BOMBS AWAY

Curated by Sophie Jerram

Megan Adams . Tony de Lautour . Fiona Jack . Jo Randerson . Richard Reddaway

12 June - 6 July 2002 . The Physics Room . Christchurch . New Zealand

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Fiona Jack, *Fig.23 Miasma*, 2002, digital print, 600x700mm

INTRODUCTION

I first saw the five Government Atomic Testing films that form the basis of Bombs Away, in 1998 when visiting the Center for Land Use Information in Los Angeles. Any notion that these films could be viewed with anything but titillating disbelief or abject horror posed a personal challenge. I became aware, as a New Zealander, how entrenched my attitude against nuclear proliferation was. I was neither able to fully explain the New Zealand position nor to extrapolate it into an international context, apart from communicating the most basic sense of abhorrence at the potential devastation of nuclear weaponry. I also became aware I had not spent any time examining the position of the pro-nuclear nations.

As someone brought up in the provinces of New Zealand during the 1970s, I had neither the independencenor the political awarenessto rally against the Vietnam war, march against the Springboks nor understand the peace squadron protests against nuclear-powered ships in the '70s and '80s. I was born into the ideology of, without understanding the cultural basis of, the anti-nuclear position.

I have asked five artists to respond to, and if possible, explore such issues from the perspective of the countries represented by the five Government Atomic Testing films; to look at the discourses inherent in these films in order that we might learn about our own position. New Zealand's long and fascinating history of anti-nuclear protest is not a feature of, but serves as the implicit context for, Bombs Away.

Sophie Jerram

IT DOES NO HARM TO WONDER why people not unlike us should have chosen to shelter under the nuclear umbrella. Why do populations with which we have much in common allow their governments to build or deploy nuclear weapons, or actively seek the protection of powers which have nuclear weapons?

It is on the face of it irrational to build an arsenal whose use would make the whole planet uninhabitable, to base a defence on a professed willingness to risk the lives of every last one of us, and to underpin international relationships with fear of the unthinkable. This is the essence of nuclear armament.

For all its perversity, the necessity of nuclear weaponry is accepted, or argued, by many who are not otherwise out of touch with reality. Indeed, when New Zealand first adopted its nuclear free policy, the most common rebuke from the policy's critics, both foreign and domestic, was that New Zealand's exclusion of nuclear weapons from its territory was unrealistic. Its supposed idealism was the quality for which the nuclear free policy was most frequently faulted.

This view was not the exclusive property of a political elite. Support for nuclear deterrence was, and is, common among people with whom many in New Zealand might easily identify. Many of us have close ties with the United Kingdom, a country in which the Labour party finally accepted that it could not win a general election until it abandoned its policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament. The Australian Labor party discarded its commitment to nuclear arms control after it came to office, and became the sternest critic of New Zealand's policy.

Exactly why people in the United Kingdom and Australia should support nuclear armament, or why voters in many democratic societies should allow their governments to spend countless billions arming themselves with weapons of mass destruction, is complex, but fear lies at the bottom of it. In the Cold War era, fear was palpable in Europe. Nobody could escape the tension between the great power blocs. Fear that enemies might use nuclear weapons against civilian populations was genuine, whatever its source. Insecurity allowed, or perhaps demanded, an acceptance of the doctrines of nuclear deterrence. Although their use might be threatened, there was consolation in the assumption that the weapons might never be used. The risks of deterrence were lesser in this view than the risks of disarmament.

There was far less immediate cause for fear in this country, but it was present nonetheless. There was considerable attachment to the ANZUS alliance, and some doubt that the nuclear free policy would prevail once it became clear that its price was the end of the active alliance relationship. While alliance membership was most often presented in political and diplomatic circles as a means of getting a hearing from the powerful and promoting our wider international interests, public support for the alliance was more visceral. It rested on the belief that New Zealand needed a powerful protector. This belief lost currency only gradually. Events in the 1980s saw the popularity of the nuclear free policy come to outweigh any lingering sense of insecurity.

