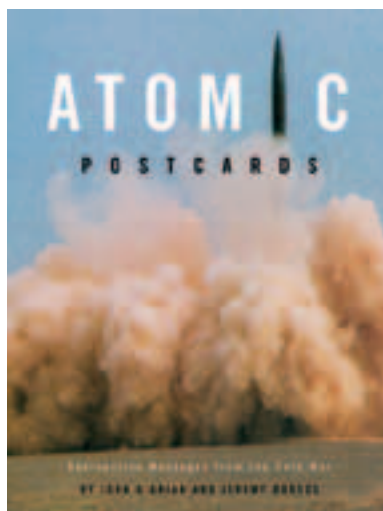


in his own words (or, at any rate, a respectful paraphrasing thereof). Hertz's interview is re-worked into a first-person narrative that blurs the boundary between fact and fiction in a fashion recalling Askevold's own destabilizing moves. A text by Los Angeles-based curator Irene Tsatsos about Askevold's computer-generated series from the 1990s, inspired by the mythology of Halifax Harbour, rounds out the collection.

David Askevold: Once Upon a Time in the East is required reading for anyone engaged in the current project of recovering the history of Conceptual art in Canada as well as those interested in challenging received ideas about the movement as a whole. The book offers a provocative, if uneven, portrait of an artist who has (so far) evaded the critical attention he deserves. The texts are most illuminating in those sections that follow the artist's lead by blending biography and myth. It is an unfortunate commentary on the state of Canadian art criticism and scholarship that an artist who did so much to put Canada on the map appears to be best understood by American artists.

NOTES

- 1 Sol LEWITT, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5:10 (Summer 1967): 80.



Atomic Postcards: Radioactive Messages from the Cold War

JOHN O'BRIAN AND
JEREMY BORSOS

Bristol, UK and Chicago, USA:
Intellect, University of Chicago
Press, 2011
188 p.

Blake Fitzpatrick

"Wish you were here" takes on a dark and unsettling irony when discovered on the reverse side of a postcard depicting an atomic blast. In *Atomic Postcards: Radioactive Messages from the Cold War*, readers are presented with an opportunity to reflect upon the ways in which Cold War nuclear experience is visualized, commented, or left unsaid through the recto/verso of postcard images. In general, postcards tend to be folksy and humble photographic forms. In *Atomic Postcards*, a juxtaposition

of recto and verso, image and text, undermines one's sense of familiarity.

John O'Brian's very perceptive opening text introduces the reader/viewer to an implicit ambiguity at the heart of this collection. Here is a book of small-scale images and texts that have accompanied the bomb since the beginning of the nuclear era and have circled the globe with paradoxically upbeat messages of what might be interpreted as a warning of the end of the world. Visual artist Jeremy Borsos collaborated with O'Brian to scour flea-markets and eBay sites to amass an archive of postwar atomic postcards. O'Brian and Borsos remind us that the deceptively simple postcard is not to be taken for granted but rather seen and read as a most familiar, and hence perhaps most dangerous, discursive support for the lived actuality of atomic destruction itself.

The postcards compiled in this book trace an approximate chronology in the Cold War development of an atomic public image. The earliest postcards depict the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and the volume concludes with images of missile tests in China in 1985. Between these two bookends, the nuclear era unfolds one postcard after another, cutting through popular culture with thematic constellations of visualized atomic experience. What does the nuclear era look like? According to this book, it first appears as an atomic cloud, which is followed by images of industrial plants, nuclear submarines and ships, launched missiles, B-52 bombers, nuclear reactor

cores, atomic museums, nuclear power stations, more missile displays, and the explosive release of surface-to air, underwater-to-ground and ground-to-ground missiles. These images were published as postcards in Belgium, Britain, Canada, China, France, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Philippines, the Soviet Union, Switzerland, and the United States. Circulated around the globe, these postcards have conjoined senders and receivers to construct a linked and distributed nuclear world-view.

The image sequence of the book launches a historical narrative that begins in Japan with a postcard dated 1945/46 that depicts a cloud-like shape, caught in a vertical frame. There can be no mistaking its origins. The publishers have added the words "THE ATOMIC CLOUD" in both English and Japanese script across the image. The raw specificity of this descriptive term links event, text, and image. In the following pages, the atomic cloud is sequentially tied to a set of images recording scenes of destruction at ground zero. Depicted from a near aerial perspective, the burnt-out structure of the Nagarekawa Church in Hiroshima is paired with what remains of a building identified on the front of the card as the 'Industrial Hall in memory at the Atomic Bomb.' Located just 150 metres from the hypocentre, The Industrial Hall has since been renamed the Atomic Bomb Dome and it stands as an iconic monument to the atomic destruction of Hiroshima. The relationship of the cloud to destruction and ultimately to death is reinforced on the following

page as another image identified as an atomic cloud is juxtaposed with the now quite famous image of a dead man's shadow scorched as a dark silhouette on the steps of Osaka Bank, Hiroshima. This singular reminder of atomic death is a significant counterpoint to the other postcards in the book. It reveals an atomic subtext that is typically suppressed by the cheerful messaging of most atomic postcards. Here there are no handwritten comments, no offerings of familial connection or domestication between sender and receiver. The atomic postcards from Japan function as historical evidence that directs attention to itemized damage. These are the events that a postcard fails to domesticate while underlining the memorial charge of the postcard to "never forget."

