

ART, SPACE, POLITICS

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Aftermath: Two Queer Artists Respond to Nuclear Spaces

*To some, sexuality may seem to be an unimportant topic, a frivolous diversion from the more critical problems of poverty, war, disease, racism, famine, or nuclear annihilation.*

GAYLE RUBIN, "THINKING SEX" (1984)

Since the detonation of the bomb code-named Trinity in 1945 in New Mexico, artists have struggled with how to represent nuclear anxieties—not only the threat of death promised by a wartime catastrophe, but also the remnants of events such as bomb detonations in peacetime testing and radioactivity's distribution via leakage of waste materials. Radioactivity's devastation to the body and the environment is often resistant to direct depiction. How does one picture a seemingly invisible threat? This question has haunted artists who attempt to visualize the aftermath of nuclear radioactivity, a force of palpably destructive powers that doesn't always lend itself to representation.<sup>1</sup> Its effects often manifest only obliquely, or indirectly, perhaps decades later (or in subsequent generations) as delayed genetic damage or rumors. This extended, deferred temporality means that such a harm can be resistant to something like photography, which captures, almost by definition, only the moment of the here and now.<sup>2</sup>

A large archive of contemporary art and photography grapples with the problem of how to illustrate, in visual form, a looming threat so vast that during the Cold War it became an unimaginable horizon that structured all power relations.<sup>3</sup> The horror of the atomic bomb, as Hannah Arendt notes, was terrorizing precisely because of the uncontainable scope of its destruction, a scope that was almost "supernatural," with "eerily impressive symbolic power from the moment of its birth."<sup>4</sup> Artists have explored this "impressive symbolic power" for their own ends and purposes since 1945; more recently, some have examined the nuclear age with the distancing perspective of the remove of the intervening decades.

One well-known example is the work of the Japanese artist Takashi Murakami, in whose painting *Super Nova* (1999) mushrooms are transformed into a pop cartoon where thickets of eyes appear to grow alarmingly on every surface. Murakami uses imaginative excess to make evident the harm and danger of radioactivity, relying on almost campy exaggeration in order to heighten and augment nuclear perils both fantastic and factual. With its bright, animated colors, this might seem an unlikely comment on atomic damage, but Murakami has long used mutated mushrooms as a displaced metaphor for the atomic blast.<sup>5</sup> In his exhibition *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* at the Japan Society in New York in 2005, he made the claim that the persistent Japanese fascination with forms such as *anime* was a complex aftereffect of the political, social, economic, and psychological impact of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>6</sup> Through *Little Boy*—named after the bomb the United States dropped on Hiroshima—he further proposes that one such aftereffect is a culture of widespread infantilization, emasculation, and stunted sexual development; he summons the widespread use of cartoon figures across Japan as proof of this ostensible national character.<sup>7</sup> His interest in this psychosexual response to atomic devastation, however, is focused entirely on compromised masculinity and exists wholly within a heteronormative frame.

Beyond Murakami, there are many other examples of artists since 1945 who have deployed a range of techniques to work through and comment on the connections between sexuality, radioactivity, and atomic aftermath, but this essay focuses on a small, and perhaps surprising, subset—self-identified queer artists—who are currently making work about what might be called, broadly, “nuclear culture.”<sup>8</sup> My use of the word “queer” is intentionally capacious, referring not only to a sexual orientation, but also to a methodological orientation that deviates, that swerves, that turns normative realms of temporality and reproduction against themselves. I take Gayle Rubin’s challenge in “Thinking Sex” to put sexuality *alongside* nuclear annihilation, to refuse to trivialize sex by dismissing it as “frivolous.” (Rubin wrote this polemic in 1984, the same year that Walter Mondale, who ran on a platform that included a nuclear arms freeze, lost the U.S. presidential election to Cold War hawk Ronald Reagan by a landslide; that historical context, as well as the growing AIDS crisis, inflected her discussion of the urgency of rethinking sex.) Indeed, embodiment and corporeality are critically relevant to any analysis of nuclear culture and nuclear sites, given how deeply vulnerable to radioactivity human bodies are.

Exploring questions of atomic “aftermath” from a queer feminist perspective is also an attempt to counter Murakami’s heterosexist and masculinist analysis. I focus on two younger queer contemporary artists, the Japan-born Hiroshi Sunairi and the U.S.-born Zoe Strauss, in order to conjecture about the relation between sexuality and nuclear landscapes—“landscapes” that are as much discursive sites as physical spaces. For Sunairi and Strauss, *body* and *land* are complexly co-articulated, as both artists utilize bodies to register the invisible toxicity of the nuclear landscape and to make palpable the discursive

sive dynamics of nuclear culture. In addition, this essay looks at these artists’ ideations of futurity, taking up the apocalyptic strand of recent queer theory to ask what might be driving anxieties about imminence. What do we make of concerns about that which might soon occur, and what can these uncertainties tell us about how we imagine alternative futures?