The end of the Cold War put an end to much of the fear which had shaped international relations. The nuclear powers were accordingly able to reduce their stockpiles of nuclear weapons and limit their deployment. But nuclear deterrence is far from abandoned. It is still the foundation of military strategy among the nuclear powers. There remain active deployments of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons are not routinely deployed on surface vessels, but the right to deploy them is reserved. Strategic doctrines allow for the first use of nuclear weapons or for their use against countries not themselves armed with nuclear weapons. Technological refinement of weapons and weapons systems continues.

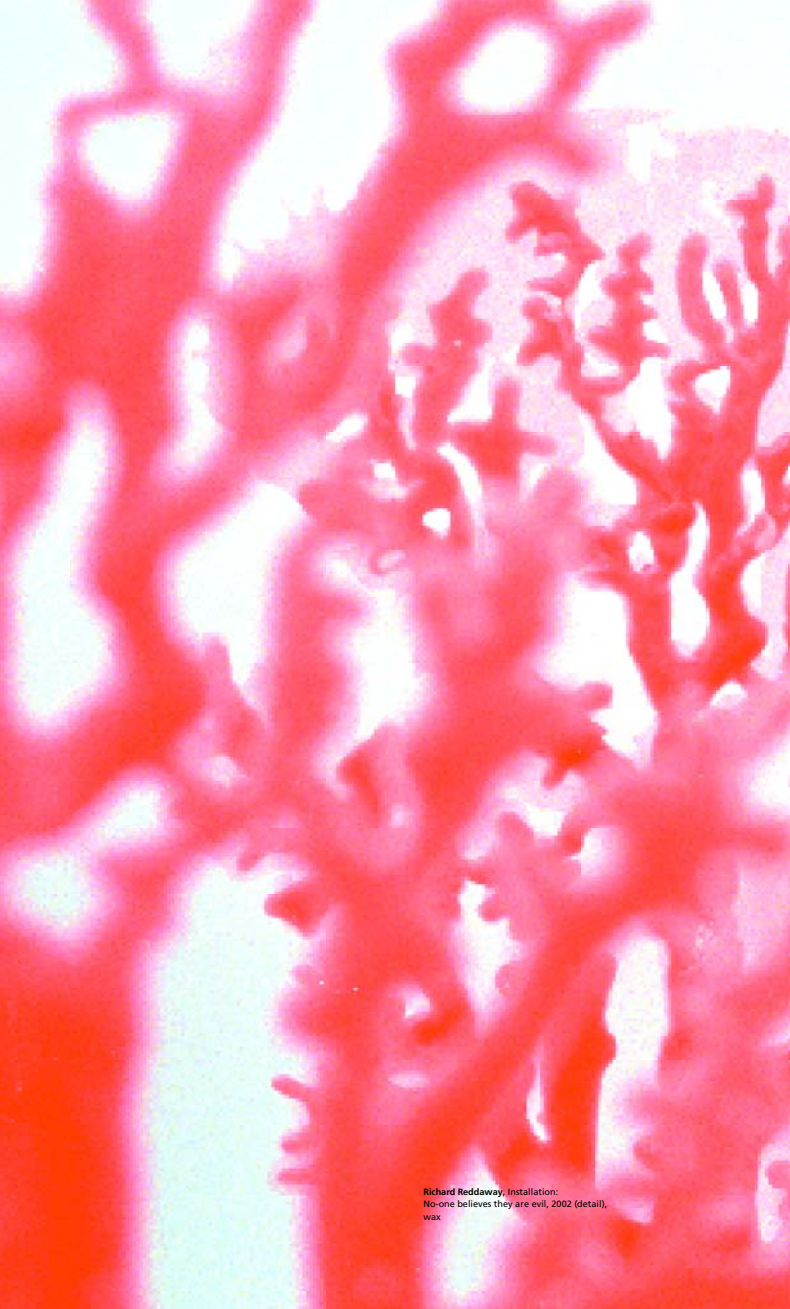
In a climate where the need to openly threaten the use of nuclear weapons has diminished, their possession is more easily tolerated. There seems, for the time being, small chance of their use. They are seen as insurance against some unspecified future risk.

