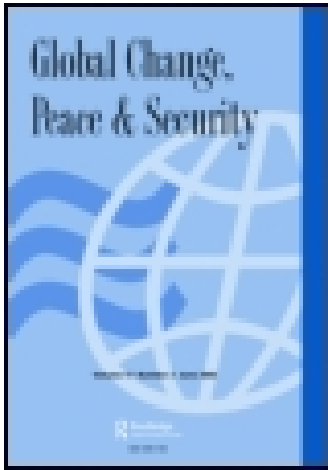


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COMMUNICATION

Atomic amnesia: photographs and nuclear memory

Jessie Boylan*

Atomic Photographers Guild

This paper addresses the ways in which photography can illuminate that which is unfathomable, such as nuclear catastrophe. It discusses how chronicling the nuclear era through art can allow us to break free of our atomic amnesia and urge us to imagine possible alternative futures free of nuclear disaster. It examines the ways in which members of the Atomic Photographers Guild have sharply focused on all aspects of the nuclear age and its fallout.

Keywords: Atomic Photographers Guild; nuclear testing; photography; art; Maralinga; Nevada

Memory is very important to our capacity to imagine the future ... If you suffer from Amnesia, it makes it very difficult for you to not only inhabit your past, [...] but it becomes equally difficult to imagine the future in any detail.

– Shona Illingworth¹

It appears that our species is suffering from a kind of ‘atomic amnesia’, and that we have all but forgotten about the catastrophic effects of nuclear weapons. Wilfred Burchett, the first Western journalist who went to Hiroshima just 30 days after the dropping of the atom bomb, reported in the London *Daily Express*: ‘[i]n this first testing ground of the atomic bomb, I have seen the most terrible and frightening desolation in four years of war ... The damage is far greater than photographs can show’.²

While the stockpile of global nuclear arsenal has significantly decreased over the years, there are still around 16,000 in the world, controlled by just nine countries, with 1,800 on high-alert.³ Burchett’s famous exclamation: ‘I write this as a warning to the world’,⁴ seems to have fallen on deaf ears, and we would rather shut our eyes and close our ears and pretend that *this could never happen again*.

Dr Tilman Ruff from the International Physicians for Prevention of Nuclear War stated that:

Just 100 Hiroshima-sized nuclear bombs, less than one per cent of the global nuclear arsenal, would generate more than five million tons of soot and smoke if targeted at cities. In addition to local devastation and widespread radioactive contamination, the climate impact would be catastrophic.⁵

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1 Shona Illingworth, interviewed by Michael Williams, *Books and Arts Daily*, ABC, September 30, 2014.

2 Wilfred Burchett, ‘The Atomic Plague’, *London Daily Express*, September 5, 1945, in ‘Passport’ by Wilfred Burchett (Sydney: Thomas Nelson, 1969), 120.

3 International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, ‘Nuclear Arsenals, The Facts’, International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, <http://www.icanw.org/the-facts/nuclear-arsenals/> (accessed September 25, 2014).

4 Burchett, ‘The Atomic Plague’, 120.

5 Tilman Ruff, ‘Stumbling in the Dark, Reaching for the Light’, *Right Now*, July 25, 2013, <http://rightnow.org.au/writing-cat/article/stumbling-in-the-dark-reaching-for-the-light/> (accessed March 20, 2015).

