

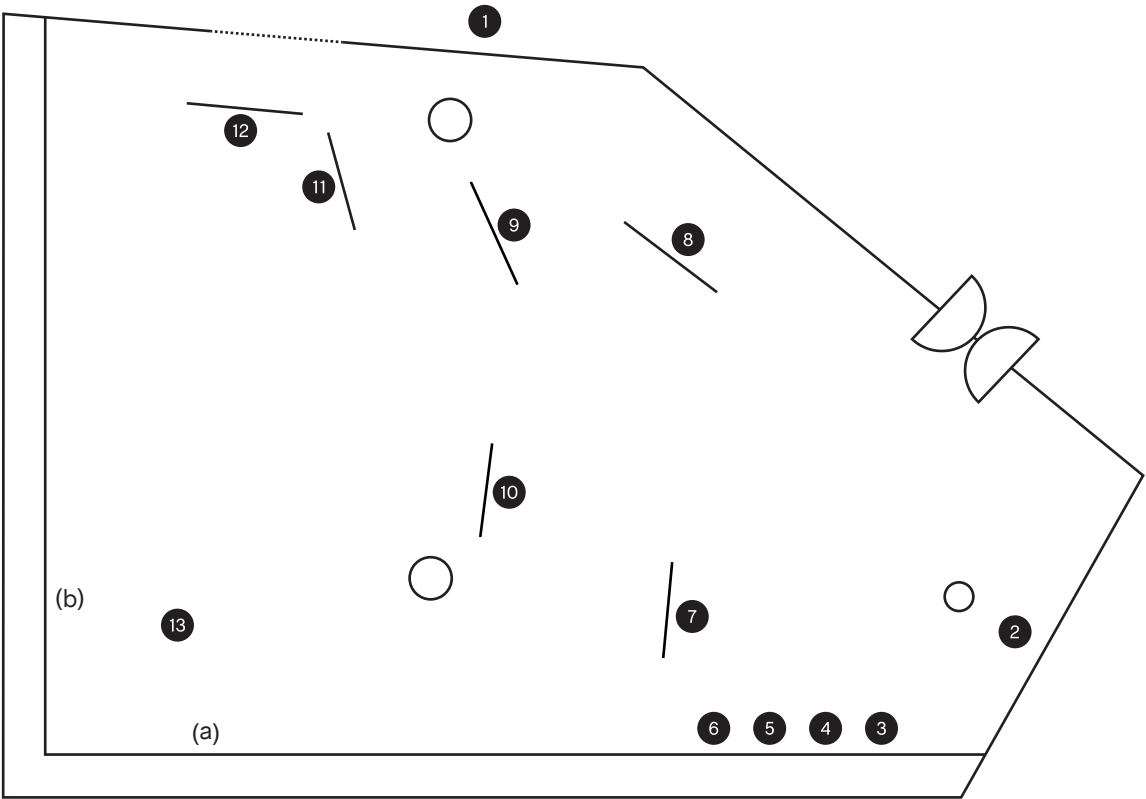
SIM CHI YIN: MOST PEOPLE WERE SILENT

Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore
Earl Lu Gallery
LASALLE College of the Arts
21 July – 10 October 2018

Most people were silent is an exhibition composed of photographs taken in the vicinity of nuclear sites in North Korea and the United States of America. Collectively titled *Fallout*, the series was commissioned in 2017 by Oslo’s Nobel Peace Center and has been reconfigured for LASALLE’s ICA Singapore.

The exhibition exposes the seemingly dormant threat of the nuclear, between and beyond the genres of documentary and landscape photography. Sim’s camera reveals the visible and invisible borders of nuclear warheads, captures objects that have been exposed to nuclear radiation, and allows unusual access to classified spaces.

Sim Chi Yin (born Singapore 1978) is an award-winning photographer who recently joined Magnum Photos. In 2018 Sim won the Chris Hondros Award and taught in the Magnum Foundation’s Social Justice and Photography programme.