Recent interest in New Zealand in reviving a form of active alliance with the United States feeds on something of this complacency. Because nuclear deterrence is no longer obtrusive, the nuclear free policy may be presented as something of purely symbolic value which could usefully be traded off in exchange for the benefits of a closer relationship with the United States. The advantages of such a closer relationship are rightly a matter for debate, but there is no doubting the price, as a recent episode confirms. New Zealand is still formally, if not actively, allied with the United States. It responded to the terrible events of September 11 with uncalculated sympathy. It sent members of its armed forces into danger in support of the war against terrorism. For all of that we are allowed the overweening condescension of being not an ally but a "very very very good friend". Much foreign policy debate in the future will revolve around whether there is more we can, or should do, in exchange for a different form of words, and what such words might actually be worth.

New Zealand's commitment to its nuclear free policy was tested in many ways in the 1980s, but we were to a great extent distant from the insecurity which led others to embrace nuclear deterrence. We are not in the same way immune from the complacency which allows many to believe that nuclear weapons are no longer a danger simply because their use is no longer openly threatened. The weapons are still with us, and there are still those who justify their presence. Complacency and indifference may in the end prove a greater threat than insecurity to the nuclear free policy.

David Lange
Prime Minister of New Zealand 1984-89

Tony De Lautour, Monument,
2002, acrylic on canvas, 800x1000mm



Richard Reddaway, Installation:
No-one believes they are evil, 2002 (detail),
wax

Megan Adams with Paul Redican,
still from Little Red Dance (Fist), 2002 (detail),
Digital Video

"For now war is self destruction,
and who will dare attack?"
Still from **THIS LITTLE SHIP**, UK 1952

"Comrades from the cultural and arts troupe
penetrate deeply into the area to conduct
propaganda and stimulating activities"
Still from **MAO'S LITTLE RED VIDEO**, People's Republic
of China, 1966, transl. USA Intelligence.

Still from **TEST OF A PURE HYDROGEN BOMB 50 MEGATONS
IN CAPACITY**, USSR c. 1962

"The two to three thousand people who live and
work on Moruroa are gathered together on the
platform specifically designed to withstand the
secondary effects of the shockwave."
Still from **NUCLEAR TESTING AT MORUROA**, France 1995

"While plans of an underground nuclear test are being
completed, and necessary approvals are being received,
a containment evaluation panel carefully reviews all
procedures and construction designs to ensure that the
radioactive material produced by the test will remain
underground, that it will not be released to the atmosphere."
Still from **TESTING NUCLEAR WEAPONS**, USA c. 1978, updated 1989.

Fiona Jack, Fig.23 Miasma, 2002 (detail),
digital print, 600 x 700 mm

Megan Adams with Paul Redican,
still from Little Red Dance (Fist), 2002 (detail),
Digital Video

Jo Randerson, Bird of Doom, 2002,
digital print

Richard Reddaway, Installation:
No-one believes they are evil, 2002 (detail),
wax

Tony De Lautour, Monument, 2002 (detail),
acrylic on canvas, 800x1000mm

LIVING WITHOUT THE BOMB
By Sophie Jerram

"The war started when people accepted the idiotic principle that peace could be maintained by arranging to defend themselves with weapons they couldn't possibly use without committing suicide". So says British scientist Julian Osborne (played by Fred Astaire), when asked to explain how the entire population of the Northern Hemisphere has been annihilated in *On the Beach*, the film based on the anti-nuclear novel by Neville Shute.

On the Beach was made in 1959. Nuclear deterrence was to be used by the five original nuclear nations as a legitimate explanation for the proliferation of nuclear weapons for at least another 30 years. And peace was maintained. We no longer live at 'five minutes to midnight', discussing with our neighbours the best ways to dig our private fall-out shelters. Deterrence, we could say, has been successful.

