



Exhibition Review

Nuclear (in)securities

*Perpetual Uncertainty: Art in the
Nuclear Anthropocene*

Z33 House of Contemporary Art,
Hasselt, BE

Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou

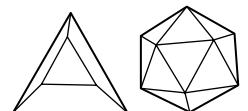
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Nuclear (in)securities

Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou

Perpetual Uncertainty: Art in the Nuclear Anthropocene

Z33 House of Contemporary Art,
Hasselt, BE

On the 3rd of January 2018, the President of the United States of America tweeted in reply to the threats made by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un: “...I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!”¹ While this is just one among the many rhetorical deceptions the American President Donald Trump employs daily, it hints to one of the cardinal features of the nuclear age, one that has become even more pressing since the 2016 US presidential election: the fact that nuclear power resides not in its actual realization, but mostly in its existence as a threat of total annihilation. Hence the button metaphor. If I don’t push it, there won’t be a nuclear attack; you just have to prevent me from pushing it. Even though the word ‘weapon’ denotes “an instrument used for fighting,” nuclear weapons have no clear use in actual conflict and have not been used in war since 1945.² The title of the exhibition *Perpetual Uncertainty: Art in the Nuclear Anthropocene* alludes to this constant breach of the feeling of security by the means of which nuclear power operates. Even though its public discourse promises security, it only generates more uncertainty, and even worse, a perpetual one.

Perpetual Uncertainty: Art in the Nuclear Anthropocene at the Z33 House for Contemporary Art in Hasselt, Belgium, is part of a larger project initiated by the curator Ele Carpenter titled *Nuclear Culture*.³ The overarching theme is the attempt to culturally understand radioactivity and this exhibition constitutes a second step towards this goal, following the first exhibition at the Bildmuseet in Umeå, Sweden,

in 2016. A third exhibition at the Malmö Konstmuseum in Sweden is to follow in 2018. Featuring artists from Europe, the US, and Japan, the show at hand gathers a set of projects that was commissioned as a response to the Belgian nuclear context, some of which have already been exhibited in Umeå. Nuclear issues are not foreign to the region and to Belgium in general. Hasselt lies only a few kilometers away from the city of Mol, where the HADES underground research lab for the storage of radioactive waste is located. Several of the artists went on-site and reflected on issues of nuclear waste. Moreover, nuclear aesthetics were the theme of the contemporary art exhibition *Riddle of the Burial Grounds* that took place a year earlier in the neighbouring city of Antwerp at the Extra City Kunsthall. Peculiarly enough, none of the artists participated in both shows, even though the exhibitions seem to share similar concerns. Finally, Belgium's infamous colonial past is deeply tied to the world's first deployed atomic bomb, as uranium for the Hiroshima bombing was extracted in the Belgian Congo.

Assuming responsibility

The exhibition opens with a video-work by Kota Takeuchi, a Japanese artist who worked at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant following the fallout. Shown in a dimly lit stairway, the video depicts a man, dressed in a full-body radiation suit that masks his identity, pointing his finger towards the camera. The gesture feels like a full-frontal accusation as the man points towards the viewer. As a pertinent opener, *Pointing at Fukuichi Live Cam* (2012) acutely sets the tone for the semantic direction that Ele Carpenter adopts in her artistic choices, namely a distinction between radiation and nuclearity. Carpenter, inspired by historian Gabrielle Hecht's *Being Nuclear*, departs from the idea of "radiation as a physical phenomenon, whereas nuclearity as a technopolitical phenomenon that emerges from political and cultural configurations of technical and scientific things".⁴ As Hecht puts it, nuclearity is not the same for everyone, as its experience differs for a nuclear power plant worker and for a nuclear scientist. Hence, what Kota Takeuchi is pointing at are the results of radiation (a nuclear