List of works

Sim Chi Yin
Fallout 2017
All works courtesy the artist and the Nobel Peace Center, Oslo

Dimensions are given as height preceding width

- 1

A sign at the B Reactor building, Hanford Site, Washington, United States of America. The world’s first plutonium reactor was used for Trinity, the first nuclear test ever conducted (16 July 1945)

digital print on adhesive vinyl on glass
470.4 x 313.8 cm
- 2

On top of the northern slope of Mount Paektu, an active volcano on the border of China and North Korea

digital print on adhesive vinyl on glass
480.2 x 320.3 cm
- 3

Painted on matryoshka dolls are the protagonists of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis: John F Kennedy (USA), Nikita Krushchev (USSR), Fidel Castro (Cuba) and Anatoly Dobrynin, the then Soviet Ambassador to the United States of America. Collection of National Atomic Testing Museum, Las Vegas, Nevada

digital print on Hahnemule paper mounted on aluminium composite panel
31.8 x 47.6 cm
- 4

Left: A photograph of the fireball from an atmospheric test codenamed Annie conducted above ground at the Nevada test site on 17 March 1953. Right: A man on duty at the Nevada test site wears a radiological safety uniform and carries a Geiger counter. Collection of National Atomic Testing Museum, Las Vegas, Nevada

digital print on Hahnemule paper mounted on aluminium composite panel
31.8 x 47.6 cm
- 5

The 1953 booklet *You and atomic warfare* given to soldiers assigned to Camp Desert Rock at the Nevada test site. Collection of National Atomic Testing Museum, Las Vegas, Nevada

digital print on Hahnemule paper mounted on aluminium composite panel
31.8 x 47.6 cm
- 6

A circular slide rule designed to calculate the physical damage caused by a nuclear blast as well as the amount of radiation emitted in different explosions. Collection of National Atomic Testing Museum, Las Vegas, Nevada

digital print on Hahnemule paper mounted on aluminium composite panel
31.8 x 47.6 cm
- 7

A border guard at his sentry post on the China–North Korea border, close to a suspected North Korean missile base

digital print on Hahnemule paper mounted on aluminium composite panel
106.7 x 160 cm

- 8

Inside an anti-ballistic missile defence radar facility in North Dakota, designed to detect and intercept nuclear warheads and Soviet missiles

digital print on Hahnemule paper mounted on aluminium composite panel
106.7 x 160 cm
- 9

A factory continues production into the night in Manpo, Chagang Province, North Korea; photographed from across the Yalu River from the city of Ji’an, Jilin Province, China

digital print on Hahnemule paper mounted on aluminium composite panel
106.7 x 160 cm
- 10

Fence along the China—North Korea border, near the city of Tumen

digital print on Hahnemule paper mounted on aluminium composite panel
106.7 x 160 cm
- 11

Two floors below ground in an abandoned radar and anti-ballistic missile defence facility in North Dakota

digital print on Hahnemule paper mounted on aluminium composite panel
106.7 x 160 cm
- 12

The desk of a launch commander in a control room of a decommissioned Titan II missile site in Arizona. The ‘no lone zone’ rule required two members of the crew present at all times; if they received orders to launch a missile, they would each have to turn a launch key at exactly the same time

digital print on Hahnemule paper mounted on aluminium composite panel
106.7 x 160 cm
- 13

Most people were silent 2017
2-channel high-definition video, 16:9 aspect ratio, colour, sound
editing: Gabriel Ellison-Scowcroft
3:40 minutes

(a)

Looking into North Korea from the peak of Mount Paektu (2,744 m). The mountain and the crater lake, formed by a volcanic eruption, divide North Korea and China

(b)

Cascade Mountains, Washington State. The snow melting from this range feeds into the Columbia River, which was the water source for Hanford Site’s B Reactor.

Audio:

i.

Geiger counter picking up radiation

ii.

Where are you, dear general? A song played every morning on Pyongyang’s streets via public broadcast

iii.

John F Kennedy’s address to the nation on the nuclear test ban treaty, 26 July 1963

iv.

Geiger counter picking up greater levels of radiation and sounding the alarm

v.

