-2 rockets and rocket scientists as they could. The US shipped back parts for hundreds of V-2s, as well as Wernher von Braun. NASA's own official Project Echo histories don't mention him at all, but von Braun was the first and most prominent advocate of the US launching a one-hundred-foot inflatable satellite into space for unabashedly propagandistic purposes. He called it “The American Star,” and he was confident it would sway the hearts and minds of Asia (i.e., China and India) toward the US cause.

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McDougall makes a persuasive case that the US space program, led by civilians at NASA interested in science and exploration, was itself an ideological refutation of the Soviets' attempted militarization of space. This also provided public cover, he argues, for an entire military/intelligence shadow space program, including the development of ICBMs and missile targeting systems, and the deployment of surveillance satellites. Though Project Echo satellites served multiple nontrivial roles in this evolution, I didn't discover until working on the show that their propagandistic mission—to be seen by the entire world—wasn't a side point: it was the main point.



Photographer unknown, *Beacon satellites on display in the US Pavilion at Expo67, Montreal, 1967.*

**BIS:** I want to pick up on your initial impetus to research these images, which shouldn't be lost in the discussions of scientific and political imperatives. How might these photographs be understood as predecessors to Conceptual photography and Minimalism? Were you able to uncover any evidence that these images, which were widely distributed, impacted the thinking of artists whom we now consider part of the photographic and sculptural canon?

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GA: In several years of archive diving I did find some connections between these projects and images and various postwar and contemporary artists, but no Rosetta Stone–style revelations. In the 1980s Chris Burden created a little-known proposal called *The Moon Project* that was basically a restaging of Project Echo as art, only bigger.

But I was really motivated more, I think, by the desire to question or expand the photographic and sculptural canon, not just to add to the footnotes of the stories that were already being written.

BJS: These photographs deserve consideration as aesthetic objects—

GA: —In the most basic sense, these prints and satellites are indeed extraordinary objects, extraordinarily made. They embodied the characteristics of and exerted major influence on the culture of their day. It's not just coincidence that they happen to look like art, or rather, that art soon emerged that looked like them. Considered on their own terms and in their own contexts, these projects can bring a lot formally, aesthetically, conceptually, and ideologically to art discourse.

Take the Palomar Observatory Sky Survey, which is an archetype of the non-subjective, anti-aesthetic scientific photography that informed Bernd & Hilla Becher beginning in the mid-1950s. Indexicality, typology, obsolescence, mankind's place in the world—these are all central elements of both POSS and the Bechers' work. The timing is such that I don't think the Bechers could have known or seen POSS in the 1950s. But I shouldn't have been surprised to learn that it was overseen at Caltech by a German refugee astronomer, and thus shared the same socio-political foundation, 1930s German objectivism, that the Bechers consciously sought out. Maybe it's the photographic equivalent of how Québécois forked from Old French, thus preserving some of its structure and vocabulary. And that's all without really addressing the issues of seriality or the grid. And on a completely different plane, of course, there's the sheer ambition and folly of deciding to take a picture of the entire universe. I mean, what artwork can measure up to that?

BJS: Douglas Huebler would announce his intention to do just that in the early 1970s.

GA: Yes. And the Echo satellite, meanwhile, even though it predates Judd's and Morris's concepts by almost a decade, seems like a "specific object" to me. It's not—or not just—a case of "this looks like that." Walking back the history of Project Echo, it turns out that visibility—direct experience with the object itself, in its space—was a the central point of the endeavor. Echo was an object made to be seen—and photographed—in space, from everywhere on earth. And on top of all that, the idea was first promoted by none other than Wernher von Braun as pure, unabashed propaganda.

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Rather than influence, it's context, and Echo makes me think of critic Michael Fried and Robert Smithson's exchange over Minimalism's theatricality and atemporality. Smithson wrote, "What Fried fears most is the consciousness of what he is doing—namely being himself theatrical," an internally conflicted position that applies equally well to Echo's spectacle. It's funny, and kind of a bummer, actually, because though my affinity for Minimalism and Smithson was what drew me to Project Echo in the first place, the more I discovered about its history and politics, the more problematic Minimalism's claims of objectivity became for me. I just kept thinking, "Man, they had to have known about all this."

<http://www.aperture.org/2013/04/interview-with-greg-allen/>