In 2005, Hiroshi Sunairi began a participatory conceptual art piece entitled *Leur Existence—Tree Project*. For this work, Sunairi—who was born in 1972 in Hiroshima and moved to New York about a decade ago—began by collecting seeds from a select number of trees in Hiroshima, trees that had survived the August 6, 1945 atomic bombing by the United States.<sup>9</sup> These trees, known as *hibaku-jumoku* (“A-bombed trees” or “survivor trees”), including round leaf holly, persimmon, ginkgo, and juniper, are found throughout Hiroshima. About one hundred and fifty are known to still be alive from the time of the attack, and the city council takes care of them as part of its International Peace Promotion Department. After collecting the seeds, Sunairi distributed them to people throughout the world who were willing to tend the growing shoots. Working in concert with the city to secure his seeds, which were harvested from second- or third-generation *hibaku* trees, Sunairi has meticulously kept track of the participants in *Tree Project*; at the date of this writing, more than four hundred have participated, from twenty-three countries. He asks for regular updates about how the seedlings are doing and posts the information online. His website features grids of photos documenting people with plants in various states of growth, from tender, just-sprouted new stalks in terracotta pots to larger leafy trees already planted in the ground (figure 18).

On the surface of things, the project appears to be a straightforwardly optimistic one about perseverance, perhaps even veering toward the precious. As the artist writes, “Over sixty years ago, the city of Hiroshima was burnt to ashes by one nuclear bomb and people thought that nothing would grow for 75 years. However, sprouts sprung up from the remains of burnt trees and weeds came out of the ground. . . . This new life gave encouragement to the people who had lost hope.”<sup>10</sup> But not all the seedling stories end with photos like the ones in this grid, with beaming green-thumbed couples proudly displaying their thriving new growth. Sunairi also chronicles plantings that did not take, seeds that went missing in the mail, forgotten waterings, and other failures. This is not a project of pure redemption, but one complicated by loss, always mindful of the inherent frailty of life and the inconsistency, sometimes irresponsible, of human care.

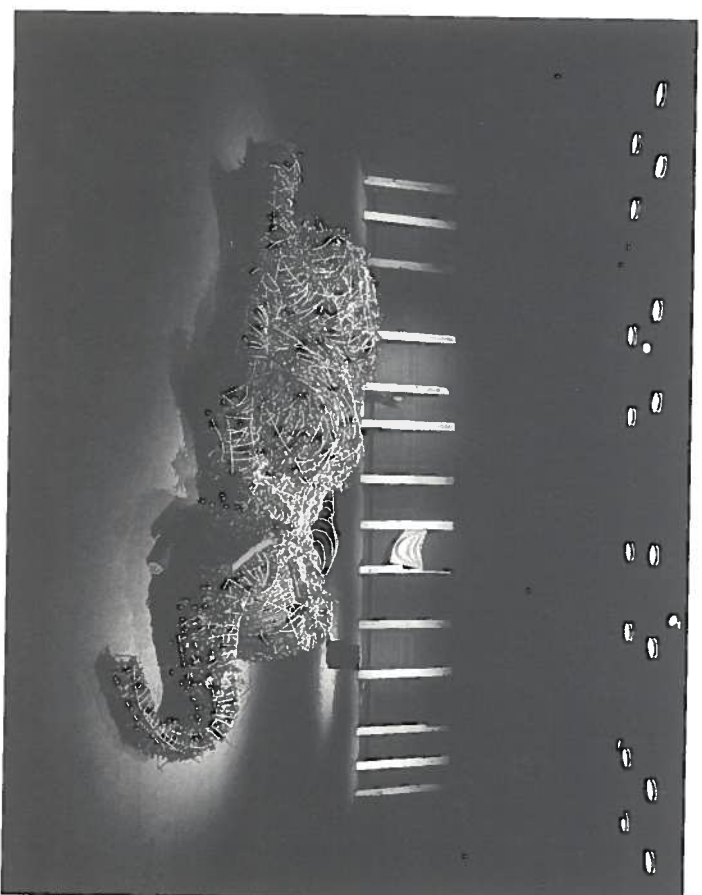
Sunairi envisioned these plantings as a way to comment on the lasting transnational residues of wartime exchange, aware of the central role played by the atomic arms race in emergent formulations of globalization in the decades after the end of World War II. His transplanted seedlings mailed over vast distances—documentation of which is uploaded on the Internet for a much wider audience—echo the concurrent postwar development of international communications networks meant to facilitate exchanges

18. Hiroshi Sunairi (in collaboration with Tree Project Participants), *Tree Project Poster*, 2006–9. Collaged archival inkjet prints, 44 × 35 in. Courtesy the artist.



in moments of crisis. But Sunairi's project also became a meditation on the unknowability of genetic progression and questions of thwarted lineage. Since, as he has commented, he doesn't "specify the ending"—meaning that the owners might keep the seeds unplanted, as dormant life, or the plants might die. "There's no conclusion."<sup>11</sup> In other words, the project is also about the uncertain future, a future whose (literal) roots in the memory of catastrophe might potentially, take hold in the present.