Phone alarm used at Hanford, Washington State

vi.

Air monitor at Hanford tracking radiation levels

vii.

Donald Trump, interviewed on the day North Korea fired its most powerful intercontinental ballistic missile, 29 November 2017

viii.

J Robert Oppenheimer, interviewed for the NBC documentary *Hiroshima*, 1965

Exhibition tour with Sim Chi Yin and curator Caterina Riva
Saturday 21, July 3:00–4:30 pm

Discussion on the present condition of the nuclear age with Sim Chi Yin and Associate Professor Itty Abraham, Head of Department of Southeast Asian Studies, NUS
Thursday 26, July 7:00–8:30 pm
F202 Lecture theatre

Free admission

Curator's introduction

Since we started working on this project, Sim Chi Yin has been sending me online articles about nuclear (dis)armament, usually one link at a time followed by the full text of the same news pasted in the body of each email for amplification. Having worked for almost ten years as a journalist and foreign correspondent, and as a documentary photographer for seven years after that, Sim is newly balancing ideas about the use and meaning of images, this time from an artist's standpoint.

When devising the installation for the Earl Lu Gallery, we discussed the importance of presenting images alone, without words or text, as the first layer of the exhibition. Through the careful selection of photographs from the series as well as their method of installation, *Most people were silent* aims to suggest the effects of radiation as one of the lingering consequences of the nuclear state.

In their temporary gallery zone, Sim's photographs are pasted onto parts of the glass façade or suspended on screens rather than being mounted on the wall, which would conceal from view some of their information. A video diptych, whose title, *Most people were silent*, lends itself to the entire exhibition, appropriates a passage from a 1965 interview by J Robert Oppenheimer, the 'father of the atomic bomb'.

Once inside the gallery, the viewer needs to negotiate the outdoor and indoor landscapes that blend the locations of nuclear sites in North Korea and the United States. Even before seeing the twin video projections and while discovering the images suspended on screens, various noises permeate the space: a ticking sound from a Geiger counter employed to measure radiation, North Korean propaganda songs, and male voices with recognisable American accents—all these remind us that the nuclear age remains a raging conundrum.

Caterina Riva
Curator, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore

Most people were silent

In the pitch darkness, a single light was reflected in the shallow waters of the Tumen River. All that was visible on the far shore was a pair of giant portraits of North Korean founder Kim Il-sung and his son and successor Kim Jong-il. In the distance, beyond the barren hills, dogs barked, as if in rhythm.

Two weeks later, I stood on the desolate, dusty hills cocooning the United States nuclear test site in Nevada, listening to the calm, eerie ring of silence. I seemed to hear those same dogs. I had come to find traces of humans' encounter with nuclear bombs—the only weapon that can destroy humanity in a single blow. In October 2017, I drove along the quiet, empty border between China and North Korea, photographing across the two rivers and one mountain that divides them. I searched out locations closest to North Korea's known nuclear test sites, missile-manufacturing facilities and munitions bases.

A fortnight later, I travelled through equally quiet stretches of the western United States to find nuclear sites, from snowy North Dakota, where an all-seeing pyramidal anti-missile radar complex stands, to the white heat of the moon-like, cratered test site in Nevada's desert. I climbed into missile silos, crawled out of bomber escape hatches, came face to face with warheads and wandered around command and control centres used during the Cold War. I was looking for parallels—visual, historical, factual, symbolic—between these landscapes. North Korea is the only country to have tested nuclear weapons in the 21st century. The United States of America is the first country to have tested and the only country to have used them, in 1945. Last year, when I started this project (on a commission for the Nobel Peace Prize), the two countries were locked in a rhetorical war attacking each other, with President Donald Trump taking swipes at North Korean leader Kim Jong-un as 'Little Rocket Man', while his counterpart called him a 'gangster fond of playing with fire'. There has been a dramatic diplomatic about-face in the past several months. The two leaders had an unprecedented summit in Singapore on 12 June where Kim made a broad commitment to 'work toward denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula'. So far, though, no details exist and the deal remains shadowy.