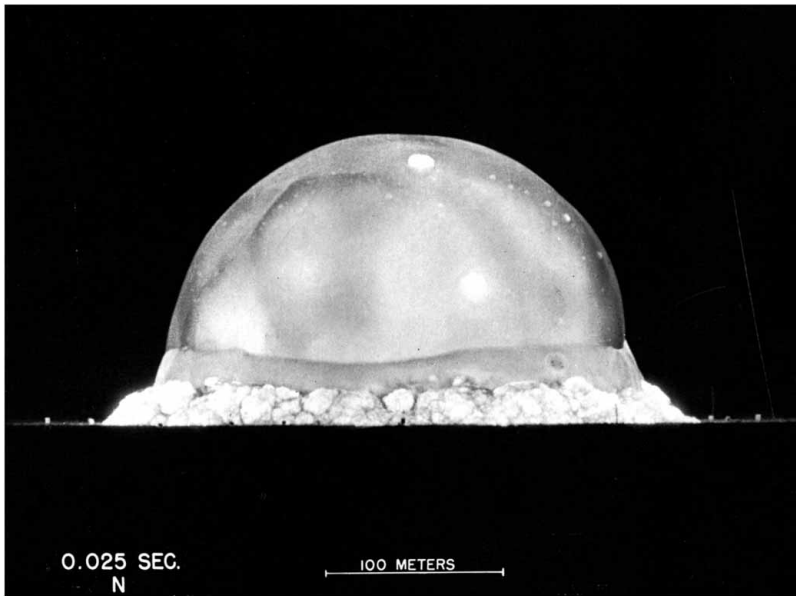


Figure 1. Berlyn Brixner, 'Trinity Blast, Nevada, 1945'.

The threat of nuclear weapons may be our greatest existential challenge of all time. In this article, I ask the question: how can photographs portray something as frightening and terrifying as the existence and effects of nuclear weapons? What are art's limitations and how can it effect change?

Picturing the bomb

From the first atomic bomb test in Alamogordo, New Mexico, in 1945, photographs have been used to represent the unfathomable: the hidden workings of nuclear weapons, uranium mining and nuclear waste.

Berlyn Brixner, who was hired by the Los Alamos National Laboratory,⁶ took tens of thousands of photographs of the *Trinity* blast (Figure 1), images that still circulate the globe as a 'representation' of a nuclear blast. Brixner had 50 cameras (high-speed cameras, regular cameras and moving picture cameras) that he used to photograph the subject from nearly 10 kilometers away (Figure 2).⁷

When the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki images were made.

Footage of 'Little Boy' being released from Enola Gay was taken by the US Army, as was the picture of the atomic mushroom cloud covering the horizon. They were aboard the aircraft that was named the *Necessary Evil*.⁸

During the cold war photographers all over the world were hired to photograph nuclear testing programs, most of whose names have long been forgotten.

But what do these images of the bomb *do* to help us understand the true effects of such an extreme destructive force? An image of a bomb, or an exploding bomb, may shock us, or

6 'Berlyn Brixner's Interview, on 'Voices of the Manhattan Project', February 22, 1992, <http://manhattanprojectvoices.org/oral-histories/berlyn-brixners-interview> (accessed April 17, 2015).

7 'Atom Blast Films Taken 15 Million to the Second', *New York Times*, May 24, 1954, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=980DEFDB153AE53BBC4C51DFB366838F649EDE> (accessed April 17, 2015).

8 Susan Evans et al., 'A Necessary Evil. A Drama about the Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb on Japan', Teaching American History Project (Portland: Portland State University, 2010).