Sunairi has also made sculptural work related to this subject, including a piece entitled *A Night of Elephants*, which debuted at the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art in 2005 to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the atomic bombings of Japan (figure 19). For this installation, Sunairi made a metal frame of an elephant and stuffed it with pruned branches from *hibaku* trees (collaboratively gathered through the Hiroshima International Peace Promotion Department). Dramatically spotlight in a darkened gallery, the elephant is a contradictory figure: a biomorphic mass whose softly curved bulk is created out of stiff and bristly sticks. This piece is an attempt to grapple with the complex memory of the attack on Hiroshima, a memory that lingers



19. Hiroshi Sunairi, *A Night of Elephants*, 2005. *Hibaku* tree branches and leaves, metal, metal sheet, ceramic, and found objects, 36 × 144 × 144 in. Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art.

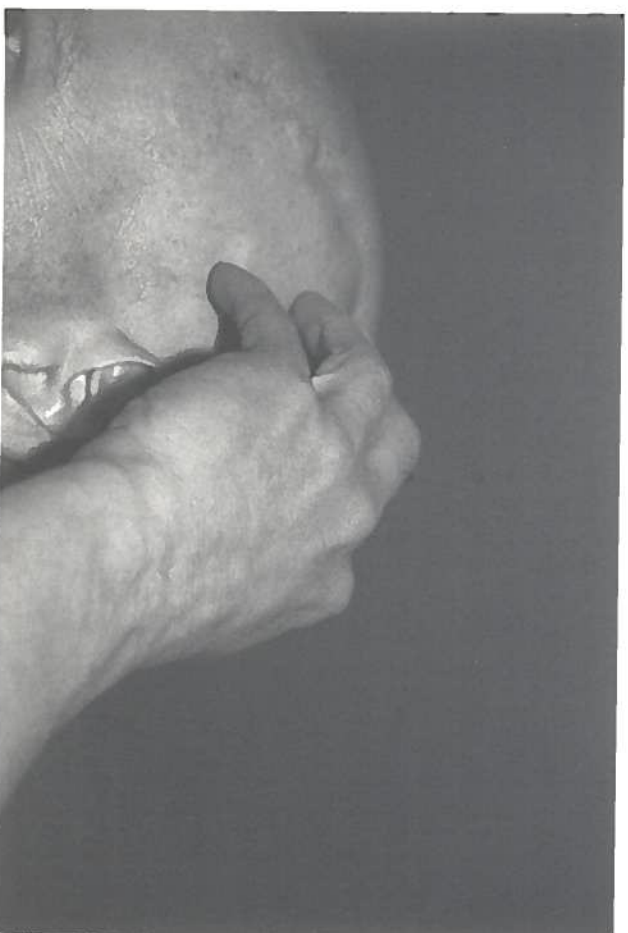
but is also growing distant as its survivors age and pass away. "Hiroshima" has become a code word for geopolitical disaster, but the city officially tries to encourage other sorts of histories and narratives, unrelated to its atomic past, to promote itself as a tourist destination.

Because it is lying on the floor, it is unclear if Sunairi's elephant—an animal famous for mourning its dead that also, according to the saying, "never forgets"—has died, or is merely sleeping (elephants do occasionally lie down to sleep). The motif of the fallen elephant is mobilized not only to provide a container for cast-off, pruned branches (branches whose very existence registers that these *hibaku* trees are still growing, despite fears that they would be forever stunted), but also gives shape to a collective corporeal form that resonates with the multiple "bodies" of the trees. It makes a body out of landscape. Like trees, animals have limbs; like humans, seedlings are fragile and must be carefully tended. Sunairi's projects encourage such associative leaps, yet these bodies are not simplistically coded as "natural" but rather heavily mediated and charged by their relationship to past, present, and unknown futures.