accident) that actively participate in nuclearity's formation. This distinction between the two terms is further confronted throughout the show with works of art that demonstrate the interdependency of radiation and nuclearity. Covering a wide range of concerns, the exhibition touches upon the temporality invoked at a site of geological disposal, the invisibility of radiation and attempts to make it visible; it encompasses artistic speculations on the Chernobyl exclusion zone as well as the continuous seeping of fallout from Fukushima into water and ocean currents. Susan Schuppli's film *Trace evidence* (2016), by far the most captivating position in this exhibition, deals precisely with this topic: How does nuclear radiation travel through water, earth, and air? Divided into three episodes, the artist explores the (in)visibility of nuclear matter, by bringing together three key moments of nuclear history. First, the discovery and subsequent exploitation of the first (and, so far, only known) natural nuclear reactor in Gabon in 1972, then the delayed political response to the Chernobyl accident in 1986, and finally the dislocated aftermath of the nuclear meltdown at Fukushima in 2011. This episode, entitled *Hydrology*, deals with the hydrological appearance of nuclear evidence in the west coast of Vancouver Island, Canada, induced from the carrying through ocean currents of nuclear particles from the Fukushima-Daiichi power plant. In its juxtaposition of found footage, new shots, and scientific images, the film illustrates the assemblage of forces that comprise a nuclear "accident," be it political or non-human in nature. It establishes a fundamental sense of uncertainty, which is inherent to nuclearity, a sense cultivated on different levels throughout the exhibition.

Illusions of certainty: marking strategies

In fact, humans *do not* have control over nuclear matter, even if we use it as a source of energy. This absence of command extends to different — temporal, spatial, and even cognitive — levels. As Timothy Morton describes, radiation is a phenomenon that radically evades human senses and has a significant impact on human social and psychic space.⁵ It is part of other *hyper objects*, such as black holes or the ozone



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- Fig. 1 Susan Schuppli, Trace Evidence, from the first episode Geology, 2016. Photo: Susan Schuppli
- Fig. 2 Susan Schuppli, Trace Evidence, from the second episode Meteorology, 2016. Photo: Susan Schuppli
- Fig. 3 Susan Schuppli, Trace Evidence, from the first episode Geology, 2016. Photo: Susan Schuppli

depletion, and thus thinking about its reality is intrinsically tricky.⁶ Ele Carpenter, who invited Timothy Morton to contribute with an article to her edited volume entitled *The Nuclear Culture Source Book*,⁷ raises the challenge of understanding the inhuman scale at which radiation operates. Part of this challenge is of a genuinely temporal nature, like the one invoked at a site for the geological disposal of nuclear waste, such as the one the HADES facility researches. Such a site is expected to endure the cyclical upheavals of the Earth's long continuance that geological time denotes, in order to keep what is contained isolated from potential future discoverers, essentially for eternity. Several of the artists in the exhibition have speculated on this deep future and the conceptual markers that could signify the danger presented by this location for billions of years to come.

The Belgian artist Cécile Massart envisions this geological forecast in whimsical ways in *Laboratoires* (2013) and *Colours of Danger for Belgian High-Level Radioactive Waste* (2017). In the latter installation she recreates colored circles that indicate containers of nuclear waste on the floor of the Z33 venue. The visitor is prevented from stepping on the circles through trestles acting as barriers. Eventually, the floor becomes entirely covered with colorful traces, an intended result that hints to the failure of this marking strategy. As the humorous tone of the work is easy on the eye, it runs the risk of reducing the debate to mere symbolism. If Cécile Massart's position can appear uncomplicated, the project *Cumbrian Alchemy* by Robert Williams and Bryan McGovern Wilson is quite the opposite. Originally produced in 2013, the work is a combination of drawings, photographs, and objects that examine the persistence of nuclear matter through time, its intersections with popular culture or the local folklore, and the nuclear industry of the region of Cumbria, UK. Part of the project, for instance, are uncanny commercials or merchandises from the time of the commissioning of atomic energy in the 1960s, shown in drawers reminiscent of the logic of a cabinet of curiosities, as well as a performance on the Cumbrian hills of Thomas Sebeok's ideas around an "Atomic Priesthood". Dealing with nuclear semiotics