For most of us, all this takes place in the abstract—on Twitter, in the news or in theory. I wanted to see what the actual nuclear infrastructure looks like. I wanted to understand how these weapons work, what the command chain was, how we used

them and might do so again. I wondered about morality and other questions: What do we make of the repeated calls to ban these weapons on the one hand, or the arguments that we need them for deterrence? On my journey, I met people from both ends of the spectrum. Some view the weapons with awe and respect, such as Yvonne Morris, director at the Titan Missile Museum in Arizona, who spoke quietly as she looked down at the massive, sleek missile illuminated by flood lamps, newly installed in its silo. This was the nuclear-tipped weapon she had commanded in the 1980s. She said: 'I would have had no trouble following the launch command, if it had come to that, because it would have meant that the US was under attack'.

I also met educator Joseph Brehm, whose father was an American World War II bomber pilot possibly saved from having to fight in Japan because the atomic bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki helped bring the war to a quick end. The younger Brehm grew up believing in nuclear weapons but now calls for disarmament: 'I love technology, love the wow factor: Oh my God look what we created. But then you have to take a step back and realise, what did we create? Because it literally is the sword that could slay humanity'. With each site I visited, I felt the beauty and the weight of these landscapes and quiet machines. I had studied Cold War history at university, reading books and texts about that dangerous era. But suddenly these events came alive in the metres-thick concrete blast doors of the missile silos and in the rusty complexes far below ground.

North Korea's nuclear ambitions and—more recently—pledges to denuclearise can be gauged only through satellite images, seismic tests, propaganda pictures and official pronouncements. That forced me to look through barbed wire fences, mountains and villages, metaphorically trying to see the missile sites and the Punggyi-ri nuclear test site where Pyongyang has conducted six nuclear tests since 2006. The latest and largest test had taken place just a month before my journey, causing buildings to shake, knives to rattle in kitchens and schools to evacuate in neighbouring Chinese towns.

In some ways those landscapes were from a different era: farmers pushing carts at a gentle speed, single-storey houses with stacks of corn at the front, steam-powered tractors, workers bicycling back to factories after lunch hour, and factory chimneys with wisps of smoke rising into the night sky. But the sense of tension was palpable: the regular guard posts on the North Korean and the Chinese side, the constant checkpoints and border police forbidding photography.

In the United States, I was welcome to look at decommissioned facilities preserved for tours and education, and sites that had been abandoned after serving their purpose. Only at the 3,500 square kilometre Nevada National Security Site—an active site—was I kept outside the fence. Over 900 nuclear weapons tests were done here between 1951 and 1992, creating a series of giant craters in the ground resembling a moonscape visible in satellite images. It was seeing an archival United States military photograph of the largest of these—the Sedan crater—that first led me to think I could create a series of 'anonymous' landscapes of these two countries, images that when placed side by side might let us suspend our sense of place and become reflective.

Elements of what I saw in both places intersected in my mind. Some of the parallels were clear as soon as I shot the second picture in a pair; others I discovered in the editing process. Across both countries there were striking similarities in the landscapes—both natural and man-made. Perhaps, as Natalie Luvera, a curator at the National Atomic Testing Museum in Nevada, put it: 'We haven't learnt from history. What the US did in the past is being repeated right now in North Korea'.

Trump and Kim both portray themselves as having written a new chapter in history, with handshakes and smiles at the Singapore summit this year. Soon after, North Korea invited international journalists to witness what it said was the demolition of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site. No experts were on hand to verify what was destroyed. On the United States side, Trump unveiled changes to the country's nuclear posture early this year, increasing the country's arsenal and developing more 'usable' nuclear warheads.

In recent weeks, academics and US intelligence agencies have been reporting that, pledges notwithstanding, North Korea has increased its production of fuel for nuclear weapons at multiple secret sites and has made infrastructure improvements at Yongbyon—its major declared nuclear facility. US officials say they are 'watching closely'. The rest of us continue to try to see, from outside the fence.

Sim Chi Yin
New Mexico, July 2018