

Power: Gridlocked

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Flip a switch and the lights come on. Flush a toilet and waste disappears. Swipe a card and money is transferred. Sophisticated yet often invisible grids of power sustain contemporary life throughout the farthest reaches of our world, providing electricity, gas, water, sewage, finances, materials, transportation, communication and more. Rolling blackouts, economic fallout, climate change and natural disasters test the viability of this interconnected system of dependence. "Gridlocked" aims to provide a multi-layered exposé of the structures and infrastructures of power, and make visible their origins, mechanisms, consequences and alternatives.

In 1879 Thomas Edison patented the light bulb. In the push to make this invention useful, a mass of new devices was created. In fact, a light bulb is worthless without the supportive interaction of complimentary switches, sockets, cords, wirings, cables, generators and more. Electricity became the basis for our contemporary grid. Powering sensors, alarms, bells, monitors, switches, pumps, and valves, electricity is essential to the workings of a vast and varied grid that includes water systems, gas lines, railroads, traffic signals, telephone exchanges, sewer systems, even the stock market.

The demand for power surged in the 1920s, and to keep up with it, private and federal companies built massive infrastructure, generating power in various ways. The early pioneers of power quickly understood that greater efficiency was possible through integration. Dams, mines, refineries, and plants began pumping power into an increasingly sprawling and linked network of dispersement. In a race to produce and deliver abundant and reliable power, consolidated utilities achieved economies of scale. The natural environment was carved, excavated, pumped, sourced, sucked, harnessed, and manipulated into a mega-machine operated by a few private companies. By standardizing, consolidating and regulating, a massive networked system of power was possible and gave way to what, in 1910, Congress recognized as "natural monopolies."¹

The grid may be the greatest innovation of the post-industrial world. Given its institutionally structured nature, heavy capital investments, supportive legislature, commitment to know-how and expertise, as well as its wide-spread cultural dependence, the grid is the largest of all socio-technical systems. And yet it is the grid that striates privilege; it elevates some populations, while leaving others, literally, in the dark. The grid is ubiquitous, sophisticated, omni-present, a sort of

¹ Nye, David E. *When the Lights Went Out: A History of Blackouts in America*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010.

contemporary god. Looking at power and how it works illuminates blurred boundaries between human need, luxury, commodity and hierarchy. Power is a paradox on both a technological and cultural level with deep implications for the environment, economy, and the future.

The American Southwest is a machine wilderness. Despite, or perhaps because of its low population density and vast open landscapes, the Southwest is home to some of the most sophisticated and powerful industries. Not only the “Land of Enchantment,” New Mexico is also the land of extraction, explosion, experimentation, entropy and is essential to the nation’s power grid. A closer look at New Mexico’s relationship to power provides entry into the grid and its hold on the larger world.

How many of us question the workings of the grid, upon which we are so dependant? What is power? How is it made? Where does it come from and how is it used? What is the value of power? Is there power in powerlessness? What are the natural consequences or eminent failures of a mega-power system? What are Do-It-Yourself solutions to creating your own power? Is there life after power?

“Gridlocked” features workshops, presentations, projects and field trips that explore power in its simplest manifestations as well as its complex hold on global society. “Gridlocked” is organized for ISEA2012 by PLAND: Practice Liberating Art through Necessary Dislocation. PLAND is a multi-disciplinary organization that supports the development of experimental and research-based projects through a variety of on and off-site programs. Headquartered off-the-grid in Tres Piedras, New Mexico, PLAND is a hands-on, exploratory approach to Do-It-Yourself, alternative living.