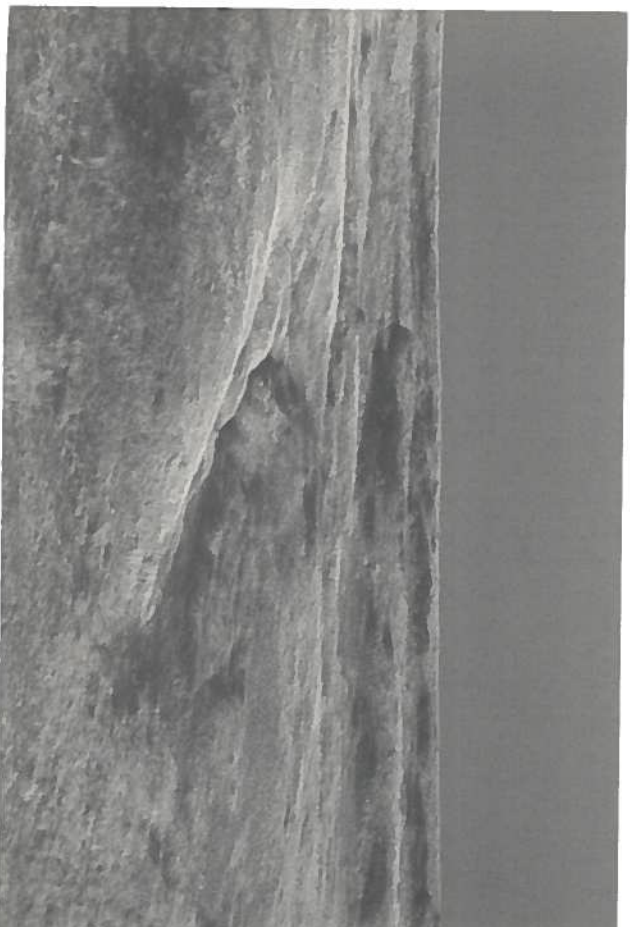
Like Sunairi, the Philadelphia-based photographer Zoe Strauss was born in the early 1970s. Growing up in the shadow of Cold War fears, particularly as a young child in the 1980s during the Reagan presidency, she fixated on the American West as a mythic landscape where bombs are produced and assembled and nuclear power plants loom over the flat land: the Trinity site in New Mexico, the Hanford plutonium production nuclear weapons facility in Washington, the Nevada Test Site. From 2005 to 2009, she embarked on a series of trips to visit these places, photographing the land and former workers of some of the facilities. She also interviewed self-identified “downwinders”—residents of towns near nuclear test sites where from 1945 to 1968 aboveground tests were performed, with radioactive fallout raining down in surrounding areas.<sup>12</sup> Cancer rates in these places are far above average, but governmental compensation and admission of wrongdoing has been slow in coming.<sup>13</sup> Strauss uses her camera to try to provide an intimate counternarrative to these erasures. For instance, in one sequence of photographs, a woman in an American flag T-shirt holds up the results of a lab test showing no genetic mutation as a result of working at the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons facility near Denver, then lifts her shirt to show a reconstructed breast after a cancer-related mastectomy. Strauss contrasts the purportedly scientific evidence of the medical form with the incontrovertible display of illness upon her body. The artist—and the woman pictured—invite the viewer to linger on this evidence of medical intervention not with pity, but with empathy and anger.

In another of Strauss’s photos from Rocky Flats, a former plant worker, Charlie Wolf, fingers a healed-over wound on his skull—the result of a surgery to remove a tumor in his brain (figure 20). Pressing her lens close to his head and shooting against a sly-blue background, Strauss makes his injured skin a surrogate landscape. A photo taken at the Trinity Site in New Mexico captures a somewhat nondescript plain of desert scrub, marked by an indentation—very like a scar—in the middle that could be a remnant of damage from test blasts decades ago (figure 21). Its ambiguity is telling; it is notable that the landscape does not “look radioactive”—as if there is such a thing without, say, a mushroom cloud blooming in the distance. One of the special problems faced by artists and activists interested in documenting lasting damage to the land caused by nuclear test bombs or by nuclear power accidents is that it can be challenging to depict the harm done to terrain that is both commercially and aesthetically devalued. This sort of topography has long been considered somewhat unproductive, lifeless, or useless, with disregard for its complex desert ecosystem and diverse animal life.

Strauss is particularly interested in the tourist circuit that has sprung up in the nuclear West. For instance, during the two days per year that it is open to the public, about two thousand visitors crowd the Trinity Site, where the first atomic bomb was exploded. In her pictures, Strauss turns her documentary gaze upon the act of photographing itself, for instance capturing children proudly displaying pieces of trinitite (glass made from sand fused by the scorching heat of the blast) to their mother, who bends at the waist to take a snapshot of their outstretched hands (figure 22). In another photo, a woman



20. Zoe Strauss, *Charlie Wolf (Rocky Flats, CO)*, 2009. Digital photograph. Courtesy the artist.



21. Zoe Strauss, *White Sands (Trinity Site, New Mexico)*, 2006. Digital photograph. Courtesy the artist.



22. Zoe Strauss, *Woman Taking Photo, Kids Holding Trinitite* (Trinity Site, NM), 2006. Digital photograph. Courtesy the artist.

smiles in front of the stone obelisk marking the site to pose for a camera that is outside the frame of Strauss's photo. In these images, Strauss asks questions about this perverse pilgrimage and the growing circuit of such grisly tourism (one that has recently included the still highly poisoned Chernobyl) as well as the conventionalized, so-called "nuclear family" that is often in evidence visiting these sites.