When *On the Beach* was made, the prevailing thought was that after a nuclear war, fall-out or radiation clouds would inevitably make their way around the world and expose any survivors to such toxic levels of radiation that no-one would be able to live. A complete apocalypse. This too, has been shown to be mistaken. Humans are immensely adaptable, and can survive and breed under trying conditions. Exposure to high levels of radiation will affect a person's genetic makeup, and that of their children, but it will not *necessarily* kill.

Public perceptions of the effects of war and weaponry are eminently malleable. We perceive current evidence to conveniently fit our existing ideologies, whether they are the pro or anti-nuclear cause. The French urban architect, political theorist and peace strategist, Paul Virilio wrote at the close of the Cold War: "...the history of battle is primarily the history of radically changing fields of perception. In other words, war consists not so much in scoring territorial, economic or other material victories as in appropriating the 'immateriality' of perceptual fields"[1]. This is particularly true of the Cold War, where the development of new weapons by the U.S. or Russia was never revealed or proven, but always suggested. New technologies were constantly invented, and the old improved, to defeat the imagined and real arsenal of the enemy.

Following September 11, the enemy for the U.S. has become the potential enemy. Frank Gaffney, a member of the U.S. Center for Security Policy, recently defended the U.S.' leaked announcement that it would be willing to use nuclear weapons against a number of countries: "It's a plan for reversing some of the disconnects that the Clinton administration adopted...This is an approach which says, 'We're going to think about the kinds of weapons we might need to use. We don't want to. We hope we won't have to, but we're going to think seriously about what might be involved, and we're going to make sure that we've got those – that they're ready, that they're reliable, that they're safe and that the infrastructure to make sure all that's possible is in place as well".[2]

Of the five original nuclear nations, the United States' nuclear strategy continues to be the most prominent and widely debated. As the world's only remaining superpower, the United States' continued development of 'tactical' nuclear weapons and its planned missile defence system sets a dangerous example to nations desiring to increase their own military power. Yet the United States' criticism of other countries' desires to test and use nuclear weapons is a 'do as I say, not as I do' approach. There are many contradictions in the U.S.'s portrayal of its weapons program, evident in the film about nuclear testing used as raw material for *Bombs Away*.

It is worth repeating here that the films used in *Bombs Away* are testing films. They therefore allude only to the potential human devastation of the nuclear bomb, rather than to the absolute and real destruction of life as witnessed, for example, in Japan in 1945. The testing film cannot be explicit; the films refer latently to the damage that atomic and hydrogen bombs might inflict. It is up to the viewers to extrapolate the damage that could be incurred by the bombs in a non-testing context.

[1] War and Cinema, Paul Virilio, London: Verso, 1989

[2] in interview on the television programme, Hardball, CNBC, March 12, 2002

Testing Nuclear Weapons, the film made for the U.S. Department of Energy in 1978 and updated in 1989, describes the United States' underground nuclear testing program at the Nevada Test Site. It depicts the employees of the site as members of a considered and sensible scientific community. Its images are 25 years old, but it is the most recent U.S. government film available to the public. It has an air of disclosure, and a friendly, everyday feel. The scientists at the base are shown integrating with the broader community in Las Vegas; and the explanations of the images are set to normalise the activity of the site. The emphasis of the video is on safety measures employed at the testing site; the tone of the video's narrator is moderate and reasonable.

The U.S. as pioneer, pushing the boundaries of science, progressing consumerism for the sake of world peace – these impressions of the superpower are seductive and well practised. And the 'reasonable American' has pre-packaged answers at hand for any objection to war and the proliferation of nuclear weaponry. Fiona Jack's *Miasma* series consists of large, digitised images of billowing grey clouds. They are beautiful, glossy smokescreens, abstracted and ostensibly benign – until we understand that they have been created by the combination of toxic chemicals. The apparent safety of nuclear testing is belied by the vapours in these works– gases that creep insidiously and cannot be contained.

