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The Center for Land Use Interpretation /  
Culver City, CA  
Gregory Green / New York  
Beryl Korot and Steve Reich / New York  
Michael Light / San Francisco  
Andreas Magdanz / Aachen, Germany  
Peter Marlow / Liverpool  
Dominic McGill / London and New York  
World Power Systems / Los Angeles  
Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries / Seoul

curated by  
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Images on reverse: (1) The Center for Land Use Interpretation, *The Nevada Test Site*, 2004, interactive, computer-based map; (2) Peter Marlow/Magnum Photos, *G.B. ENGLAND, Kelvedon Hatch - Nuclear Bunker*, 1997, photograph; (3) Dominic McGill, *Model for a Deathwish Generation*, 2002, mixed media; (4) World Power Systems, *Model #47 (Trinity Diorama)*, 1998, mixed media; (5) Gregory Green, *NUC.DEV.DEV. (10 Kilotons Plutonium 239)*, 1997, mixed media, 42" x 27" x 27", edition of 5; (6) Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, *Operation NUKOREA*, 2003, Flash; (7) Andreas Magdanz, *Präsidialamt Bauwerk Ost/Ost, Plan Nr. 22*, 2002, [photograph of former government bunker in the Ahr Valley, Germany]; (8) Beryl Korot from *Bikini, Act 2 of Three Tales*, a video opera by Beryl Korot and Steve Reich, 2002; (9) Michael Light, *100 SUNS: 064 DOG*, 2003, pigment print on aluminum, 20" x 24", edition 3/5

# BUILD- ING THE UN- THINK- ABLE

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## CONSTRUCTING DESTRUCTION

This exhibition directs our attention to the perceptual space revealed, transformed, and constructed by the twentieth century's most emblematic technology. As *deus ex machina*, the atomic bomb transformed the global political landscape, in turn altering our perceptions of power, scale, and time. It inaugurated a space in which destruction is domesticated, where the microscopic fissure of atoms eliminates an entire city, and where networks that once promised apocalypse can now provide the vital infrastructure to sustain contemporary society. Engaging this new terrain, the works in this exhibition shift attention from the bomb's destructive force to its ability to transform.

"The H-bomb, that's the ultimate sculpture."

— Michael Heizer in Bertram Gabriel, "Works of Earth," *Horizon Magazine*, 1982

July 16, 1945 was marked by the first atomic bomb test, in the *Jornada del Muerte* ("Journey of Death"), a desert in New Mexico. Twelve years ago this fall, the United States concluded the last of these experiments. In the interim years, the US alone detonated over 1,054 nuclear bombs. They included the two officially used in combat, against Hiroshima (15 kilotons) on August 6, 1945 and Nagasaki (21 kilotons), three days later. These were — compared to the detonations on American soil — early-model weapons. Considered tests, the Japanese bombs accompanied a vast urban-planning and photographic-reconnaissance project. The goal: to learn what would happen if such an attack were made on Western cities.

In many ways, the atomic bomb was less the result of a war between ideologies in the East and West than a conflict between the city and the landscape, between the center and its periphery. A century earlier, technology (from the rifle to the surveyor's cartography) had laid claim to the natural and indigenous West. The atomic bomb was the technology that ultimately conquered the desert's cataleptic landscape. While Hiroshima and Nagasaki were made into wastelands, the desert — from the American West to the Algerian Sahara (in which the French conducted their own colonial-era atomic tests) — embodied this desire for an absence of inhabitation.

In the 1960s, a handful of New York artists reacted against the commercial art world — and more importantly, against the very space of the gallery. Many of the Earthworks artists

found themselves drawn to the voids of the West, their works referencing the military's measures against the landscape. Inextricable from the geography of the atomic bomb, Land artists set up camp around the negative spaces of the Western testing grounds. The desert represented an inversion of urban life. As such, it proposed new and sometimes radical practices of inhabitation, material usage, ecologies, and scale. Nuclear tests and art alike involved a paradox of human intervention against the screen of long-term and often-times imperceptible consequences.

"A whole city will be raised from the earth and fall back in ashes..." — Marguerite Duras, screenplay for the film *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959)

Though born at the fringes of civilization, the bomb's primary target was the city and its everyday practices. While Tokyo and other major Japanese cities existed in a state of emergency following a devastating aerial campaign of fire raids, life in Hiroshima was routinely domestic, nearly untouched by the war. In North America, the geography of the bomb would significantly impact post-war spatial logic. Supporting a trend towards decentralization of urban infrastructure, the nuclear events in Japan anticipated a similar strike on American cities.

A vast, spatialized undertaking, the Manhattan Project and its vestiges fostered the atomization brought by Postmodern urbanism. The bomb's creation was, in a bizarre twist, America's most important public-works project. Alongside the wartime networks of the Strategic Air Command and the Air Defense Command came Eisenhower's 1956 National Highway Defense Act, creating America's interstate-highway system. Decentralization privileged the growth of suburbia and satellite town planning, and created a sophisticated and dispersed communications network. Post-bomb urbanism and spatial production echoed the bomb's reliance upon anti-hierarchical organization.

### Sites of Exception

Many of the works in this exhibition explore the psychology of space, revealing hidden places and the power that existed within them. These are the visually peripheral sites of extraordinary events, forgotten spaces in which civilization's future was determined. While the bomb remains a threat to this day, these architectures have

become our modern-day ruins. Their demise came not as the result of a singular event like those that destroyed Hiroshima or Nagasaki, but the more unwieldy and invisible forces of time and obsolescence.