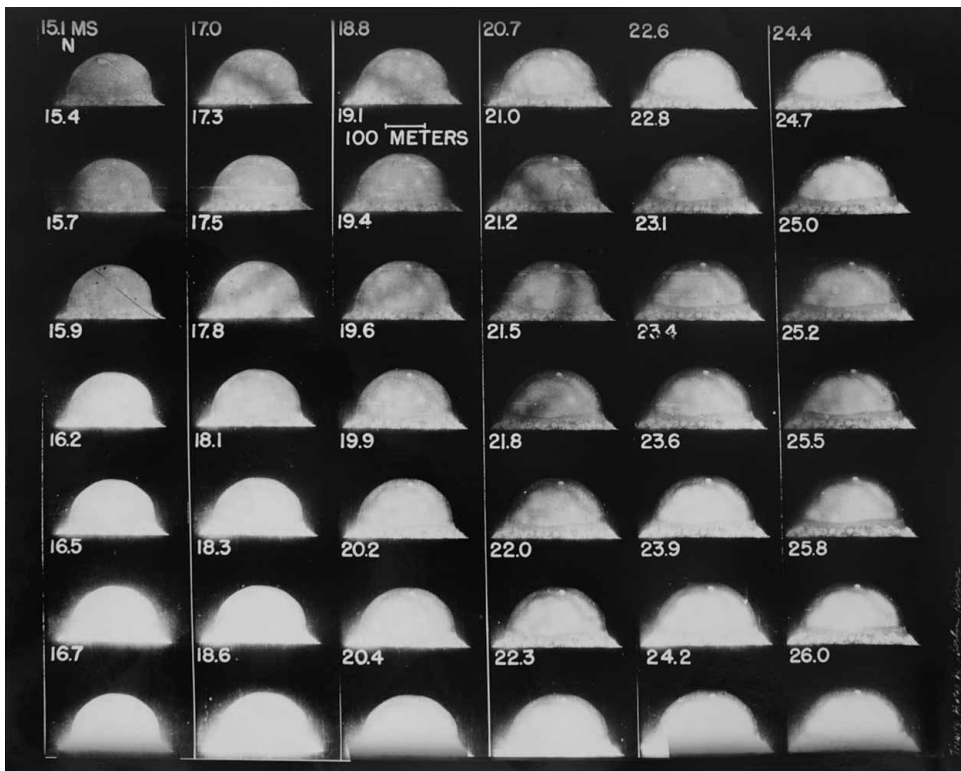


Figure 2. Berlyn Brixner, 'Trinity Blast Sequence, Nevada, 1945'.

allow us a visual reference point when thinking about the subject, but do they still leave us unknowing, unfeeling and unaware of what this man-made object has done and can do to our bodies and our minds, our water, our food, our cities, towns and environment, to animals, to plants, to the ecosystem, and to the future?

From the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 9 August 1945, photographers from all around the world have made it their mission to put a face on 'this culturally invisible, damnably everlasting bomb of ours: to make the invisible visible',⁹ says Robert Del Tredici, founder of the Atomic Photographers Guild (APG).

Yoshito Matsushige, a Japanese photojournalist, was the first to do this. On the day of the Hiroshima bombing, Matsushige was just 2.7 km from the hypocenter of the blast. He ventured out with his camera to photograph what are the only surviving images of the immediate effects on people and the city. He had only two rolls of film with him but could manage to take only five photographs that fateful day (Figures 3–5).¹⁰

These images allow us to see the human effect of nuclear war, destruction and devastation experienced by the people of Hiroshima that day and, unknowingly, ever since.

Matsushige and Brixner both became members of the APG in the 1980s, when Del Tredici discovered that their work was linked. Coordinating atomic image-makers into an organized network, Del Tredici made it his mission to seek out others who were also focusing on nuclear issues through photography elsewhere in the world.

9 Robert Del Tredici, 'Behind the Atom Curtain; Life and Death in the Nuclear Age', exhibition catalogue, 14 March – 15 April, FORM gallery, Midland Atelier, Perth, Western Australia, 2012.

10 Robert Del Tredici, email correspondence with the author, April 26, 2015.



Figure 3. Yoshito Matsushige, 'Students at the Miuki-Bashi Bridge (2.2 km. from the hypocenter of the explosion), Hiroshima, Japan, August 6th 1945'.

The APG, founded in 1987, is made up of 27 (and growing) photographers worldwide who aim to render visible all aspects of the nuclear age. Del Tredici says:

The Guild has built up an archive of images of nuclear weapons pioneers, workers, victims and activists, as well as nuclear-impacted landscapes, buildings and machines. We aim to show things that have not been seen before. We want to get people to realize that nuclear weapons are not only symbols, though they are almost exclusively discussed as if they were symbols (Figure 6).¹¹

For the most recent APG exhibition, *Behind the Atom Curtain: Life and Death in the Nuclear Age*, Harris Fogel and Del Tredici wrote: 'The Guild releases its images in books, on gallery walls, and over the web so others can piece together the fragments of what may well prove to be our darkest, most enduring legacy (Figure 10).'¹²

In the 1980s, Peter Goin, fine art photographer and member of the APG, had been told by the Department of Energy that it was impossible to gain access to the Nevada test site in order to

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Harris Fogel and Robert Del Tredici, 'Behind the Atom Curtain, Life and Death in the Nuclear Age', exhibition catalogue, September 23 – October 21, Sol Mednick Gallery, University of the Arts, Philadelphia.



Figure 4. Yoshito Matsushige, Closeup: 'Students at the Miuki-Bashi Bridge, Hiroshima, Japan, August 6th, 1945'.

photograph it. Partly this was due to anti-nuclear protestors trying to enter the site to disrupt the tests, as well as the 'veil of secrecy [that] was draped over the site'.¹³

With an interest in archaeology and land formation, Goin's concentration lay in the effects of nuclear testing on the landscape.¹⁴ What he discovered – once he was finally granted permission to enter the restricted site – were landscapes of fear and physical threat that provoked a similar response to crossing a border into another country.¹⁵ 'Almost instantly, we no longer possess the landscape, and we identify ourselves as alien',¹⁶ he says (Figure 7).