Fig. 4 Cécile Massart, *Colours of Danger for Belgian High-Level Radioactive Waste*, 2017. Photo: Z33/Kristof Vrancken

to guarantee the marker's stability through time, Sebeok suggested the creation of a trans-historical assembly of experts that he called an "Atomic Priesthood." As profoundly cynical and elitist as such a proposal may sound today, Thomas Sebeok is, nonetheless, one of the first to have seen the futility of arbitrarily launching a sign into the distant future.⁸ Engaging with such a proposal circumvents the usual rhetoric that current debates on geological disposals run into; speculative conclusions produced from (pseudo) scientific research that is trapped in its insufficiency to articulate the human factor within these overarching timescales. Instead, this type of debates remain captive (but inactive) within the vastness of inhuman time. Thus the *Cumbrian Alchemy* performance avoids pure speculation on what the future holds in terms of communicative means and does not reduce the problem of waste to a merely technical one but refers to the larger human condition.

The continuum of deep time is also addressed in another work, more closely related to the Belgian nuclear debate. Andy Weir's plastic 3D figurine *Pazu-goo*, is a modifiable uranium glow-stick inspired by Pazuzu, the Sumero-Assyrian demon of famine, contagion and dust. The artist organizes workshops and shares instructions on how to 3D print these miniatures, and proceeds to suggest confining it to a clay tablet before flushing it into a local water supply; the innate goal being that these statuettes could be discovered by potential future archaeologists. The choice of clay echoes back to the work produced by the research laboratory HADES as they are researching the possibility of storing waste in a deep clay layer 225 meters below the surface of the Earth. Andy Weir's work succeeds in shifting away from the intergenerational communication/equity argument⁹ and constitutes a powerful comment on the persistence of matter and its entanglements with the Earth, adding a clearly ecological edge to the discussion. Arguing against an assumed passivity of the Earth, *Pazu-*



Fig. 5 Robert Williams and Bryan McGovern Wilson, *Cumbrian Alchemy*, 2013.
Photo: Z33/Kristof Vrancken

goo becomes a material metaphor for our toxified future. It fails, however, to address another issue: the very political context in which the waste has been produced – which multiplies daily. This aspect is unfortunately lacking from several other works and it is only hinted in works like Isao's *Hashimoto 1945–1998* (2003). The video is referencing the style of a video game, as red, blue and green dots seemingly pop up on the map, designating the geographical spots where and the year when atomic tests were performed. These colorful marks flicker on and off, frantically covering the whole Earth from Algeria to the Pacific Ocean. The blinking light appears magically on the image, inducing an uncanny impression, as if the bombs were detonated by themselves eradicating any agency to the nations that were behind each explosion. Each date and flag that accompany the image though, come as a disquieting reminder and afford the viewer the larger picture of the nuclear age, by way of a conclusion of *Perpetual Uncertainty* as the work is situated towards the end of the first and biggest part of the exhibition.¹⁰

Contextualising the Nuclear Age (?)

Even though some works, such as *1945–1998*, might offer a glimpse into the historical *continuum* of radiation ecologies, the overall impression of the viewer can be disorienting. Perhaps the earlier exhibition *The Riddle of the Burial Grounds* achieved to implicate the larger geopolitical situation that *Perpetual Uncertainty* never explicitly, or perhaps too politely, refers to. The film *Containment* (2015) by Peter Galison and Robb Moss explored the only deep underground burial facility currently in use, the WIPP (Waste Isolation Power Plant), which lies several kilometers away from the National Los Alamos Laboratory – the very cradle of nuclear culture. But more importantly, they offered a poignant comment on the instrumental role that has been assigned to art by the American state: to find signifiers of danger for future generations.¹¹

In *Perpetual Uncertainty: Art in the Nuclear Anthropocene* the political and technical parameters of the nuclear age are either obliterated by the spirited attitude of several works or too literally illustrated in others. However, this impression is amended in the last room of the show where one can sit at a table to read publications, such as Liam Sprod's radical *Nuclear Futurism: The Work of Art in the Age of Remainderless Destruction* or Mary Mycio's travelogue *Wormwood Forest: A Natural History of Chernobyl* (2005). The work *Roundtable* by James Acord is simultaneously a work of art and a design piece, created by his studio in 1999, in which the visitor can sit at the table and indulge into a rich collection of nuclear literature. Initially, it was conceived by the artist in his studio in Hanford (US), which is a mostly decommissioned nuclear production complex currently operated by the United States federal government. Acord's goal was to gather environmentalists and people from the nuclear industry to discuss the possibilities and risks of working with nuclear material.¹² Similarly, Ele Carpenter gathered such specialists through a collateral event of the exhibition, a roundtable entitled *The Nuclear Culture Roundtable*. She was aiming for a similar objective: How can we generate reflexivity that will enable a deeper understanding of nuclear radiation?