Over the past five years, Jack's work has moved from the appropriation of American-style advertising to a more abstract salute to the murky territories of commercial and governmental messaging. The grey vaporous masses in *Miasma*, like acid rain clouds threaten to seep into our minds and muddy our clear thoughts. Jack was three when the U.S. testing film was made. She describes her dense memories of the fear that, in her childhood, paralysed her in her dreams, and now inform her *Miasma* series:

"I often had nightmares where my body would be falling apart and things around me were melting. These dreams were always monochrome, and it is the only time in my life I remember smelling in my dreams - a clean and sharp acid smell that makes me feel sick even now- 20 years later- if I smell something remotely similar. But the thing I remember being most scared of was this almost invisible gas that would attack my body. I imagined that nuclear war would be very quiet, and that I may not even know that it had happened; that things would just be overcome by this insidious gas."[3]

In contrast to the apparently candid American film, *Testing Nuclear Weapons*, the 1962 Russian film *Test of a Pure Hydrogen Bomb 50 Megatons in Capacity* appeals to a romantic, courageous spirit. The Russian film makers have no qualms about presenting an enchanting, visionary tale of the test of the largest nuclear bomb ever detonated – the 'superbomb', shot with Tarkovsky-style cinematography. It is by far the most beautiful of the atomic testing films, constructed in melodramatic shots and accompanied by a Romantic musical score. Three motifs recur: the isolated, wintry landscape, the impressive gleaming metal bombs under construction, and groups of uniformed officers standing around fuzzy maps of the Siberian peninsular, using rods to rap meaningfully at points here and there. Without knowing the film's verity, these images could well be read as a spoof on the Russian spy film. It is this impression of the Russian and his map that Jo Randerson has chosen to embellish.

Jo Randerson's *Diorama 1 - Russian Crude* presents a view of an entombed Russian comrade, complete with bear, guidebook and vodka, seeking to place himself on the world map, a man yet to secure his place in the world. As an encased figure, behind a glass box, he is now an object of curiosity, a thing of the past, no longer the hero of 19th and 20th Century wars, but a displaced figure, alone and somewhat unsure of his responsibilities with the bomb. Randerson may or may not have been influenced by the travels of her mother, Jackie Randerson, who went to Russia in the early 1980s as part of a Christian peace mission. Jackie describes her own coming to terms with the Russian perspective on nuclear weaponry. The Russians 'would rather have bombs than trousers', and exhibited a simultaneous desire for peace, but also never again to experience the phenomenal loss of human life experience in the Second World War.[4]

[3]Fiona Jack, email to author, May 2002

[4]Jackie Randerson, in conversation with the author, May 2002

In a recent solo theatre piece, *Banging Cymbal, Clanging Gong*, Jo Randerson has explored marginalised, aggressive identities. Jo Randerson plays a lonely Danish punk exploring the world in search of fellow rebels. Like the magpie in the work, *Bird of Doom*, the Russian in *Diorama 1 - Russian Crude* is depicted as a displaced bird, a politicised animal attempting to forge a new identity under the shadow of the post-nuclear age.

Admiralty London: ***Plym, oblivion. Repeat, oblivion. Oblivion***

The last words of the UK film, *This Little Ship*, made in 1952, are a stark acknowledgement of the potential human destruction of the atomic bomb. But *This Little Ship* deflects the potential human consequences of the UK's first nuclear detonation by focusing on the sacrifice of a ship, the HMS Plym, to the nuclear cause.

"For now war is self destruction, and who will dare attack?" This pithy explanation of the penultimate line of the film of deterrence is in keeping with the poetic style in which the film is narrated. It is told by Jack Perkins as a 'Boys Own' story of drama and sacrifice. By allowing the viewer to get to know the HMS Plym before she is destroyed, our emotions are drawn to her loss, rather than to the potential impact of the bomb.

This Little Ship is told with a heavy inevitability; as if the UK naval services are following an ordained path into doom. On a national level, this is pure deception: the UK was leading the development – it was the first country to make serious progress relating to the feasibility of nuclear weapons, and established the "British Mission", a significant group of contributors to the Manhattan Project that developed the bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945.

