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Abstract Power

On a warm, sunny afternoon in the Flint Hills of Kansas on August 29, 2019, a group of firefighters joined with the National Park Service and the United States Department of the Interior at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve to ignite a fire along a mile-long stretch of Highway 177 in Strong City, Kansas. The measure of the mile had been carefully chosen in advance for a land art piece titled *Mile Long Burn* with the intent of creating a large-scale temporal land art intervention, reinvigorating the growth of prairie plants, and keeping invasive species at bay. The power of the fire that day was magical. This powerful transformation of the vegetation from a crisp brown wave into an elemental source of carbon is a critical component of the ecology of grasslands. The power of fire is intrinsically tied to the origin of plants in that plants are responsible for two of the three elements essential to the existence of fire: oxygen and fuel. The power and magic of the *Mile Long Burn* that warm day in August 2019 will continue to nourish the prairie for years to come and will contribute to the biodiversity of the dwindling tallgrass prairies.

Power

Sulle Flint Hills del Kansas, nel pomeriggio caldo e soleggiato del 29 agosto 2019, un gruppo di vigili del fuoco si unisce al National Park Service e allo United States Department of the Interior presso la Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve per accendere un fuoco lungo un tratto di un miglio della Highway 177 a Strong City, Kansas. La sezione di un miglio era stata accuratamente scelta in anticipo per un'opera di land art intitolata *Mile Long Burn*, con l'intento di creare un intervento di *land art* di lunga durata, rinvigorire la crescita della vegetazione della prateria e tenere a bada le specie invasive. Quel giorno la potenza del fuoco si rivela magica. La potente trasformazione della flora, da distesa bruna e crespa a fonte elementare di carbonio, è una componente critica dell'ecologia delle praterie. Il potere del fuoco è intrinsecamente legato all'origine delle piante, in quanto responsabili di due dei tre elementi essenziali per l'esistenza del fuoco: l'ossigeno e il combustibile.



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Quodlibet

Letizia Battaglia, Ospedale Psichiatrico, Via Pindemonte, Palermo, 1983 (ristampa | reprint 2016). Courtesy MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Roma. Collezione Fotografie del MAXXI

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Vesper è una rivista scientifica semestrale, multidisciplinare e bilingue, si occupa delle relazioni tra forme e processi del progetto e del pensiero. Ponendo lo sguardo al crepuscolo, quando la luce si confonde con il buio e l'oggetto illuminante non è più visibile, *Vesper* intende leggere l'atto progettuale seguendo e rendendo evidente il moto della trasformazione. Pitagora identificò nel pianeta Venere sia la stella della sera (*Hesperos*) che quella del mattino (*Phosphorus*), i due nomi si riferiscono allo stesso astro ma posto in condizioni temporali differenti. *Vesper* dichiara quindi una posizione più che un oggetto e privilegia il situarsi che ne profila lo statuto. Non è qui accesa la luce tagliente dell'alba, che promette giorni completamente nuovi e alti sol dell'avvenire, ma quella che fa intravedere nella penombra una possibilità nell'esistente.

Richiamando e rinnovando la tradizione delle riviste cartacee italiane, *Vesper* ospita un paesaggio articolato di modalità narrative, accoglie forme di scrittura e stili differenti, privilegia l'intelligenza visiva del progetto, dell'espressione grafica, dell'immagine e delle contaminazioni tra linguaggi. La rivista è pensata nella sua successione di numeri tematici come discorso sulla contemporaneità, nello spazio di ogni singolo numero è articolata in un insieme di rubriche che gettano luci differenti sul tema. Nel procedere delle diverse sezioni – editoriale, citazione, progetto, racconto, lezione, saggio, inserto, traduzione, archivio, viaggio, ring, tutorial, dizionario – mutano i riverberi tra idee e realtà, si accende l'intreccio tra evidenze concrete e loro potenzialità, potenziali trasformativi, immaginari. Le rubriche sono pensate non per aggiornare istantaneamente ma per indagare condizioni progettuali e per fornire strumenti e materiali dall'*ombra lunga*.