Minnesota-based photographic artist and APG member Paul Shambroom spent over 10 years gaining access to US high-security military sites, missile command centers, Trident submarines and nuclear weapons storage facilities in order to photograph these places and urge us to look anew at structures and regimes of power, and ideas of national security (Figures 8–9).¹⁷

13 Peter Goin, prologue to *Nuclear Landscapes: Creating the North American Landscape* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 3.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'Paul Shambroom, University Art Museum at California State University, Long Beach', review, *ArtForum* 47, no. 10 (2009): 330.



Figure 5. Yoshito Matsushige, 'The view from Matsushige's living room window. Hiroshima, Japan, August 6th, 1945'.

For Shambroom, the interest in focusing on issues of power, nuclear weapons and the military industrial complex came from being a child when, in the 1950s and 1960s, the 'Duck and Cover' drills were being carried out in classrooms across America. He remembers dreaming and believing in an apocalyptic scenario as being a real possibility. In the introduction to his book *Nuclear Weapons: Face to Face with the Bomb* (2003), Shambroom writes:

I remember a vivid dream from around the same time. It was nighttime, there was an orange glow in the sky and things were burning everywhere. People were quietly wandering in a daze around our suburban neighborhood, although no one appeared to be dead or injured. No one spoke, but I and everyone else knew that 'this was it' and that we would never see the light of morning.¹⁸

18 Paul Shambroom, introduction to *Nuclear Weapons: Face to Face with the Bomb* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), xi.



Figure 6. Robert Del Tredici, 'The Amount of Plutonium in the Nagasaki Bomb, Kansas City, Missouri, 22 September 1983'. Copyright of the artist.

Shambroom believes that 'everyone alive since 1945 has carried a profound awareness of nuclear weapons someplace inside them. We live with the knowledge that we have the means to eradicate our own species'.¹⁹

Although there is a large gap between the concept of a nuclear weapon and the true understanding of it, artists, like members of the APG, have worked to close it. In an interview I conducted with Del Tredici recently, he stated that:

When I was in the early stages of my work *In the Fields of the Bomb*, I knew that I could not find the human meaning of the bomb from the country that was mass-producing them. I decided I had to go to Hiroshima where I met with Hibakusha (a term used for atomic bomb survivors) who closed that gap between reality and idea of the bomb. I met with many bomb survivors and they consistently told me, each in their own way, these three things: 1) If you weren't there when the A-bomb exploded overhead, you can have no idea what it was like. 2) This can never again happen to anyone for any reason. 3) Nuclear weapons and human beings cannot coexist.²⁰

When Colorado-based photographer Carole Gallagher began her research for the work *American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War*²¹— her monograph on the effects of nuclear testing in Nevada on the 'downwinders' of Utah — she discovered some recently declassified 1950s documents from the Atomic Energy Commission, which described 'the people living downwind of the Nevada Test Site during the atmospheric atomic testing era as a low-use segment of the population'.²²

Gallagher then moved to Utah, where she lived for 10 years to make the work contained in *American Ground Zero*, which focused on the civilians, soldiers and the workers who were affected by radiation from the 1,054 nuclear detonations that happened between 1951 and 1992 (Figures 11–13).²³

Radiation is invisible, says Gallagher, but documentary photography can make the invisible visible.²⁴

19 Ibid.

20 Robert Del Tredici, email message to author, August 26, 2014.

21 Carole Gallagher, *American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993.

22 Carole Gallagher, 'Nuclear Photography: Making the Invisible Visible', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 69, no. 6 (2013): 43.

23 Matt Wray, 'Blast from the Past: Preserving and Interpreting the Atomic Age', *American Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (June 2006): 468.