In *Monument 2002*, Tony de Lautour places his ubiquitous British lion atop a monument to death. The lion clutches a bomb in one hand whilst holding above his head the HMS Plym as one would hold a lamb to the altar. The base of the monument consists of sheer mountains embedded with skulls - this is a lion who has climbed over a lot of slippery slopes to get to the top. He is still proud, though, this lion, even as he threatens to be toppled by the size of the battleship or blown up by the bomb in his hand.

Monument poses the question: Where are our monuments of today? Have we stopped constructing monuments because we recognise that today's heroes can be tomorrow's villains? Monuments capture history in a form that books, paintings or films cannot - in permanent material and in public, they are hard to erase. In *Monument*, De Lautour's lion is a foolish hero; his proudly thrusting chest a visual block to his precarious foothold. How long can he remain at the top of this pillar? Will his head be knocked off, his ship stolen by a marauding vandal? De Lautour reminds us that the ability of the British to embellish, to create heroic narratives, to make the horrific appear romantic, remains unsurpassed.

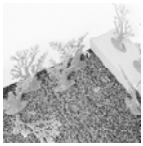
In *Little Red Dance*, Megan Adams and Paul Redican have created a video capturing the refined, celebratory aspects of the Chinese army's highly practised military exercises. They create a fictitious comrade who doubles as a cultural performer (dancer Liana Yew). They draw on the remarkably joyful, celebratory aspects of the highly elaborate preparations for the 1964 nuclear tests as shown in *Mao's Little Red Video* of 1966.

Of all the nuclear nations, probably the least is known about the Chinese nuclear programme, both in 1964 and now. In 1960, the Soviet Union cut aid to China, so the level of resource made available for the nuclear programme within China was unknown. The mystery surrounding its programme has sparked fear more recently in the West that China could be lending nuclear development support to other nations, and China is understood to have assisted Pakistan with its recent nuclear testing.

Mao's Little Red Video was made for internal use in China, but procured by American Intelligence later and a selective American translation was dubbed over the top. We are told that the Chinese are determined to prove that they can do as well as the 'imperialist' nations. The pageantry of the military preparations is grand and impressive, and soldiers are depicted as futuristic warriors pouring from their space suits gallons of sweat after an arduous trek around the desert. Cultural performances are used as 'stimulating activities' for the comrades at the nuclear test site. These cultural performances are as tightly practised as the army drills and scientific processes shown in the film; all in all, the socialist nation is presented as highly polished and disciplined. Of all the government atomic testing films, it is only in this Chinese film that we see women taking an active role in the military work, and the commentary suggests pride in this equity.

The character created by Adams represents both an emancipated female comrade and a replicable member of Mao's army. She is available for sacrifice, but as a tightly trained comrade she would die, not as a rough pawn, but with beauty. In the 'countdown' sequence of *the Little Red Dance*, the comrade's precise movements create the shapes of numerals, a gesture to the inevitability of human loss through the use of nuclear weaponry.

Unlike the U.S., China and Russia, the French have consistently tested outside Mainland France, first in Algeria, then in the South Pacific. It is fitting, then, that Richard Reddaway's wax coral works are growths found in spaces where art would not habitually reside. These are fascinating excretions, made from forcing one substance through another.



Making the film *Nuclear Testing at Moruroa* in 1995 as they broke the International Comprehensive Test-Ban treaty signed only three years earlier, the French provide a coolly scientific explanation of their use of the coral atoll. We are to be reassured by the film's animated images of the drilled core of rock that these explosions will not impact on the wider environment - save for a brief minute or two on the surface of the water. Reddaway's *No-one Believes They are Evil* suggest otherwise – that it is not possible to contain such force without a ripple effect or movement elsewhere. The possibility of their action causing displacement is, to the French, apparently not worth considering. Like their attitude to the peoples in the Pacific, the French assume they can manoeuvre the physical environment without discernible impact.
In one grand display of social and physical manipulation in *Nuclear Testing at Moruroa*, the French have assembled the "two to three thousand people who live and work on Moruroa...on the platform specifically designed to withstand the secondary effects of the shockwave".