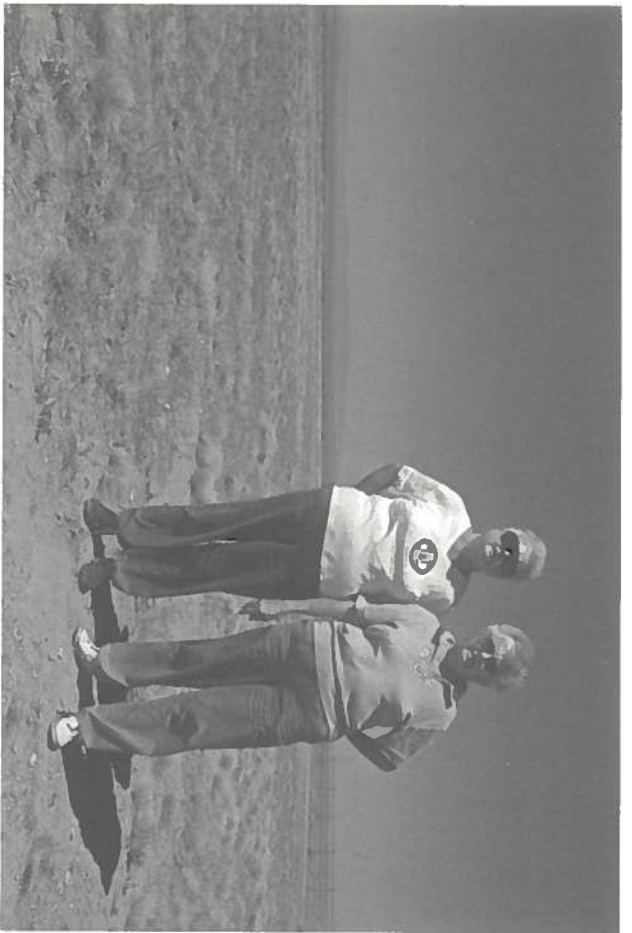
Strauss is also concerned with other kinds of family formations, ones that are distinctly queer. Both Sunairi and Strauss are queer artists working through questions of national memory and trauma. There are other queer artists for whom nuclear culture is at the center of their practice, including Lisi Raskin, whose work is based on research into Cold War culture and whose alter ego, the male scientist Dr. Wolfgang Hauptman, builds fallout shelters and conducts fictional experiments in missile silos. Another is the drag queen / performer Nuchia Waste, who has made work in dialogue with contaminated waste sites in Colorado.<sup>14</sup> The queer photographer Connie Samaras has trained her lens on militarized landscapes in the U.S. West and elsewhere. These do not just "happen" to be queer artists; they are also artists for whom queerness saturates, motors, and sustains their practice. Sunairi, in fact, first gained prominence as a performance artist in New York, making work that thematized sexual vulnerability, exposure, and exhibitionism. For instance, he invited the audience to document and join in his stripteases and performative S/M play in his 1999 pieces *Early Hiroshi* and *The Me Up*. In his

self-portraits, some of which he published in soft-core porn magazines as a critical comment on the Western fetishization of Asian bodies, he has presented himself as an idealized, nude, receptive boy. He has also made a collage of such images in the rough outline of an American map.

Queer sexuality has been at the center of both Strauss's and Sunairi's work since they entered public visibility. Both have also been recognized as moving away from concerns with rigid notions of identity-based "gay" art toward a more open-ended queer aesthetic. In 2003, Sunairi was named, along with others such as Assume Vivid Astro Focus, as at the forefront of a new cadre of young queer artists by the art critic Holland Cotter, who commented, "It seems clear that some new, multifarious version of 'gay art' is in formation, just in time for this post-criminal, premarital, passively resistant gay moment."<sup>15</sup> Sunairi was being hailed as a different sort of gay artist just before he turned his attention away from explicit examinations of sexuality toward questions of global Japanese representation as well as a different sort of audience-viewer exchange.

For Strauss, whose photographs of drag queens and pride parades have been featured in exhibitions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, among other places, queerness is likewise a persistent subject as well as a kind of method of making, as she forges relationships with those she photographs. She is deeply concerned with questions of consent. Regardless of who or what her lens is trained upon, her camera is situated with an intimacy and at times a disarming candor and urgency, as well as an openness to her subjects that bespeaks a great porosity that could be called queer.<sup>16</sup> In the tenderness of the eyes behind a masked face in one photo, for instance, gender loses its substance and becomes somewhat unfixd. The bodies she documents are often marginal, whether for reasons of race, class, sexuality, or physical ability, and her gaze is remarkably compassionate, as is evident in her work with the downwinders.

Strauss's queer way of looking also inflects her images of radioactive landscapes. In an image taken in 2006, two women, tourists who have traveled to see the Trinity Site, form a somewhat ambiguous coupling (figure 23). Their physical proximity indicates their closeness, but do their matching physiognomies suggest sisters, friends, or a same-sex couple who have grown to resemble each other? They might prompt a vaguely butch/femme dynamic, as one has slightly longer hair and a more feminine shirt, but such a reading hovers just at the level of suggestion. Their hands are behind their backs, perhaps because they are hiding something—possibly pieces of trinitite, the possession of which is illegal—raising issues of the clandestine, concealment, and disclosure that resonate with the historically outlaw nature of queerness. Placed within a series that includes photographs of barbed-wire fences with "KEEP OUT" signs, Strauss's cluster of images suggests a narrative that links queer sexuality and the nuclear precisely around their shared coordinates regarding prohibition, secrecy, and codes both readable and explicit. Queer bodies are often subject to scrutiny, disciplining, and harsh criminalization, but queer desire has also found inventive, if oblique, ways to make itself known. Strauss's images,



23. Zoe Strauss, *White Sands (Trinity Site, New Mexico)*, 2006. Digital photograph. Courtesy the artist.

with their own sets of codes and secrets that implicate (and maybe even desire) bodies, further imply that nuclear landscapes might also be seen as critically queer.

