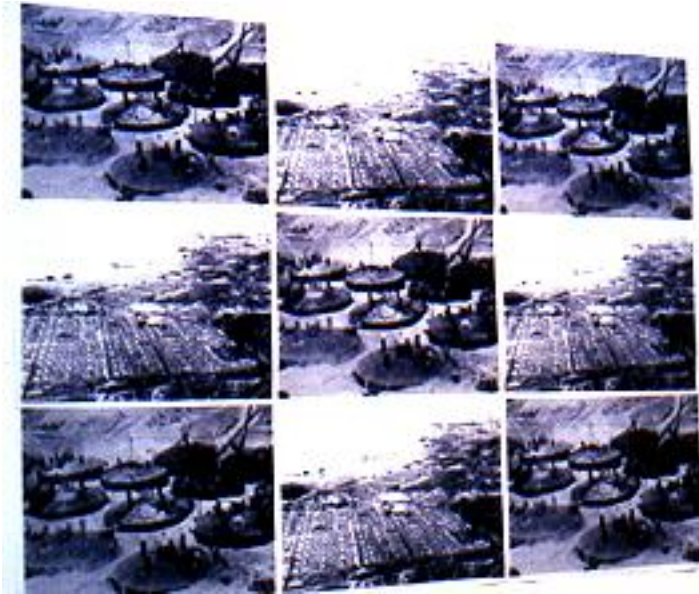


## EXHIBITION REVIEW

### **Infinity City: Nuclear Bombs, Nuclear History and Postmodern Politics**

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



©Ann Rosenthal and Stephen Moore **Tri City Trinity** Photocopies from photographs taken by S. Moore of the Atomic Bomb loading pits and US military installation on Tinian Island, Micronesia.

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. As the recent uproar in Congress and among veterans' groups over an exhibition 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 clichés—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 down winders 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.

Here is a statement by the artists from their former website that details the various stages of the project from 1982 to 2001.

INFINITY CITY is a collaborative exhibition by artists Ann T. Rosenthal and Stephen Moore that explores life in the atomic age. Since 1982, we have been involved in projects that examine the social and personal effects of living in the "shadow of the bomb". We believe the development of this weapon was a monumental event in the history of humankind, and that the stress of living in the atomic age is much underrated.

The initial part of INFINITY CITY, "ANNIVERSARY", commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the detonation of the first atomic device on July 16, 1945.

ANNIVERSARY was our response to the atomic sites that we visited, including Trinity Site in New Mexico, Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, and the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington State.

The second part of INFINITY CITY, "SHADOW", explores the legacy of atomic development following the end of World War II. SHADOW was shown at the Bellevue (WA) Art Museum in 1997 as part of the "Nuclear Cities" exhibition. INFINITY CITY: SHADOW is comprised of three sections: "No Man's Land: A Nuclear Chronology"; "Phantom State"; and the 'shadows' or profiles, of the first three nuclear weapons: Little Boy, Fat Man, and the Mark 17 hydrogen bomb.

The third part of INFINITY CITY, "2001", marks milestones of America's nuclear legacy that have anniversaries occurring in this millennial year. Each anniversary is noted with an e-mail edition, which is then posted to the 2001 section of this web site.

Stephen Moore and Ann T. Rosenthal

Pittsburgh PA 2001

STATEMENT FROM ORIGINAL (ANNIVERSARY) PROJECT:

INFINITY CITY: Anniversary commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the birth of the Atomic Bomb, a monumental project that culminated in the detonation of "The Gadget"

in the New Mexico desert early on the morning of July 16, 1945. At that moment the future of humanity was irrevocably altered. Man had released the awesome energy inherent in the very structure of matter, and channeled it into a weapon of unprecedented power. The Atomic Age had dawned, and there was no turning back.

Anniversary represents the development of the Atomic Bomb (Los Alamos/Trinity Site), its deployment (Tinian island), and the destruction it wrought (Hiroshima and Nagasaki). We have visited each of these sites, and this exhibition is our response to both the physical and emotional impact of those journeys. We do not intend to present an account of history here, but rather to capture the spirit” or ghost” that still lingers in those historic places.

The three-part foundation of INFINITY CITY: Anniversary corresponds to the three geographic areas that we visited:

- \* Tricity Trinity: Trinity Site and Los Alamos, New Mexico; Hanford Nuclear Reservation, Washington State

- \* Eternity Ignored: Rota, Saipan, and Tinian Islands, Northern Mariana Islands

- \* Target Japan: Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan

The story leading to the atomic bombing of Japan in 1945 is truly an American epic, involving tens of thousands of people and spanning the continent and an ocean. It involved hundreds of millions of dollars, secrecy and spies, and embodied the "Can do!" spirit of wartime. The event that precipitated this fervor occurred on December 2, 1942, when Enrico Fermi and his associates at the University of Chicago initiated the first controlled atomic chain reaction, at the Stagg Field Test Facility. Since that fateful date, humanity has lived in the shadow of The Bomb, and this fact has subtly influenced our perception of life and the future of the planet. We have yet to acknowledge, much less understand, the social and psychological implications of that creation: the victims of nuclear experiments; our heritage of deadly poisons that threatens untold generations to come; and ultimately, man's capability to destroy virtually all life in a matter of minutes.

The legacy of America's nuclear program is profound: begun in haste and secrecy, it continues of its own impetus, still rife with denial and disinformation. There is no effective plan for disposal of radioactive waste, and only minimal preparations exist in the event of nuclear disaster. What was once seen as an instrument of peace and a source of endless energy has become an issue of debate, an expensive problem with no apparent solution.

We acknowledge the efforts of all those who labored in the Great War effort to make the atomic bomb a reality. We encourage those still involved in nuclear development to answer the many questions before proceeding.

Ann T. Rosenthal / Stephen Moore Seattle WA 1995