24 Gallagher, 'Nuclear Photography', 43.

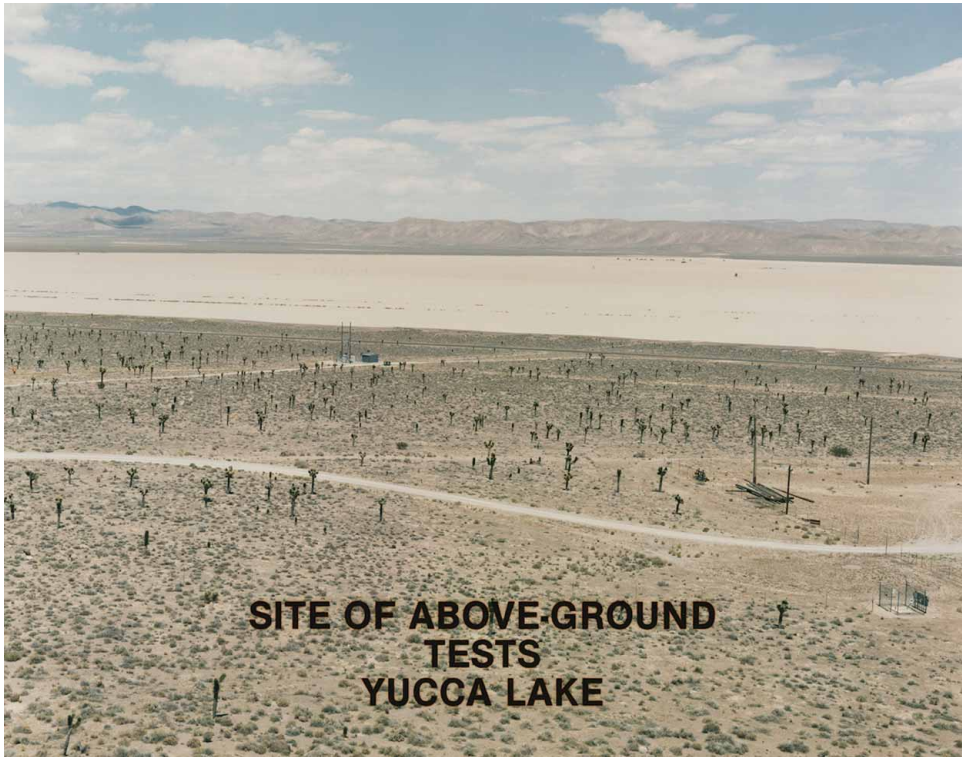


Figure 7. Peter Goin, 'Site of Above-Ground Tests, Yucca Lake, Nevada, 1986', dye coupler print. Copyright of the artist.



Figure 8. B83 1-megaton nuclear gravity bombs in Weapons Storage Area, Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, 1995, Color coupler print, 48x61 inches. Copyright of the artist.



Figure 9. Paul Shambroom, Peacekeeper missile W87/Mk-21 Reentry Vehicles (warheads) in storage, F.E. Warren Air Force Base, Cheyenne, Wyoming, 1992, Pigmented inkjet on paper, 24×30 inches. Copyright of the artist.

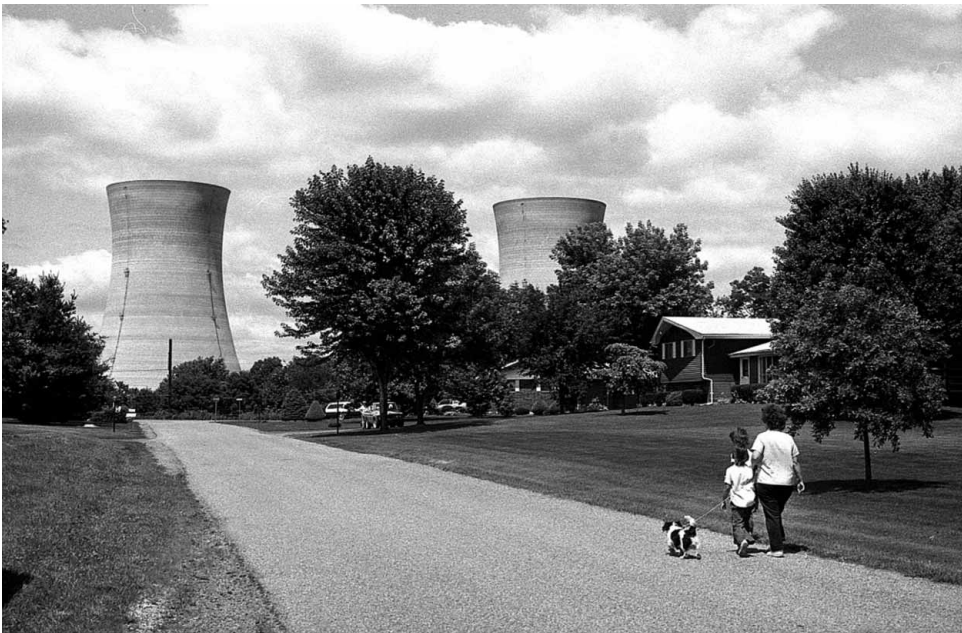


Figure 10. Robert Del Tredici, 'The Yellow Brick Road' from the book *The People of Three Mile Island, 1979*. (Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 1980). Copyright of the artist.