The majority of the postcards in the book are from the 1950s and 1960s. Viewers are exposed to the self-promotion of American atomic cities – places where the incessant preparation for atomic war functioned to support a local economy while contributing to the massive American military industrial complex that produced and tested nuclear weapons during the Cold War. For example, there are four postcards of the elaborate industrial complex at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, the "City of the Atomic Bomb," complete with handwritten messages from Cold War tourists. The Oak Ridge complex was the top-secret industrial backbone of the Manhattan Project; the postcards are rather bland images of nondescript industrial structures. Echoing Bertolt Brecht's famous remark concerning a

photograph of the Krupp Works, one might say that a photograph of the Clinton Engineering Works in Oak Ridge tells us next to nothing about this institution. Similarly, a postcard of the exterior of the Eldorado Radium and Uranium Extraction Plant in Port Hope, Ontario, functions to keep its secretive operations invisible within. The refinery in Port Hope was the conduit through which Canadian uranium was processed and exported to the United States for research in the Manhattan Project. Thus, a postcard of a nondescript factory on the shores of Lake Ontario hides the front end of an industrial process that would come to conclusion in the atomic leveling of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The handwritten commentary of Cold War tourists on the back of the Oak Ridges postcards is equally evasive, for example, one handwritten message reads: "Hi ya all! Having a great time here at Oak Ridge. Plan to leave tomorrow for Belvidere. Plenty Hot. Love Jim & Cher." That atomic realities are specifically *not* addressed in the handwritten comments of atomic tourists is of critical importance in this book. While the postcard images identify the massive scale of the nuclear weapons industrial complex, the handwritten comments suggest that, to the tourists, the meaning of these facilities is ambiguous at best. One of the eerie pathologies of the nuclear era is the juxtaposition of extraordinary authority and ordinary complacency. As O'Brian suggests, many Cold War atomic postcards reveal contradictions in which "the extraordinary keeps company with

the ordinary, the excessive with the banal” (12).

A confused sense of “what is it?” accompanies the viewing of many of the postcards in the book and this requires language and captioning to identify an answer. Language is a charged subject in nuclear matters. Critics such as Daniel Pick note that the language of nuclear war, including for example the personalization of the bomb dropped on Nagasaki as “Fat Man,” may serve to domesticate unspeakable terror.¹ Language may be particularly necessary for subjects that cannot be seen by the human eye. This includes atomic phenomena that exist below the visible but it also extends to subjects such as nationalistic or humanistic ideals that supersede the visible and can rarely be directly pictured. For example, the book includes postcards depicting photographs of missiles that bear, without intended irony, the postal stamp “Pray for Peace” on the verso. Such juxtapositions serve to override the interpretive frame with an affixed national narrative that the atomic postcard may come to represent.

A crucial aspect of the authors’ commentary is revealed through the viewing and reading of the fronts and backs of atomic postcards. The semantic play of image and text is most effectively revealed by two-page spreads in which the fronts of postcards are juxtaposed with the handwritten messages, postmarks, legends and titles printed onto the backs (inexplicably, the backs precede the fronts on the left side of the two-page spreads, so

instead of an encounter with a recto/verso pairing we have an encounter with a verso/recto). In the case of postcards without handwritten messages, images are reproduced singly on a page, with titles and legends relegated to the Catalogue section at the end of the book. Relegating textual information to a separate section of the book is an aesthetic and conceptual design strategy that adds unencumbered visual appeal to the singular photographs and the insightful juxtaposition of the images provides the opportunity for visual commentary. However, detaching images from contextual information is a debatable strategy in photographic publishing, especially when such textual information might produce a critical counterpoint to the image or, at least, information leading to a fuller understanding of a work’s cultural context. On this score, I found myself at odds with the design of the book, as I was compelled to flip from the image to its title and legend at the back of the volume for each and every postcard. A design strategy that engaged the reader in a series of recto/verso encounters would have added conceptual and material consistency, while heightening the reader’s engagement with the cultural context of the book.

These recto/verso images and texts are the turning points that structure a tourist’s relationship to the atomic world. For those of us on the outside of the nuclear establishment, there can be no unmediated public engagement with the secretive atomic world. We are reliant on the images and texts that have

been constructed about it. O'Brian and Borsos are to be commended for having produced a provocative and deceptively charming book. Their *Atomic Postcards* points to a neglected site of tension between the history and memory of the atomic era by directing our attention to the meaning of atomic experience as it might have arrived in the mail.

NOTES

- 1 See Daniel PICK, *War Machine: The Rationalisation of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 263.