Vesper is a six-monthly, multidisciplinary and bilingual scientific journal which deals with the relationships between forms and processes of thought and of design. Gazing into the dusk, when light slowly merges with darkness and the illuminating object is no longer visible, *Vesper* aims to interpret the act of designing through tracing and revealing the movement of transformation. Pythagoras identified in the planet Venus both the evening star (*Hesperos*) and the morning star (*Phosphorus*), assigning the two names to the same star observed in different temporal conditions. *Vesper* thus states a perspective rather than an object, privileging the condition that defines its status. Rather than the sharp light of dawn, heralding a brand-new day and promising a brighter future, it is the twilight that allows you to have a glimpse at the potential of what is already there.

Following the tradition of Italian paper journals, *Vesper* revives it by hosting a wide spectrum of narratives, welcoming different writings and styles, privileging the visual intelligence of design, of graphic expression, of images and contaminations between different languages. The journal is conceived as a series of thematic issues that build a discourse on the contemporary. Each issue is divided into sections that offer a range of diverse perspectives on the theme analysed: editorial, quote, project, tale, lecture, essay, extra, translation, archive, journey, ring, tutorial, dictionary. Throughout the different sections, reverberations between ideas and reality change, connections emerge between tangible facts and their potentials, transformative prospects, collective perception. The principal aim of these sections is not to provide instant news, but to offer an in-depth investigation of different instances of design and to provide tools and materials that have a long-lasting effect.

VESPER No. 6

MAGIC



Letizia Battaglia, *Discarica sulla costa di Acqua dei Corsari* (tema: Costa est di Palermo), 2003. Stampa b/n ai sali d'argento su carta baritata | B/W gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 40 × 50 centimetri | centimetres.
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power (paʊər) noun. 1. ability to do, act, or produce. 2. great ability to do, act, or affect strongly; vigor; force; strength. Collins English Dictionary, www.collinsdictionary.com, accessed 14/11/2021.

Kevin Benham, *Mile Long Burn*, The Tall Grass Prairie National Preserve, Strong City, Kansas, September 2019. This land art piece, conducted with the National Park Service, uses the alchemy and magic of earth, wind, and fire to reconstitute the biodiversity and native species in the dwindling tallgrass prairie. The piece is a mile in length and the width is variable, depending on biomass and prevailing meteorological conditions.



The agent by which fire was first brought down to earth and made available to mortal man was lightning. To this source every hearth owes its flames. — Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 50 BC.

On a warm, sunny afternoon in the Flint Hills of Kansas on August 29, 2019, a group of firefighters joined with the National Park Service and the United States Department of the Interior at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve to ignite a fire along a mile-long stretch of Highway 177 in Strong City Kansas. The previous night had been crisp and the stars in the sky shone brightly over the stark and barren landscape. As a result of those meteorological conditions, the sun was bright, and the air was dry that next morning as the firefighters situated themselves along the length of road from the Historic Ranch Headquarters to the north and down to St. Anthony Cemetery to the South. Additional firefighters were sited along the Fox Creek to the East prior to the ignition of fire along the highway to control the burn should it jump over the river and consume more of the prairie than intended.

The groundwork for that event had been carefully planned three years prior, but the availability of firefighters and the proper weather conditions finally coalesced on that beautiful August afternoon. The wind was blowing lightly from the west, the sun beaming down onto the vegetation and the humidity was low enough for the flames to lick rapidly through the parched grasses.

The burn began with a single firefighter striking the tip of a hand-held drip torch and carefully touching it down onto the edge of the prairie. That firefighter worked his way rapidly along the edge of Highway 177 and ignited the vegetation along a mile long swath. The measure of the mile had been carefully chosen in advance for a land art piece titled *Mile Long Burn* with the intent of creating a large-scale temporal land art intervention, reinvigorating the growth of prairie plants, and keeping invasive species at bay.