Richard Reddaway's brittle waxen works are, like the coral of the atoll, too unstable to maintain their form after exposure to huge climatic changes. Unlike coral, the wax works appear to spawn themselves, like fungus, glowing brightly amongst the unexpected debris of a gallery setting. These mutations are beautiful but oddly disturbing in their fluorescence. Like the French themselves, it is possible to be both charmed and frightened by them.

If New Zealand were to make a film about nuclear testing, where would it be set? I would suggest that it should be set in the land of the '80s – when fears of obliteration, nuclear winters and great masses of refugees from a nuclear war, ran rife. Where are these fears now? For some, the fear of the nuclear threat has been transferred to global warming, for some, to genetic modification, for others, to 'rogue state' terrorism.

In interviews with New Zealanders concerning their memories of the nuclear threat of the 1980s, one aspect is common: the *constancy* of the imagery of the bomb and its effects. Tony Cairns, who co-wrote a book entitled *New Zealand After a Nuclear War*,[5] says that "for the first 20 years of my life I was convinced that I was going to be destroyed by a nuclear bomb... I was dreaming from an early age of being followed by a very huge, Dinsdale-like bomb, about 500 foot long."[6] Books such as his appear anachronistic in the post-Cold War era. They were available alongside images from films including *The Day After* and *On the Beach*, and documentary footage of the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Together these works maintained a fear at the subconscious, as opposed to unconscious level, of the New Zealand public during the 1980s, and contributed to a galvanising of action – a rejection of nuclear weaponry.

The international nuclear threat is perceived to have been diverted since the Cold War. In fact, the threat is ever more present as an increasing number of countries are either developing or purchasing nuclear arms. Their reasoning, that it is unfair for only five nations to keep the secret to the most powerful weapons yet known, when abolition has not yet commenced, has the semblance of reason.

In a recent interview, Paul Virilio suggested that nuclear deterrence has been superseded by a second deterrence: "'the information bomb' associated with the new weaponry of information and communications technologies". He goes on to say "the age of the locally situated bomb such as the atomic bomb has passed. The atomic bomb provoked a specific accident. But the information bomb gives rise to the integral and globally constituted accident".[7]

If this is a post-nuclear age; one in which the immediate threat of global destruction is no longer present, there are now multiple threats, particularly in the control of the content of our information and communications systems. Even with the recent signing of a nuclear arms reduction treaty between the U.S. and Russia is heralded by the major press agencies, new weapons, including a 'bunker busting' nuclear penetrator, are still being proposed by the U.S.[8]

Scepticism regarding the commodification of war imagery is not new. The effects of the media on war are well noted by writers including Baudrilliard, Noam Chomsky and Virilio: the twentieth century is regarded as having been the century in which war was re-defined to fit the television screens. However, what is being hidden from sight is as important to New Zealand as the framed pictures of war and attack.

This current invisibility of the potential consequences of nuclear attack poses a great risk to New Zealand's stance opposing nuclear weapons. During the last fifteen years, the rise in economic power of New Zealand's ex-ally, the United States, has been paralleled by the predominance of global newscasts controlled out of the United States. Unsurprisingly, this has resulted in New Zealanders' receiving little affirmation of New Zealand's anti-nuclear pursuit. Whilst it is deemed of lesser strategic importance on the global newsdesks, it is harder to maintain it on the New Zealand news radar.

But the threat, remains, like Fiona Jack's insidious gases, ever present. The need to manage our own imagery of this and other threats is paramount to our independence of position.

[5] 'New Zealand after a nuclear war', Wren Green, Tony Cairns, Judith Wright, NZ Planning Council, Wellington, 1987

[6] Tony Cairns in interview with the author, May 2002

[7] Paul Virilio in interview with John Armitage, Ctheory Listserv, published October 2001

[8] The Boston Globe, May 14, 2002

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