It is always hard to quantify and measure what impact art can have on policy and political decisions (or on anything for that matter); however, the impact it has on individuals can sometimes be known.

In the 1990s, at the Iowa State University of Science and Technology at Ames, Gallagher shared a panel with Theodore Taylor, a scientist who played a critical role in the Manhattan



Figure 11. Carole Gallagher, 'Ken Case, North Las Vegas, Nevada, January 1984'. From *American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War, 1993–2009*. Copyright of the artist.



Figure 12. Carole Gallagher, 'Della Truman at Rest, mother of Preston Jay Truman, 1987, from *American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War, 1993–2009*'. Copyright of the artist.

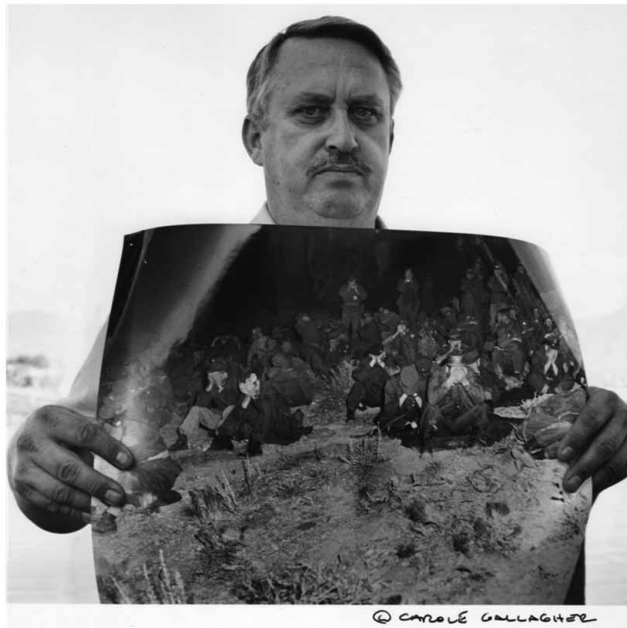


Figure 13. Carole Gallagher, 'Robert Carter, Atomic Veteran, Taylorsville, Utah, 1988', from *American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War, 1993–2009*. Copyright of the artist.

Project, and whose designs were turned into weapons used in some of the Nevada tests. Once the panel was over, Gallagher was able to show Taylor her book and as he became increasingly upset, she asked him 'In all your years in the nuclear weapons industry, did you ever think about the people living downwind of the test site, where your bombs were set off, and what it might be doing to their health and their lives?' 'Suddenly he dropped to his knees, put his head in [her] lap, and said, "I never gave it a thought". And he wept.'²⁵

Out-of-sight, out-of-mind

What led me to begin my journey in nuclear catastrophe? In 2005 I went on my first Radioactive Exposure Tour, an anti-nuclear educational tour run by Friends of the Earth (FoE). I was 19 years old.

Since the 1980s, FoE has taken hundreds of concerned people from all over Australia into the South Australian outback to learn about the impacts of the nuclear industry on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and on the environment; from the British nuclear tests in South and Western Australia in the 1950s and 1960s to the ongoing displacement and degradation of land and the environment because of uranium mining across the country, as well as the links to nuclear reactors and nuclear proliferation overseas (Figure 14).

This journey was my introduction to more than just history in Australia. In retrospect, I came of age into the anti-nuclear movement's arms, almost everything I did after this first trip was with them, it is also through this movement that I have made most of my longest lasting friendships and allies.

Like the downwinders of Utah, who had been described as 'low-use', this mentality plays into a very common idea that people living out-of-sight and out-of-mind are not worthy of keeping safe, or of even being informed of potential impacts related to their own health and environment.

25 Ibid., 44.



Figure 14. Jessie Boylan, 'Tailings, Olympic Dam Uranium Mine, South Australia, 2005'. Copyright of the artist.

