

~~BLACK NOISE~~

[A Trinity
Trilogy]

Sanne Peper

25.09–06.11.2010

Corrosia! Expo

www.corrosia.nl

~~BLACK NOISE~~ [A Trinity Trilogy] is the title of a three-part study in which I use nature as a metaphor to visualize certain issues concerning the idea and implications of the atomic bomb. The title of this triptych refers to the code name for the first nuclear test, which was carried out near the town of Alamogordo in the desert of New Mexico, but it also alludes to the three most important economic powers of that era: the U.S., Japan and the Soviet Union. With a grant from the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture, I traveled to Los Alamos and the surrounding area [SPLENDID ISOLATION, *A PAST* 2006, 2008, 2009], to Hiroshima and Nagasaki [MONO NO AWARE, *A PRESENT* 2007/2008] and to Chernobyl [STALKER, *A FUTURE* 2008]. The subtitles *A PAST*, *A PRESENT* and *A FUTURE* reflect my conviction that there is no such thing as *the* history or *the* truth, although there are certainly possible histories and potential futures. This project is a very subjective attempt to grasp the overwhelming idea of total annihilation through nuclear weapons.

A PAST In the first part - SPLENDID ISOLATION, *A PAST* - I look into what the *sublime* of the atom bomb has to do with the *sublime* of nature. The mushroom cloud that looms after a nuclear explosion is one of the most striking images I know of - but also the most horrible. For this part of the study I shot photos in Arizona and New Mexico, and more specifically around Los Alamos, the village where the first atomic bomb was developed and tested as part of the Manhattan Project. Under the leadership of Robert Oppenheimer, a group of young scientists - their average age was 25 - worked in complete isolation to develop a nuclear weapon of mass destruction. It is this particular combination of history, science and politics, of human ingenuity and individual conscience, that I find so intriguing. Since that first test, the menace of nuclear war has always been latent, but with the current situation in the Middle East, Iran and North Korea, among others, that threat is once again manifest. That makes it an urgent and relevant subject. In my eyes, it is alarming to note that none of the numerous American museums that are devoted to this topic assign any negative connotations to nuclear energy, let alone to the development of a nuclear bomb. The collective American consciousness seems to have little room for voices other than those that point out the lifesaving benefits of radioactive isotopes in medical science and assert that the bomb actually spared lives by bringing an end to the Second World.

On returning home from my trip, I came across *Het sublieme verlangen* [The Sublime Desire], a text by the Dutch philosopher Jos de Mul, in which I found a possible explanation for the fact that I had photographed mainly landscapes. I had visited that region to look for visual cues that would allude to the images known from photos and film stills, and it was the landscape in particular that still seemed to hold such traces: I found 'scorched' earth, vast wastelands, dead trees - nature that was corroded, disturbed and yet sublime. Nature in America seems to defy all reason: it is both fantastic and terrifying. It makes me highly suspicious, if not anxious. It is that combination, known in philosophy as a *negative pleasure*, that forms the intrinsic connection between the bomb and this particular landscape.

A PRESENT For the second part of the project - MONO NO AWARE, *A PRESENT* - I traveled to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The immediate reason for my trip was the annual ritual that

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Hiroshima residents perform on the anniversary of the atomic bombing of their city. Each year on August 6th, people set thousands of small, cube-shaped lanterns afloat on the river. This spectacle suggests a drifting city of apartment buildings on fire, with the candles representing the souls of the victims of the atom bomb. It is a grand image on a small scale. But I also encountered a different and highly complicated emotion, especially around the days of commemoration. The branding of the word 'peace' was disconcerting, considering Japan's military and political history as an aggressor. That history, specifically during the Second World War, is complex but fascinating. There is no denying that the bomb victimized the population, but there was also Japan's collaboration with Nazi Germany, the slaughter in Nanking, the Japanese prisoner-of-war camps and the 'comfort women', all of which denote Japan's role as a perpetrator. This part of the study deals with loss and victimization, aggression and political accountability, memory and recollection. As it concerns immaterial matters, it was also the most difficult to visualize. That was the reason I called this part of the project 'Mono No Aware', an untranslatable Japanese concept that means something like 'the beauty of the transient', an intense wistfulness about the things that pass.

