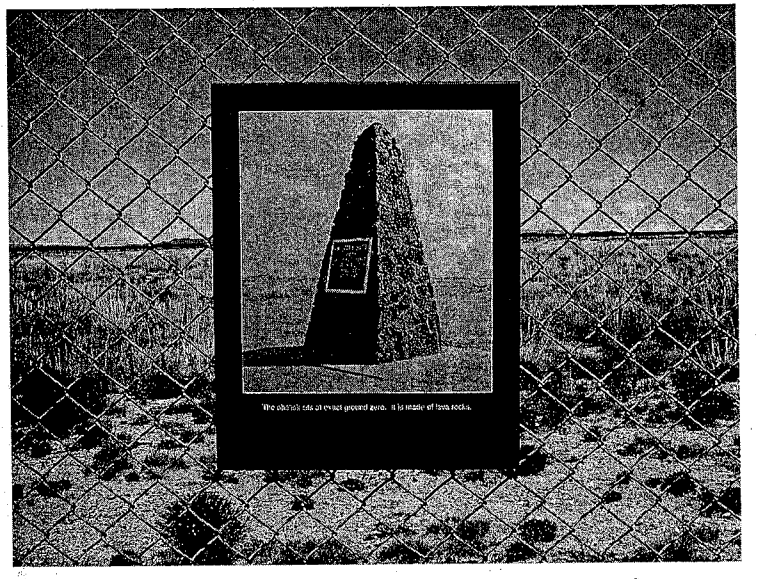
5:29:45 AM

JOSEPH MASCO

July 16, 2005—5:29:45 AM—thousands of tourists assemble in the early morning hours at a remote desert location in the southwestern United States to bear witness to the sixtieth anniversary of the first atomic explosion. Located in the middle of the White Sands Missile Range (an active U.S. military test range located in central New Mexico), the Trinity Test Site is open to the public only two days a year and for special anniversaries. Getting to this open-air museum and historical monument (which gained National Historical Landmark status in 1975) requires a difficult journey: visitors commit to a minimum two-hour drive from Albuquerque, and must negotiate military checkpoints, gates, and miles of barren, two-lane desert road to arrive at the birthplace of the atomic age. Once there, international tourists mix with past and present U.S. nuclear workers and military personnel, anti-nuclear activists, military history buffs, and the increasingly large number of Americans fascinated by the historic sites of the atomic age.

But what of the bomb actually remains at this desert test site? And what is capable of drawing such an international and politically diverse audience to this remote piece of New Mexican desert minutes before sunrise on this specific July morning? Visitors expecting to encounter the great modernist accomplishment of the twentieth century—the start of a new "age" of military science, international relations, and everyday fear—instead discover a large patch of desert surrounded by a chain link fence. There are no buildings at the point of



1. Photographic display at the Trinity Test Site (White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico, 2005). Photo by Joseph Masco.

detonation, only a simple historical marker, the metal casings of the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki (devices code-named "Little Boy" and "Fat Man" by Manhattan Project scientists), and a photographic display.

Both a museum and monument to itself, the site is a near-total simulation: the closest visitors get to the first atomic explosion is by viewing a long line of historical photographs strung on the chain-link fence, which document some of the personnel and equipment involved in the test, as well as a time-lapse sequence of the detonation. The display ends with a photograph of the historical marker (figure 1) whose caption reads: "The Obelisk sits exactly at ground zero. It is made of Lava Rocks." The stupefying banality of this exhibit is enhanced by the fact that the obelisk actually sits some fifty yards behind the viewer and is the core object of public attention at the Trinity Test Site, providing the preferred snapshot souvenir for most visitors. The culminating image in the historical display thus introduces the viewer to the space that he or she actually inhabits—conveying nothing of the sublime power of the nuclear age. For those interested in acknowledging the wonder or terror of the first nuclear explosion—a scientific accomplishment that revolutionized nearly every institution of American life, turned the surface of the earth into an experimental test range (involving radioactive fallout), produced a new kind of state (the

global nuclear superpower), as well as new kinds of world war (both cold and apocalyptic)—the bomb remains invisible in its site of origin. Visitors are presented instead with a hall of mirrors, a simulation that evacuates the nationalist fervor, the technoscientific accomplishment, and the terror of the first nuclear explosion through the deployment of neither first-hand experience nor expert knowledge nor realistic ambiguity but instead blindingly obvious factoids.

The Trinity Test Site is part of an evolving series of monuments and museums commemorating nuclear nationalism in the United States. Since many of these projects were concealed by U.S. national secrecy practices for decades, the new Cold War museums and atomic monuments often represent not a commemoration of known history but rather the first public inscription of it. These new military museums and monuments strive to document the historical evolution of the nuclear security state on its own terms; consequently, they are also deeply embedded within the current U.S. national security project known as the "war on terror." Thus, while officially positioned as "neutral" histories of World War II and the Cold War, atomic history sites are nonetheless highly politicized spaces, ideologically charged in how they engage the past, present, and future. In summer of 2005, for example, the Bradbury Science Museum at Los Alamos National Laboratory pulled "Little Boy," the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima, from display, citing new security concerns. Thus, despite years of public display in New Mexico, the first bomb used in atomic warfare became, at age sixty, once again a national security secret in Los Alamos, one of potential use to "terrorists." Concurrently, the National Atomic Museum in Albuquerque (which houses the largest public collection of U.S. nuclear weapons casings in the world) staged a "blast from the past" fundraiser on July 15, in which participants were given secret identities for the evening, presented with a 1940s-era fashion show and a panel of Manhattan Project personnel, before taking an early morning bus to the Trinity Test Site for the sixtieth anniversary. A coalition of anti-nuclear activist groups responded to this effort to romanticize the bomb by flying a survivor of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in from Japan to attend the event. Crashing the fundraiser with an alternative narrative of the nuclear age, activists also installed a "sidewalk museum" in front of the building. Presenting images of damaged bodies and buildings from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, activists challenged not only the National Atomic Museum's effort to approach the bomb as light hearted popular culture, but also the continued U.S. investment in nuclear weapons in the twenty-first century.