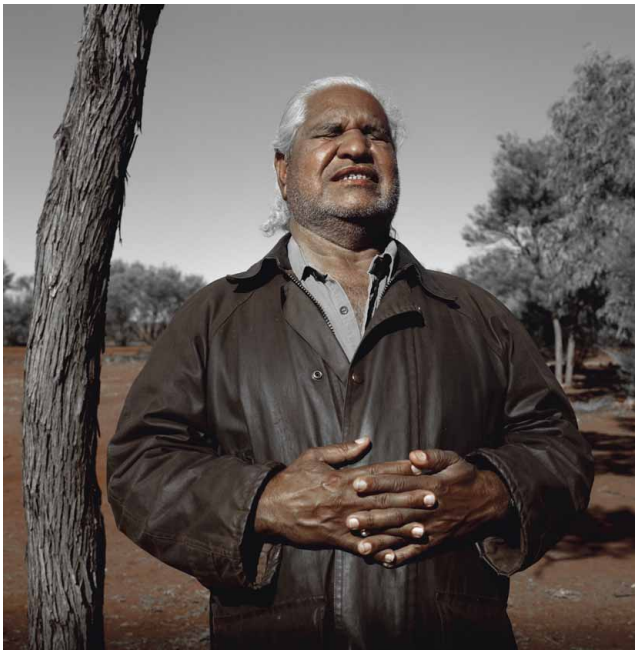


Figure 15. Jessie Boylan, 'Yami Lester, Walatinna Station, South Australia, 2006'. Copyright of the artist.

This is a concept which led me to my first work, *Inhabited*, made in 2006, as a response to the then Howard Government's decision to make Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory the site for a national radioactive waste dump.

I created life-sized portraits of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people affected by the nuclear industry in Australia from the 1950s to today (Figures 15 and 16). I also included an audio component that was attached to the wall next to the images so that viewers could listen to each person's story as they told it. My aim in this work was to raise awareness around issues of nuclear harm and prompt deeper thought into the ongoing legacy of the nuclear age in Australia.



Figure 16. Jessie Boylan, 'Kevin Buzzacott, Alberrie Creek Station, South Australia, 2006'. Copyright of the artist.



Figure 17. Jessie Boylan, Still from *Maralinga Pieces*, 12 minute video, 2012. Copyright of the artist.

There were limitations to this work – it was simplistic, showing us only what has been done and not what can be done, as well as being made by a young white woman with a limited world view, and the message was decided beforehand. As David Levi Strauss said in *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics*, 'To be compelling there must be tension in the work: if everything has to be decided beforehand there will be no tension and no compulsion to the work ...'.²⁶ Regardless of these limitations, this work has been used as an educational tool and resource for the anti-nuclear movement across Australia since it was first toured to Alice

26 David Levi-Strauss, 'The Documentary Debate: Aesthetic or Anaesthetic', in *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (New York: Aperture, 2003), 10.



Figure 18. Jessie Boylan, 'Tennis Court, Maralinga, South Australia, 2011'. Copyright of the artist.



Figure 19. Jessie Boylan, 'Swimming Pool / Pit #68U, Maralinga Village, South Australia, 2011'. Copyright of the artist.

Springs in 2007. Since then it has been moving across the country in urban, rural and remote displays as well as online and re-published in different forms.²⁷

Inhabited aimed to work on a different level than most environmental and social justice campaigning (e.g. public protest, petitions), it allows people to listen, look and learn in their own time, to be prompted to look deeper into the issue without being pressured by protesters on the street.

27 Between 2006 and 2013 *Inhabited* toured to: Gasworks Arts Park, Albert Park, Victoria (December 2006), Sustainable Living Festival Melbourne (February 2007), Dudley House Gallery, Bendigo, Victoria (March 2007), Watch This Space Gallery, Alice Springs 'Shifting Ground' Festival, Northern Territory (May 2007), Casuarina Library, Darwin, NT (June 2007), Darwin Fringe Festival, NT (July 2007), Synergy Gallery, Northcote, Victoria (2008), Higher Ground, Adelaide (March 2008), Fringe Festival, South Australia, Kalgoorlie Public exhibition, NAIDOC week, Western Australia (October 2009), Leonora Public Exhibition, Western Australia (September 2012), Riverton Library, Riverton, Western Australia (January 2013), Mayors For Peace Conference, Fremantle, WA (2014).



Figure 20. Jessie Boylan, 'Woomera Camp, South Australia, 2014'. Copyright of the artist.