A FUTURE

I photographed the third part - STALKER, A FUTURE - in the area around Chernobyl and Pripyat. Built as a Soviet model city ('Atomograd'), Pripyat has been a ghost town, completely abandoned, ever since the explosion in nuclear reactor no. 4. With the population evacuated and nature unchecked, the houses and other buildings are becoming overgrown; it appears to have a whole new ecological balance, with great diversity in flora and fauna. The architecture - that which humans had created and then destroyed - is being retaken by nature. It is a bizarre experience to walk around in this post-apocalyptic landscape: it is as if you are looking into a potential future. You can't see or feel the nuclear radiation, but your perception is colored by the knowledge that everything there is heavily contaminated. And that is precisely what my work is about: how the history of a place influences and distorts one's perception of it. I attempt to translate what I know about a place or an event into what I photograph when I get there. Analogous to the film *Stalker* [Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979], in which a 'seeker' guides an artist and a scientist through a forbidden and contaminated area where they hope to fulfill their innermost desire, this part consists of the projection of 135 black-and-white images of my trip to Chernobyl and its environs. Glimpses of the city appear sporadically in color - I deliberately retained all aberrations caused by my old scanner.

Since something as sublime as nature is difficult to capture in a photo, I always choose to work with a 35mm camera and very strong telephoto lenses. By capturing only a tiny fragment of the immensity I see before me, I try to reveal what is *not* in the photo. To quote Jos de Mul: 'Romantic art represents that which is unrepresentable by showing its unrepresentability. Every representation of the Absolute is necessarily inadequate.'

Sanne Peper, September 2010

[1-6: see wall texts]

[1] THE SUBLIME NATURE OF NATURE

“Kant had already elevated the concept of the sublime to a central category in his doctrine of beauty, although he reserved that concept for the experience of nature. In his view, a sublime experience is characterized by ‘*negative Lust*’ [negative pleasure], which is to say a feeling of discomfort that is linked to a feeling of pleasure. As examples, Kant gave the experience of a mighty ocean or mountain, a powerful storm or an erupting volcano. Such experiences entail an idea of absoluteness and supremacy that leads us to experience our insignificance, but that cannot be comprehended sensorily or mentally. That is what makes us feel uneasy. But at the same time, in the sublime experience, we are part of the absolute, albeit in a negative way. That means that the experience of the sublime, in contrast to that of beauty, is fraught with extreme tension.” [Jos de Mul, *Het sublieme verlangen* (translated from the Dutch).]

[2] AUGUST 9, 1945

Three days after the annihilation of Hiroshima, the second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki.

[3] WORMWOOD

Chernobyl (or *chornobyl*) is the Russian word for wormwood [*Artemisia absinthium*].

“[...] It is often said that the meaning of the Ukrainian word *chornobyl* is ‘wormwood’, and the suggestion that the disaster fulfilled the biblical prophecy of the Wormwood star that augured Armageddon resonated deeply with the fear of nuclear apocalypse. But the botany was actually more complex. [...]”

[Mary Micio, *Wormwood Forest: A Natural History of Chernobyl*]

“And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a torch, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters.

“And the name of the star is called Wormwood; and the third part of the waters became Wormwood; and many men died of the waters because they were made bitter.” [*Revelations* 8:10-11]

[4] AUGUST 6, 2008

Every year on August 6th, the people of Hiroshima set thousands of small, cube-shaped lanterns afloat on the river. The candles represent the souls of the victims of the atom bomb. On that same day - the Day of the Dead - fireworks are set off in Tokyo.

[5] STALKER

Stalker is the name of a film by Andrei Tarkovsky [1979], in which a ‘seeker’ guides an artist and a scientist through a forbidden and contaminated area where they hope to fulfill their innermost desire. It has often been suggested that the film forecasted the disaster in Chernobyl. People who work there now refer to themselves as ‘stalkers’, and the contaminated area is called the *Zône/Zona*, just as in the film.

[6] AUGUST 6, 1945, 8.15 AM

The first atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima at a quarter past eight in the morning. Among its various artifacts, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum contains numerous small clocks, each of which stopped ticking at precisely 8:15 a.m.

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Las Vegas, the mid-1950s. A favorite pastime of the era was to take a cocktail up to the top of a casino in the morning, to search the northern horizon for a flash of light or a mushroom cloud and toast America's superpower ascendancy.

[Joseph Masco, Desert Modernism, Cabinet Magazine.]



Typography
exhibition:
Michaël Snitker

[6 miles from Trinity.]