Thus, despite official efforts to ideologically contain the Trinity Test within New Mexican museums and memorials, public discourse around the sixtieth anniversary of the bomb proliferated. Nuclear activists—both pro and con—mixed with tourists (Japanese, German, American) in the summer of 2005 dem-

2. "Trinity Site, Jornada del Muerto, New Mexico," 1989. Photo by Patrick Nagatani, from his larger *Nuclear Enchantment* project. Image courtesy of the artist.

onstrating that the bomb is not yet located in a stable narrative of the past or present. Indeed, the nuclear public sphere in New Mexico revealed the nuclear explosions in the summer of 1945—on July 16 in New Mexico, and three weeks later on August 6 in Hiroshima and August 9 in Nagasaki—to be fundamentally linked events, explosions that make the U.S. the only country in the world to have engaged in nuclear warfare. The more subtle transformation of the U.S. into a society that largely organized itself around the bomb in the second half of the twentieth century remains a more difficult and elusive narrative, one more easily encountered today in works of art than in official history.

Patrick Nagatani's vision of the test site, for example, "Trinity Site, Jornada del Muerto, New Mexico" (figure 2), engages the nuclear revolution from a rather different vantage point than that offered by the official history sites. Part of a larger photographic work, *Nuclear Enchantment*, this work directly challenges the silences, contradictions, and public romance with the bomb in New Mexico, a state that is almost entirely supported by U.S. nuclear weapons research and tourism. Nagatani's beautiful photographic montages present philosophical statements on race, class, nationalism, childhood, militarism, and the processes of social normalization in a nuclear age. Nagatani recovers lost histo-

ries, not only of nuclear tests, accidents, and espionage in New Mexico, but also of the complicated racial context of the bomb, which connects the indigenous populations (both Native American and Nuevomexicano) in New Mexico to the Japanese through forms of nuclear victimization. His "Trinity Site, Jornada del Muerto, New Mexico" returns us to the Trinity Site but through the eyes of tourists who appear to be literally startled by the viewer. Under the wing of the Enola Gay (poised to drop another Little Boy bomb?), the startled Japanese (or are they Japanese-American?) expressions raise immediate questions about the normalization of the bomb and the economy of otherness that supports the U.S. nuclear arsenal. What, after all, is being commemorated by their tourist snapshots of the "Obelisk . . . made of Lava Rocks" at the Trinity Site—a scientific accomplishment, a new military superweapon, the end of World War II, the destruction of Japan, the start of the Cold War, or merely some unarticulated collective pleasure in atomic kitsch?

The explosion at 5:29:45 AM on July 16, 1945 inaugurated a continuing revolution in global affairs. However, the Trinity Site, the precise spot of the detonation in the New Mexican desert, though promising visitors unmediated access to the bomb, actually denies entry into the event or its historical meaning. For that, one must turn to a more imaginative register, one that makes a claim not on the physically real, but on the complexity of the nuclear revolution itself. As comparative modes of display, the physical site of the first atomic explosion pales in comparison to the photographic fantasy, as Nagatani's ambiguous challenge to the present articulates the vital need for critical public engagement—a sorting out of memory, history, and ideology—in an increasingly nuclear age.

Transforming Museums on Postapartheid Tourist Routes

LESLIE WITZ

The demise of apartheid in South Africa in the 1990s and the advent of universal adult franchise were heralded both locally and internationally as marking the beginning of a new democratic nation. A government headed by the African National Congress (ANC) assumed power in 1994 and proclaimed its commitment to a national state where public institutions would be much more accessible, employ a wider and more representative staff, respond to broad societal needs, and restore justice. The elected government called upon the populace, most of whom had been racially excluded from these institutions under apartheid, to bury the past and participate as citizens in the newly constituted nation. Yet in looking forward to the commonality of a postapartheid nation, the idea of forging a collective past that would be aligned with the present and the anticipated "never-ending" future was promoted by the government.[1] Presented as a national inheritance and labeled as heritage, this past was to be utilized as "a powerful agent for cultural identity, reconciliation and nation-building."[2]

Museums as sites for the visual management of the past have become important signifiers in the unfolding of this discourse of a newly rediscovered heritage. Whereas museums in apartheid South Africa were spaces where black people were represented only in "ethnographic collections and exhibits," in postapartheid South Africa they have presented the possibility of changes in the domain of visualizing a new, more inclusive society.[3] By drawing upon