Figure 21. Jessie Boylan, 'Camp, William Creek, South Australia, 2012'. Copyright of the artist.

But is this enough? As Levi-Strauss asks, 'How can the viewer of an image have more choice than acceptance or rejection of the message, but to become involved in a more complex response?'²⁸

From *Inhabited* I continued my focus on nuclear issues, mainly on documenting the movement, our protests, meetings and campsites. In 2011 I applied for permission to enter the Maralinga–Tjarutja lands in South Australia, on which the British nuclear tests had been conducted between 1956 and 1963. Much of the land had been given back to the Traditional Owners in 2009 (with the remainder being handed back in November 2014), and it is through the Maralinga–Tjarutja Council that one has to apply to gain access. Initially, my application was rejected

28 Levi-Strauss, 'The Documentary Debate', 10.



Figure 22. Jessie Boylan, 'Lizard's Revenge Camp, Roxby Downs South Australia, 2012'. Copyright of the artist.

due to sensitivity around media and photography issues, but later that year I was invited to accompany nuclear veteran Avon Hudson for a Remembrance Day event there.

The reason Australia became Britain's testing ground was that, after the end of World War II, Britain was losing power and was eager to become part of the global nuclear arms race. In secret negotiations, Prime Minister Robert Menzies offered up parts of South and Western Australia for testing British nuclear weapons,²⁹ pushing it through without even consulting the cabinet. Menzies hoped that 'Britain might let a few atomic crumbs fall from their table, perhaps so that Australia might be able to develop its own atomic industry'.³⁰

The work from my journey there culminated in a video piece, *Maralinga Pieces* (Figure 17), and a photographic series, *Operation Buffalo* (Figures 18 and 19). Both of these explore the physical and metaphysical remains of Australia's atomic testing ground, and aim to prompt more inquiry into the lasting legacies of these tests.

My current research is focusing on the ways in which the anti-nuclear community, of which I am a part, are developing, and have developed, our own connection to place, memory and history amidst broader Australian social narratives, and are questioning and challenging what it means to exist in the contemporary Australian physical, social and political landscape. I am looking specifically at our campsites, as these are the places where we come together to connect, learn and strategize, as well as return to year after year (Figures 20–23).

29 Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'British Nuclear Testing Starts in Australia', ABC Archives, <http://www.abc.net.au/archives/80days/stories/2012/01/19/3411273.htm> (accessed October 14, 2014).

30 Frank Walker, *Maralinga: The Chilling Expose of our Secret Nuclear Shame and Betrayal of our Troops and Country* (Sydney: Hachette, 2014), 1.



Figure 23. Jessie Boylan, 'Waste Barrel Props, Lizard's Revenge, Roxby Downs South Australia, 2012'. Copyright of the artist.

Since the 1980s, the South Australian outback has been the site of protest and resistance to uranium mining developments, with the first of the Roxby Blockades happening in 1983 and again in 1984. These desert blockades brought people from all over Australia to protest at the gates of the Olympic Dam uranium mine, demanding that it be shut down.

People have been travelling to these sites in order to learn for themselves about what exactly is happening 'out there', so the issues are no longer 'out-of-sight, out-of-mind'. They – and I am part of that 'they' – have been doing this in order to seek an alternative narrative to that which is presented to us by the Australian government and mining companies.

In his article 'Beyond Place: Is Australian Photography Global?' Daniel Palmer writes:

Place returns, or continues, because it is inescapably linked to memory and history: complex layers of meaning may be embedded in the physical attributes of a place ... But places don't just have histories – they also have presence and possible futures.³¹

Art can illuminate that which is otherwise hidden or obscured by oppressive dominant narratives. I remain focused on nuclear issues because it is such a horrendous reality how we can continue down a path which, ultimately, can lead to our own demise. I hope to show not only sites where horrific unthinkable acts have occurred, but also brave alternative communities who are capable of imagining alternative futures.

Acknowledgments

Some of this paper is taken from my Master of Fine Art (photomedia) exegesis 'This is not Nowhere: Photography, the Campsite and the Anti-nuclear Movement in Australia'.

To contact or view the work of the Atomic Photographers Guild see: <http://www.atomicphotographers.com>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

31 Daniel Palmer, 'Beyond Place: Is Australian Photography Global?', *Photofile* 92 (2013): 45.