Within U.S. culture, queerness has long been figured as a kind of toxic relation—one that might, like radioactivity, be sinister, contaminating, corrupting, and undetectable. There is a sort of “gossamer-y connection between queer identity, repressive homophobic McCarthyism, Cold War hysteria, and blacklisting,” as Strauss has put it.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the specific 1950s fear of homosexuality, for instance sex-crime panics and the hysteria around the “Lavender Scare,” has had its own temporal delay (much like radiation) that is now being picked up and utilized by queer artists.<sup>18</sup> These painful pasts are thus being used to different effects in the present.

There has been, historically, a strong desire to ferret out perceived poisonous elements and threats to national security (both internal and external), and this includes those with non-normative sexualities. This fear, already very much alive in the McCarthy era, reached a different fever pitch during the early days of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the mid-to-late 1980s, when Senator Jesse Helms called for all gay men to be quarantined, and the conservative columnist William F. Buckley wrote in the *New York Times* that “everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper forearm, to protect com-

mon needle users, and on the buttocks, to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals.”<sup>19</sup> This demand for ocular evidence, for the status of infection or contagion to make itself visible on the body even if the body appeared “normal” or “healthy,” is one that has threatened to delimit and control queer bodies in recent decades. And the quest to mark radioactivity is no less obsessed with detectability, as it seems imperative to warn not only those in the present about its dangers but to flag it as dangerous well into the future.<sup>20</sup> (Interestingly, in the popular imagination, radioactivity is often caricatured as luridly, aberrantly colored and thus extra-noticeable—for instance bright neon green, as in the comically misplaced rod from the Springfield nuclear power plant where Homer Simpson works. This palpably evidences the longing for radioactivity to be that perceptible. Despite the drive to render it visible, much of the detection of radioactivity is in fact done with sound, as in the clicking of the Geiger counter.)

In fact, one might conjecture that these two cultural rifts or threats—nuclear radioactivity and queerness—have strange points of convergence. At the very least, nuclear war has been heavily sexualized. As the queer theorist Peter Covello has written, “It might be said that sexualization of nuclear warfare was evident from the moment of its conceptual inception, and took a form as blaringly unsubtle as simple naming, for instance the paternalistically named bomb Little Boy.”<sup>21</sup> What is more, during the civil defense campaigns that reached their peak during the 1950s, the U.S. government encouraged the building of bomb shelters in backyards that would cocoon the normative family so that it might survive a Soviet attack that would wipe out towns as well as spew radioactivity far and wide to linger in the atmosphere for an unknown amount of time. One of the hallmarks of such radioactive contamination is its ability to cause birth defects in children and to render both men and women sterile; in other words, it figures in the public imagination as fundamentally eroding the capacity for childbearing, a block to (straight) reproduction.

Queerness, of course, is also assumed to threaten reproductive futurity. It destabilizes the sanctity of the normative “nuclear family” precisely because of its ostensibly non-generative sexuality. This is part of Lee Edelman’s argument in his 2004 book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, in which he calls for a radical embrace of the negative potential of queerness to *not* figure a future.<sup>22</sup> He writes, “Rather than rejecting, with liberal discourse, this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might, as I argue, do better to consider accepting and even embracing it.”<sup>23</sup> He goes on, polemically: “The future is mere repetition and just as lethal as the past . . . What is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively—to insist that the future stop here.”<sup>24</sup>

Arguably, then, both queerness and the nuclear have the potential to foreclose our notions of the future, or, at the very least, provide a different model for thinking about temporality. This temporality also has spatial dimensions, as nuclear landscapes oscillate between prehistoric deserts and futuristically despoiled wastelands—hopelessly “unproductive” and unfertile. With this in mind, consider again the sprouts pushing up against

the soil in Sunair's *Tree Project*. The act of giving away seeds and that of gathering branches for his *A Night of Elephants* speak to endurance in the face of a legacy of radioactivity that is still a persistent presence in his hometown.

But I would argue that Sunair's works are also queer projects, as he stages an encounter with the trauma of Hiroshima but does not recapitulate the fear of a nuclear—or queer—apocalyptic endpoint. Taking the branches of many trees and merging them into one figure is a reversal of the normal arboreal scheme of replication. Instead, with his seedlings in pots and reclining elephant, Sunair's works insist not upon disfiguration or obliteration, but on resiliency in the face of damage—of surprising elasticity, continuation, and regeneration. To sprout from a seed is also a queer way of reproducing, in the sense of plants auto-reproducing. It may seem quite a gap between his early soft-core porn pieces and the *Tree Project*, yet the connections between audience participation, the fragility of bodies (whether human, animal, or vegetable), and risk tie these early works into his later Hiroshima pieces. Likewise, Strauss's photographs urge us to think about survival in new ways, as in a photograph with a vibrant, almost surreal signpost at the side of an empty road reminding drivers to "STAY ALIVE."

Stay alive. Given the alignment of queerness with AIDS since the mid-1980s in the United States, queer sexuality has been seen as its own kind of endpoint, not unlike nuclear catastrophe, a globally destructive force that forecloses or thwarts a sense of the future. The apocalyptic fears of imminent catastrophe—and also mordant thrills—that attend to both the nuclear age and the age of AIDS have perhaps dimmed with the end of the Cold War and the advent of life-extending antiretroviral drug cocktails, yet both the possibility of rogue nuclear missiles and the ongoing AIDS pandemic mean that both continue to signify as major termini in the public imaginary. The paired registers of threat (nuclear war and AIDS) have arguably waned since their high frenzy of the 1980s, although they persist, along with a more recent awareness of the potential catastrophe of climate change.

