

Infinity City: Nuclear Bombs, Nuclear History and Postmodern Politics

©Susan Platt first published *Reflex Magazine*, 1994 – 1995, Seattle

After a burst of attention following the television “docudrama” simulating the aftermath a nuclear attack *The Day After*, (aired by ABC November 1982) and the disastrous accident at Chernobyl (April 25, 1986) nuclear power is currently "out of fashion" as a publicized subject for political art. But as the risk of nuclear components in the hands of terrorists continues, as do the health hazards of its production and storage, nuclear power is still an issue and a presence that we cannot afford to forget. The recent (1997)uproar in Congress and among veterans' groups over an exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the dropping of the bomb reveals, atomic bomb history and nuclear power is still a carefully edited story. Ann T. Rosenthal and Stephen Moore in their installation *Infinity City* have produced a reminder, in response to that same anniversary, of the ongoing presence and dangers of contemporary nuclear power as well as a roadmap of that edited history.

Infinity City overlays and juxtaposes cultural artifacts in many media as a metaphor for the multi-layered and ambiguous presence of atomic and nuclear power in our lives and in history. It avoids the predictable quick hit cliches-there are very few mushroom clouds and they are small, encompassed in other imagery. The emphasis is much more subtle. It asks us to use our intellect as much as our emotions.

The exhibition has several parts. The first part, "Tricity Trinity" marks a US map with the atomic triangle, the Pentagon, Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, and the Hanford Nuclear Reservation. Invoking the latter are blown-up blue line prints of tight rows of the lethal, leaking waste storage tanks at the Hanford Plutonium Plant. The waste tanks are paired with the orderly suburban houses of nearby Hanford, Washington. The second part of the show "Eternity Ignored" includes manipulated photographs of the abandoned runways at the military base at Tinian Island in the north Mariana Islands (halfway between New Guinea and Japan). An eerie antithesis to a South Sea paradise, the wide, empty runways have small signs landscaped with flowers that mark the deep pits used

only once, for loading the huge atomic bombs Little Boy and Fat Man onto B 29 planes. The site is striking, according to the artists, for its lack of historical documentation, its air of a military ghost town. That sense of the horrific transformed into the trite and the obscure is captured in their understated images.

The rest of the exhibition is titled "Target Japan." It includes paintings invoking Japanese scrolls that overlay an aerial photo of Hiroshima Ground Zero with the very young men of the crew of the B 29 and the current Peace Park at the site. The juxtaposition of these somber images with gay, civic-style banners hanging from the ceiling and tourist artifacts speaks of the commodification of even atomic and nuclear war. The tourist souvenirs mix Japanese traditional art and contemporary kitsch with brochures from public tours of Hanford and Trinity Site, New Mexico. Marking the back of the exhibition, and metaphorically casting its presence over the entire show, is a full scale black outline of Little Boy.

But for Ann Rosenthal and Stephen Moore these objects are only a point of departure. They are hoping to generate awareness, questions and even activism. On a table are books such as *Nuclear Culture*, *Missile Envy*, and *The Day the Sun Rose Twice*, as well as clippings about the current health problems from the plutonium production plant at Hanford. A news article details an exuberant Tri Cities near Hanford as the recipient of huge clean up funds that are ensuring the economic survival of the city for years to come.

The artists want to not only reach people with the subject, but give them possibilities for expressing their feelings within the exhibition itself. They provided an area for adding a work of art or a written statement. One such piece was by a Japanese student who remembered, in a stirring drawing, the shock of visiting the Hiroshima Peace Museum as a child. Residents of Eastern Washington State commented that they have relatives who are downwinders from Hanford, relatives who helped build the bomb, relatives who fought in the war. Most believe that dropping the bomb ended the war and saved lives. These responses add more layers to the cultural history of atomic and nuclear power and make the exhibition more effective than the use of a more controlled, didactic approach.

The artists have an ongoing involvement with the subject. They believe that "the atomic bomb changed our whole perception of reality and the future." In 1982 they created several performances in Los Angeles as part of a group of six artists called UNARM. The group focused on the death and horror from just one nuclear detonation and sought to "raise the public awareness of the irreparable consequences, both physical and psychological, of the folly of nuclear proliferation." One installation by UNARM created a type of wagon train nuclear scene, like a camp site, except that everyone was sitting in the middle of burned out cars and ash, wearing gas masks. The works in *Infinity City*, in contrast, do not depict nuclear horrors; they do not simply "let us pat ourselves on the back for feeling bad," as they put it. They seduce us instead with pop culture and aestheticism. Those multiple voices are part of the political stance.

Where does work like *Infinity City* position itself in relationship to more "fashionable" political topics such as gender or identity issues? Rosenthal and Moore are not functioning within a political network (they use watchdog activist groups against nuclear power only as sources of information). They are now (in contrast to their earlier work) operating without the benefit of group support or real world political activism. Yet they do align with other political artists in their subversive strategies of presentation.

Those strategies have a lot to do with why political art is emerging with renewed effectiveness today. Postmodernism enables the artist to bypass direct representation of an issue and to insert the political concern in a condemnation of the systems of culture in general. Artists are now recognizing that power in art is based on economic systems, a fact which they turn to their advantage by the avant-garde strategies of what Coco Fusco has called "reversal, recycling, and subversive montage." Much nuclear related art belongs to an earlier approach to political art, when the issue was depicted directly, not embedded in a subversive strategy.

On the other hand, does postmodern complexity paired with placement of the political work in a highly mediated gallery environment vitiate the work, place it in an elitist sphere and make it inaccessible to the average person? While most critics would say yes, dubbing this political art "gallery leftism," I would disagree. The average person does

understand the issues (that is not to say that they agree with them). Reaching the public is actually documented in *Infinity City* by inviting and incorporating responses into the exhibition.

Rosenthal and Moore communicate by undermining a simple and dominant cultural myth - that American technological brilliance solves problems, wins wars, and of course "makes everything all right." Underlying it is our knowledge that technology is actually destroying the planet both physically and psychically, in the microcosm and the macrocosm. *Infinity City* presents fragments of the invisible presence and history of the largest and most obvious psychic and physical manifestation of that destruction and of the misplaced values of our culture, atomic and nuclear energy.

Note: This article was written in 1994. The project continued for many years.