The power of the fire that day was magical. It swiftly moved across the surface of the earth and scorched the prairie, leaving the strong smell of smoke and an inky black surface coated in carbon. Wisps of soot rose into the air, held aloft by the thermal energy created by the power of the brightly colored flames. This powerful transformation of the vegetation from a crisp brown wave into an elemental source of carbon is a critical component of the ecology of grasslands. ‘Fires were and are started by lightning strikes, but Native American people were historically responsible for igniting fires as well. Because people have been active in central North American prairies for as long as those prairies have existed, it’s impossible to separate the two’ (Helzer 2010, p. 13).

As a result of the regimen of using fire as a means of grassland management by the indigenous peoples, the settlers crossing the tallgrass prairie in the early 1800s were greeted by a seemingly endless landscape of vibrant and colorful wildflowers and grasses, one of the most diverse ecosystems on our planet (Williams 2010). Today, only four percent of tallgrass prairie remains in the United States, with most of the prairie extant in the Flint Hills of Kansas and Oklahoma (Sampson, Knopf 1994). As the parcels of land containing tallgrass prairies has decreased, the prescribed burning must be performed on smaller and more numerous plots of land that are often surrounded by urban development or modes of transportation that require carefully planning and executing the prescribed burns to account for prevailing winds and other climatological conditions (Larson,

Hernandez, Larson, Leone Julia, Pennarola 2020). This extremely limited acreage of surviving tallgrass prairie in the United States and difficulty in conducting controlled burns makes the land art piece *Mile Long Burn* and the controlled burn that August afternoon in 2019, even more powerful as a symbolic gesture for the conservation of this fragile grassland ecology.

Interestingly, the power of fire is intrinsically tied to the origin of plants in that plants are responsible for two of the three elements essential to the existence of fire: oxygen and fuel. A heat source is also required to produce fire and has been readily available throughout the history of Earth through lightning strikes (Pausas, Keeley 2009). Fire gains its power from its vigor, force, and strength. It is mystically not composed of matter but is instead a chemical reaction called combustion that results in the production of heat, light and visible flames as an artifact of that process. The power of fire also magically converts and transforms organic material into soluble nutrients that feed the soil and allow prairie plants to prosper.

Part of that transformation was recorded as scientific data during the event that August day. While the controlled burn was occurring, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) flew a jet over *Mile Long Burn* to record and collect scientific data for energy produced by the burn as well as the chemical composition of the resulting smoke and gasses. The controlled burn that day will also contribute to the larger base of knowledge regarding the efficacy of prairie burns. Periodic fire can limit species dominance and decrease thatch accumulation, which in turn decreases competition by subordinate species and allows for greater diversity in vegetation. Burns also allow for species smaller in stature that must compete for light and other resources to prosper (Collins, Calabrese 2012).

‘Fire is a natural part of the grassland ecosystem and helps maintain its health and vigor. It warms up the soil and reduces the leaf litter that accumulates each year, allowing sunlight to penetrate. Warming the soil increases microbial activity, which releases nutrients from decaying plant material that new grasses and flowers need to grow. After a fire, blackened fields quickly revive with new green grasses and abundant, showy wildflowers. Big bluestem, purple coneflower and blazing star are among the many species that thrive with fire’ (The Nature Conservancy 2018).

While *Mile Long Burn* lies in that same trajectory of sculpture and land art from the 1960’s and 1970’s that Rosalind Krauss eloquently discussed in her seminal essay, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, the piece differs from the work of that era in that its essence lies within the processes of natural systems rather than as an object placed strategically within a larger field upon which forces are exerted. ‘The time of sculpture, usually, is limited to the perceptual experience’ (Beardsley 2000). *Mile Long Burn*, in contrast, posits a new understanding of the boundaries of land art and sculpture in that it gains its power by supporting positive environmental change through a process of action that results in an increase in biodiversity.

The power and magic of the *Mile Long Burn* that warm day in August 2019 will continue to nourish the prairie for years to come and produce a rich tapestry of vegetation in a kaleidoscope of colors and textures. The event will remain as a fond memory for the few people who were lucky enough to observe the grandeur of such a large-scale intentional landscape intervention and will contribute to the biodiversity of the dwindling tallgrass prairies.

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