If we understand queerness as a way to mediate among and between bodies in non-normative ways, then radioactivity itself—its emission of ionizing particles, for instance, that then destabilize adjacent particles, is arguably queer. Radioactive decay occurs when (in a fitting twist on this queered nuclear family) the "parent radionuclide" breaks down, and sends out a rogue, single "daughter nuclide" that threatens to break up intact units. (It is critical that radioactivity not become overloaded with simply negative associations of harm; remember that there are radioactive treatments that, as much as they threaten, can also help cure.)

What is more, radioactivity does not honor conventional bodily integrity, but rather passes through us and within us. I have developed these ideas in close dialogue with Mel Y. Chen, who in the book *Animacies* theorizes how toxicity travels in queer routes through and among bodies.<sup>25</sup> Chen posits that the openness of bodies (via breath, via skin, and

so on) makes them permeable in unconventional ways; that is, we have polymorphous routes of absorbing matter into ourselves as well as expelling matter out, in a larger circuit of shared atmospheres and desires. There is also some relation between queer vulnerability and that of radioactive porosity. Indeed, when it comes to radioactive material, whose harm persists for many years on a scale of geologic rather than human time, those queer routes have temporal implications. As Shiloh Krupar notes about radioactive waste, it "continually crosses the boundaries of bodies, spilling into the cellular matter of humans and nonhumans, creeping into the future."<sup>26</sup>

The sexualization, or even queerness, of the nuclear and of the radioactive can be understood, then, in multiple ways—from the U.S. government's promiscuous disregard of fallout clouds, to porous national and bodily borders, to the forced heteronormativity of civil defense duck-and-cover propaganda. In the 1980s, the muscular saturation of nuclear weaponry, the potent power of it and the sheer ubiquity of phallic missile siloes ready to be deployed, was also figured as threateningly queer. Take, for instance, a passage from the book *Einstein's Monsters* by the British author Martin Amis, written in 1987: "The nuclear arsenal is not nowhere, it is everywhere. Every minute, in thousands of locations, in the oceans, in the heavens, there are reports, readings, dispatches, exercises, posturings, provocations. . . . The man with the cocked gun in his mouth may boast that he never thinks about the cocked gun. But he tastes it, all the time."<sup>27</sup> As Peter Covello has brilliantly put it

One need not be a Freud or Lacan to unpack the sexual dynamics of this lurid and arresting figure. The effect Amis strives for here is clearly one of fascinated revulsion, and it is a revulsion at an intimate and sexualized abasement before power, at forced incorporation, at violating penetration. In a smoother if less vivid version, Amis might have written, power in the nuclear age is horrifying and unlivable because it makes me—or wants to make me—thoroughly, irredeemably queer.<sup>28</sup>

But what if we understood Amis's homophobic fears as one of the *strengths* of thinking through the nuclear queerly? If we take the nuclear and the queer as twinned in some ineffable manner, then perhaps we can reinvent a temporality, that is to say, a futurity, that is not reliant on paranoid fantasies of survival at all costs.

As William Haver argues in his 1996 book *The Body of This Death*, an engagement with AIDS as well as with the legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, "demands an openness to the radical insecurity of a futurity for which we must refuse to be prepared, an openness to a revolution that would be at once political, economic, social, cultural, and intellectual."<sup>29</sup> I am not interested in recapitulating the cliché that such disasters are "unrepresentable," as young artists have been grappling with how to represent them for some decades now. Nor is it responsible to assert that HIV/AIDS and nuclear catastrophe are parallel, apocalyptic "endings." Instead, let's honor those attempts to imaginatively retell our histories in ways that also point toward a different kind of present.





24. Zoe Strauss, *Your Future Starts Here (Painted Over) (Las Vegas, NV), 2005*. Digital photograph. Courtesy the artist.

In conclusion, it might be impossible to make the radioactive threat fully perceptible, as it often does not cause immediate ill effects to human, soil, and plant life, but rather produces lingering long-term genetic damage that is not always easy to picture. But that impossibility opens up other conceptual avenues, and contemporary artists such as Sunairi and Strauss seek to figure and represent our collective radioactive pasts within the current moment, as well as to project those legacies into a fraught and insecure future. They queerly engage nuclear culture (not just the bombings of World War II, but also current nuclear power) to interrogate visibility, turning especially to bodies as a way to give form to these inchoate subjects.

How can we image (and also imagine) troubled, but also potentially hopeful, futures? Sunairi and Strauss bear witness to moments of survival, to lasting grief and living through it, to more responsible and thoughtful stewardship of our scarred Earth. They make art about nuclear anxieties within a queer rubric that embraces uncertainties, failures, and weaknesses. To end with one last image: a photograph by Strauss that captures a sign that reads "Your Future Starts Here" against a cloudy sky shot with a few patches of blue (figure 24). At an angle in the bottom-right corner of the frame, next to a streetlight, the sign is almost completely decontextualized. Strauss's defamiliarizing perspective places us under the sign, looking up at it with no sense of what it is advertising or announcing, other than, perhaps, the clouds that are either gathering strength or dispersing. Here the future is a ghostly trace—dimmed, perhaps, or in disrepair, but still legible.