Organizations like the Society for Industrial Archaeology and the Bureau of Atomic Tourism ([www.atomictourist.com](http://www.atomictourist.com)), and recent books like Tom Vanderbilt's *Survival City* (2002) and photographer Richard Ross' *Waiting for the End of the World* (2004), have refigured the Classical ruins of the Romantics into Modernity's post-war leftovers. Against this Romanticist classicism towers the Sublime, of which the atomic bomb may be its greatest example: at once immeasurable, limitless, extreme.

Andreas Magdanz and Peter Marlow's photographic mementos of that era's monumental architecture are the contemporary incarnation of the Grand Tour. Proxy spaces in which strategists drafted out doomsday scenarios on sheets of Plexiglas and television monitors, the bunkers they photograph are filled with kitschy, abstracted references to the "outside world." These underground cities, eulogized by journals like the short-lived *Underground Space* (1976–85), revealed a new architectural idealism, in which both dystopia and utopia were implored into one. Dealing in representations and abstractions, nuclear bunkers manipulated built space that was at once Foucauldian and Piranesian.

These architectures of the ground created visual ephemera unlike any other. Against the urban phenomenon of fireworks, translating the multitude of the city into the night sky, the atomic flash and its resulting mushroom cloud celebrated the desert's lack of inhabitation. In Dominic McGill's massive diorama, a South Pacific atoll sits within the hollowed-out core of an early-model atomic bomb, literally poised to blow the island sky-high. The hierarchy of scale between cause and effect is inverted or, as it might be, corrected. The very material and subject of destruction is the land itself.

#### Nodes and Hubs

In 1948, the Douglas Aircraft Company in Santa Monica, California, spun off the RAND (Research and Development) Corporation to provide the military-industrial complex with "Objective Analysis, Effective Solutions." Founded in 1994,

a few miles away in Culver City, The Center for Land Use Interpretation exists somewhere between this model of independent research think-tank and artistic interventionists, "dedicated to the increase and diffusion of information about how the nation's lands are apportioned, utilized, and perceived." The Center's publications appear sterilized of judgment, cloaked in officiality, and institutionally objective. Culled from a large online database of human interventions on the land, the Center's interactive guide to the Nevada Test Site is a virtual tour, pointing out speculative features for those unlikely visitors to a tightly-guarded, nearly inaccessible terrain. Their concern is the perception of a place, which is often more important than its true history.

The Internet itself was an accidental result of the nuclear-era decision to construct a network (the *Arpanet*) for communication, control, and command. In the online work of the Seoul-based collective Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries, a doomsday narrative calmly scrolls along the screen in a single font, keeping time with a soundtrack of jazzy riffs. This apocalyptic story of urbicide tells of Seoul's destruction by its northern neighbor Pyongyang, and of nuclear bombs pointlessly lobbed at Los Angeles. Governed by the logic of geographic coordinates, the tale is a blend of likelihood and hyperbole. It is a war made by nodes and hubs of information in which the digital has foreshadowed what might be real.

#### Radical Archivists

In *The Savage Mind* (1962), Claude Lévi-Strauss described the *bricoleur*, who reassembles "the residues of previous construction and destruction." For World Power Systems, which builds sonic landscapes into old scientific apparatuses, *bricolage* is both a conceptual operation and an artistic trope. Obsolete devices once used for gauging radiation and flux are reinvented as topographic prosthetics for measuring the new landscape and its changing meaning.

The *bricoleur* is also at hard work in the archive. Like the atomic blast-proof shelter in which the Mormon church recently assembled a vast database of genealogical bio-data on microfiche, the Atomic Archive preserves data rather than people, documentation of the past and present, rather than agency over the future. Culled from the archive, digitized, and altered, video artist Beryl Korot's use of computer technology places the footage in her video opera *Three Tales* (2002), somewhere between historic and contemporary. The

footage of atomic tests on which she draws is a curious twist of the Deboridian "spectacle": existing only to be recorded and measured by electronic media, but purposely hidden from the public eye. At the same time, composer and collaborator Steve Reich loops and layers sounds mined from the archives, investigating chance in the steady countdown of archaic machines and metronomes.

*100 Suns* (2003), Mike Light's book of archival nuclear-test images, is geared towards the coffee-table market. Like the Flemish *vanitas* still-life — a domestic composition intended for the living room, rendering with photographic realism the lacy transparency of bug-eaten leaves — Light's re-presentation of archival images fills the function of a modern *momento mori*. It is a reminder of the proximity and inevitability of death, a warning against hubris. At the same time, the uniformity of atomic light and the generic code names of the blasts (Ivy, Ranger, Teapot, etc.) seek to eliminate any sense of place, the tests themselves radically reshaping the land.

#### Good Bombs, Evil Nations

During the Cold War the world had five declared nuclear nations. Today, there are more than 22,000 nuclear warheads stockpiled around the world. With so many bombs, the issue is no longer proliferation, but distribution. In this sense, the bomb's decentralization and its network of networks — rather than the weapon's individual destructive force — has created the lasting danger. Non-state actors no longer need the state apparatus once required to kill on a massive scale. Over the past year a complex nuclear geography has revealed the "Islam Bomb" in Pakistan, Libya and Iran. North Korea has a couple of its own. Sundry other characters do as well, among them both governments and individuals. Even artist Gregory Green has his own home-made nuclear bombs, constructed out of materials from children's toys and drug shops, using information available on the Internet. Though inert, his works radically alter the space of the gallery. They, like many of the works in this exhibition, place us face-to-face with a technology that has spent a decade hidden behind seductive mushroom-cloud imagery, post-war consumer clichés, *Dr. Strangelove* tragedy, and daily color-coded alerts.

Christian Stayer  
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