

# apexart

## BUILDING THE UNTHINKABLE

If the atomic bomb threatens total destruction, the work in *Building the Unthinkable* then shifts attention to its productive element. This exhibition examines contemporary artistic and architectural production responding to an unlikely inspiration. Like Paul Virilio's 1975 *Bunker Archaeology* exhibition, *Building the Unthinkable* employs contemporary works to think about history's bearing on the present. The bomb has defined a space that is both global and inhabitable. Collectively, the works in exhibition recognize the bomb as Kant's sublime: larger and more beautiful than possibly conceivable. While exhibition brings together first-hand photographic and filmic observation, installations, and hypothetical plans, the approach is analytic rather than activist, more geographic than aesthetic. While the bomb suggests opposition without true resolution, this exhibition mirrors that structure with an organizational triad.

The first section traces the military-industrial complex's "techno-aesthetic." The atomic project as organization on an unprecedented scale—human, technological, and construction—created a network of networks that spatialized destruction. This logistic of information informs the work of such collectives as The Center for Land Use Interpretation (Los Angeles). Their installation of touch-screen computers maps the complex geographic network of sites created and transformed in response to nuclear technology. Similarly, the remnants of the military-construction complex have spawned a recent investigation of industrial archaeology. In photographs of the Dienstelle Marienthal by Andreas Magdanz (Aachen), for instance, rooms of a sprawling bomb shelter deep under the Ahr Valley are ironically decorated with mushroom-cloud table lamps and hot pink settees. In a similar vein, a film installation by Jane and Louise Wilson (UK), *Gamma*, treats the spaces of the abandoned silos and control centre at Greenham Common Airbase as relevant to today's often-declared "time of uncertainty." While the bomb affected the world in an urban and international extent, the result was often human in scale. Re-presented through digital media, archival photographs compiled by Michael Light (San Francisco) depict the infrastructure of atomic bomb tests in the American West: observation platforms, lookout posts, and demonstration structures. An artist such as Gregory Green (New York), appropriates scientific information in an altogether different way. The personal atomic bomb Green constructs question the relationship of this technology to the architectural and social space of the gallery.

The second part of the exhibition locates the bomb's domestic place: an event that is both extraordinary and suburban. From fallout shelters to hairstyles, the bomb is famously domestic. In works such as the video-documentary opera, *Three Tales* (2002), by Steve Reich and Beryl Korot (New York), artists have examined the more subtle tensions between proliferation and habitation. In "Bikini," the atoll's native islanders pack their paltry belongings and wave goodbye to their homes before hydrogen bomb tests. Adaptations of atomic relics and the *detournement* of military and residential typologies have provided an alternative commentary on destruction. Within a hangar originally used to assemble the Enola Gay's payload, the Simparch collective (Utah) has designed and built a self-contained, nuclear living unit.

The final section of the exhibition examines the bomb's relation to scale disparities: the impact of microscopic fission on mass destruction. At once material and immaterial, the bomb is both visual yet invisibly effective. This discrepancy of scale and perception influences the work of artists like Nancy Rubins (Los Angeles), whose sculptures freeze the impact of hypothetical explosions. Her eerie installations express the speed and synthetic beauty of destruction. The massive, archaic memorial to the microscopic uranium element proposed by James Acord (Richmond, WA) deals with time and scale in an altogether different way. His "nuclear Stonehenge," intended for heavily contaminated Hanford Nuclear Reactor in Washington, has led him into a comic engagement with the US Department of Energy. In order to create the monument, Acord has fashioned himself a nuclear scientist: he is the only private individual in the world licensed to own and handle radioactive materials.

In conclusion, the project seeks not a survey of "atomic art," nor does it attempt to make a political statement concerning today's use of the bomb as a diplomatic *dues ex machina*. Rather, the exhibition examines the subtle ways in which this ultimate power has, over time, affected spatial production. It seeks to create a productive debate among generations for which the bomb was not a threat, but an everyday object.