## NOTES

I first wrote this paper as a talk for a panel called "Queer Bodies / Toxic Bodies," part of Crossroads 2010, the Association for Cultural Studies conference in Hong Kong. I thank Mel Y. Chen for co-organizing this session with me, and for our ongoing, exhilarating dialogues and mutual support. Much gratitude goes to Emily Eliza Scott and Kirsten Swenson for inviting me to publish this somewhat eccentric take on landscape in their volume.

Epigraph: Gayle S. Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole Vance (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 267.

1. The literature on artistic and photographic responses to the atomic age is vast. See Kyō Macker, *Bedouled Visions: Hiroshima-Nagasaki and the Art of Witness* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1999). For a more diffuse U.S. perspective, see *Vital Forms: American Art and Design in the Atomic Age, 1940–1960*, eds. Brooke Karmin Rapaport, Kevin Stayton, et al. (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2001).

2. See *Camera Atomica: Photographing the Nuclear World*, ed. John O'Brian (London: Black Dog, 2015).

3. Akira Mizuna Lippit theorizes the problematic of atomic visibility vis-à-vis the idea of "shadow optics" and what he calls "a-vision" in *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

4. Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 158.

5. There are many technical distinctions between atomic and thermonuclear (or hydrogen) bombs, but for the purposes of this essay, the terms will be used as adjectives and somewhat interchangeably.

6. Takashi Murakami, ed., *Little Boy: The Art of Japan's Exploding Subculture* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2005).

7. *Ibid.* See also Takashi Murakami, "Impotence Culture—Anime," in *My Reality: Contemporary Art and the Culture of Japanese Animation*, ed. Jeff Fleming, trans. Ryusuke Hikawa (De Moines, Iowa, and New York: De Moines Art Center and Independent Curators International, 2001), 58–66.

8. Michael Leja has helpfully theorized connections between art, masculinity, and Cold War culture in his *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1997). For one sharp analysis of photography of nuclear power plants that places gender at the center, see Deborah Bright, "Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry Into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography," in *The Contest of Meaning: Alternative Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1987), 125–43.

9. Sunairi first became interested in these seeds through the tree doctor Riki Horiguchi; for more on this project, see [treeproject.blogspot.com](http://treeproject.blogspot.com). He exhibited this work in 2009 and 2012 at the New York Horticultural Society.

10. Sunairi, <http://www.nyu-apastudies.org/MakingMemorySacred/?p=109>.

11. "Artists in Conversation: Hiroshi Sunairi and Yukuken Terayū" lecture at New York University, March 27, 2008.

12. Here Strauss follows in the footsteps of important precedents such as the photojournalist Carole Gallagher, who produced a groundbreaking examination of downwinders in her *America Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993). Strauss, however, identifies as an artist rather than a journalist, and often takes more liberties with jarring, antirealist cropping and framing than does Gallagher.
13. See, for instance, Dennis Carroll, "Six Decades After Trinity Site Blast, Area Residents Living with Fallout with No Help from Government," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, April 17, 2011.
14. For more on how a nuclear imagination has impacted the work of Raskin, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, "The Nuclear Naive: An Interview with Lisi Raskin," *Lisi Raskin: Mobile Observation* (Amundale-on-Hudson, New York: Bard Center for Curatorial Studies, 2010), 9–17. For more on Nudlia Waste, see Shiloh Krupar, "Transnatural Ethics: Revisiting the Nuclear Cleanup of Rocky Flats, Colorado, Through the Queer Ecology of Nudlia Waste," *Cultural Geographies* 19, no. 3 (May 2012): 303–27.
15. Holland Cotter, "Art in Review: Paul D.," *New York Times*, July 18, 2003.
16. For more on queer photography, see Deborah Bright, *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).
17. Strauss, correspondence with the author, June 2, 2010.
18. For more on 1950s fears, see David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
19. William F. Buckley Jr., "Crucial Steps in Combating the AIDS Epidemic: Identify All the Carriers," *New York Times*, March 18, 1986.
20. For more on attempts by the U.S. government to mark radioactive waste dumps for the next 10,000 years, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Building a Marker of Nuclear Warning," in *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade*, eds. Robert Nelson and Margaret Olin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 183–204.
21. Peter Covello, "Apocalypse from Now On," in *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations*, eds. Joseph A. Boone, Debra Silverman, Cindy Sarver, and Karin Quimby (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 43.
22. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004).
23. *Ibid.*, 4.
24. *Ibid.*, 31.
25. Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012).
26. Shiloh Krupar, "Transnatural Ethics," 319.
27. Martin Arns, *Einstein's Monsters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 7.
28. Peter Covello, "Apocalypse from Now On," 48.
29. William Haver, *The Body of This Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS* (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1996).

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