Obviously, there is no single answer to this question, and Ele Carpenter seems to be aware of that. The different projects she has put together have attracted visitors from afar, in addition to the inhabitants of the city of Hasselt, to engage in unlikely conversations. Discussions took place during *The Nuclear Culture Roundtable* that brought together artists and philosophers along with nuclear agencies, scientists, and other stakeholders. Certainly, the exhibition provides insights into why and how radioactivity is, and indeed forever will be, a difficult entity to handle physically and perceptually. It however falls into the same trap several thematic contemporary art exhibitions have previously fallen into. By

vigorously embracing – in this case nuclear – art practices as being good in themselves, it takes contemporary art's criticality as a given. This presents a double-edged sword. Remarkably, it stands among the few cultural projects dealing extensively with nuclear matters. However, presupposing an inherent criticality of contemporary art and its discourse, it also illustrates a lack of foresight of the art-world itself.



Fig. 6 Andy Weir, Pazugoo, 2017. Photo: Z33/Kristof Vrancken

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Comments

- 1 Uri Friedman, The Terrifying Truth of Trump's 'Nuclear Button' Tweet, in: The Atlantic, January 3 2018. URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/trump-nuclear-button-tweet/549551/> [17.01.2018].
- 2 Georges Rasset, Notes toward a Radioactive Art, in: Leonardo, Vol. 25, Winter 1992, p. 38.
- 3 *Nuclear Culture* is a curatorial and research project led by Ele Carpenter, associate curator at Arts Catalyst, in partnership with Goldsmiths College. For more information you can visit the website at: <https://nuclear.artscatalyst.org/> [17.01.2018].
- 4 Gabrielle Hecht, *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade*. Cambridge and London 2012, p.15.
- 5 Timothy Morton, *Hyper Objects, Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minnesota, London, 2013. p. 10.
- 6 According to Morton, "a hyperobject is an entity that is massively distributed in time and space relative to human" to such an extent that it outscapes the human completely (ibid., p. 11). He suggests this new concept in the light of the ecological crisis, where humans are confronted to nonhuman entities "that can be thought and computed but not directly touched or seen", like climate change for instance. Timothy Morton, *Poisoned Ground*, in: *Symplokē*, Vol. 21, No. 1-2 (2013), p. 37. The term hyperobject can thus accommodate these new entities and impel us to think the nonhuman "as a being in its own right" and not as a mere object of knowledge that can be calculated and predicted (Hyperobjects, 172).
- 7 The book gathers nuclear art and critical writing on the topic: Ele Carpenter (ed.), *The Nuclear Culture Source Book*. London, 2016.

- 8 Peter C. van Wyck, *American Monument: The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant*, in: Scott C. Zeman/Michael A. Amundson (eds.), *Atomic Culture: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Boulder, 2004. p. 149–172.
- 9 Intergenerational equity is the idea that justice should be applied between generations or between the present generation and generations yet to be born. In the context of nuclear waste, it applies to long-term storage and the quest for the most optimal solutions. In economics, the intergenerational argument tends to reduce nuclear waste debate to practical matters. For a more critical approach, see: Jantine Schröder, *Geological Disposal of Radioactive Waste: A Long-Term Socio-Technical Experiment*, in: *Science and Engineering Ethics*, Vol. 22.3, Summer 2016, p. 687–705.
- 10 The video is available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjAqR1zICA0> [19.03.2018].
- 11 For more information on the film, see: Tessa Giblin (ed.), *Hall of Half-Life* (cat.), *Steirischer Herbst and GrazMuseum: Graz 2016*, p. 97–112.
- 12 For a concise entry into James Acord's work, see: Nicola Triscott, James Acord, *Roundtable*, in: *Carpenter 2016*, p. 52–53.