

THE RADIANTS

Bortolami Gallery, New York

In his recent book, *After Fukushima* (2014), Jean-Luc Nancy draws out the philosophical ramifications of the 2011 catastrophe in Japan: the undersea earthquake that caused a tsunami that led to a nuclear disaster whose effects continue to extend today even further into global social, economic and political spheres. 'It is the interdependent totality of our technologized world whose truth we must think about.' Such a world formed the backdrop for 'The Radiants', a group exhibition curated by Jacob King and UNITED BROTHERS, which, in taking 'radiation' as an open-ended theme, did some of this thinking.

Fukushima provided more than a frame for the show; it was the point from which it extended, almost literally. UNITED BROTHERS is a collaborative project between Fukushima-born brothers Ei and Tomoo Arakawa, which was initiated using compensatory funds they received from the power company following the disaster. Together, they founded Green Tea Gallery, a 'fake' art gallery that intends to bring international artists, mostly friends, into a conversation around Fukushima. Here, you might already sense one kind of radiation at work, in the form of a discourse projecting out from the aftermath of the nuclear disaster, which gradually implicates more and more people. Their work at Bortolami included a barely there cardboard 'room' housing a television (*Green Tea Gallery Viewing Room*, 2015) screening two of their hour-long science-fiction movies whose lengthy cast lists include mainly artists, writers and gallerists. Set in the international art world, the films tell (badly and hysterically) of UNITED BROTHERS' struggle against a plot by a group of mad scientists seeking to control the world's nuclear plants, resulting in occasional battles between art-powered androids.

'Art energy' could be said to be one organizing principle of the show, at least in the sense that several of the pieces intertwined meaning with symbolic performances of radiation. For example, on the floor in the centre of the largest room in the gallery was a solo piece by Ei Arakawa, *Nuclear Lanterns (Fukushima Daiichi Unit 1 to 4)*, (2015): four small lamps designed after the four broken reactors in Fukushima, which added to the overhead light illuminating the works in the exhibition. Likewise, all of the work in the

show was placed within earshot of a piece by Sergei Tcherepnin (*Radiation Yield Route 6 (Version 2)*, 2015), which emitted a dull tapping sound with varying frequency corresponding to levels of radiation encountered during a drive between the homes of the Arakawas' relatives in the area near Fukushima. A piece by Jay Chung and Q Takeki Maeda (*March Painting*, 2015), an understated blue painting made with a special, radiation-absorbing pigment, works like an antithesis to both of these by actually neutralizing radiation, rather than symbolically releasing it.

The exhibition drew artworks out of an international network and aligned them to expand its thinking: if radiation has the potential to alter living bodies at the invisible level of their DNA, many of the works included seemed to undergo a similarly subtle but fundamental transformation as they passed through the discursive zone of the show. For example, seen through its contemporary lens, works from the 1950s by artists Tatsuo Ikeda and Enrico Baj looked portentous, transmitting anxieties surrounding nuclear technology after the then-recent bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One dark abstract painting by Baj that frenetically visualizes nuclear catastrophe (*Esplosione, Explosion*, 1951) found unexpected resonance with a nearby piece by Kerstin Brätsch, who, via the technique of marbling, wrested a crystal-clear image from the totally entropic situation of pigment floating on the surface of water (*Pele's Curse_Unstable Talismanic Rendering Series*] with *Gratitude to Master Marbler Dirk Lange*, 2014). Other works that may, at first, have seemed entirely unrelated could not escape the show's pull. In this context, the silver mylar string curtain by Jutta Koether that hung in front of her painting (*Untitled*, 2008) became legible as an inadequate barrier for the hot-pink picture, which beamed through ominously.

By assembling many practices that are conceptually and geographically disparate, 'The Radiants' felt broadly contiguous with UNITED BROTHERS' project as a whole. In drawing its audience's attention to Fukushima and mobilizing artworks to amplify its reality, the exhibition makes an intervention into a global system that's become inconceivably interdependent, while also posing possibilities for thinking about art's place within it.

SCOTT ROBEN

ALFREDO JAAR

Galerie Lelong, New York

Bodies wracked by grief, convulsed by the shock of politics, immortalized by the click of a camera's shutter: these were the raw materials of Alfredo Jaar's latest, multi-room installation. Using as its touchstone a 1978 photograph taken in Nicaragua, *Shadows* (2015) pared back the image to two central figures, whose distressed forms became detached from the larger photograph in an arresting, one-minute loop of flashing and fading. *Shadows* is part of a trilogy of works that also includes *The Sound of Silence* (2006), which used one of South African photojournalist Kevin Carter's images of the 1994 famine in Sudan. With *Shadows*, Jaar turned to the work of the Dutch photographer Koen Wessing, mounting several of his shots in light boxes along darkened corridors, and projecting the principal image – of two Nicaraguan women reacting to news of their father's senseless death – onto a sprawling white screen in a pitch-black room at the installation's centre.

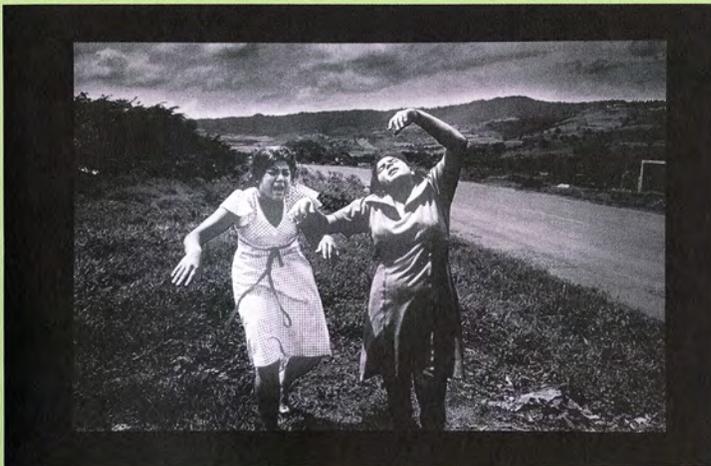
Wessing trained his camera on the murder of a farmer in Esteli, Nicaragua, by the National Guard under the country's dictator, Anastasio 'Tachito' Somoza. Following the deceased man's fellow farmers as they carried his body home, Wessing snapped – among other subjects – the victim's two daughters, who had just received word of their father's fate. One lurches forward, her face contorted and mouth open in a cry of anguish; at her side, her sister swoons with eyes closed, as if about to faint.

The exhibition included a video interview with Wessing that could be listened to on headphones. The conversation explores both the origin and the aftermath of his photograph – one that, Wessing confesses, still gives him nightmares decades later. Six smaller images were displayed in LED light boxes in the corridor leading to and from the central room. These photographs lent further context – temporal, topographical and familial – to the exhibition's principal, spare image. In them, we see farmers leaning against a bus with their hands up, as a policeman trains his gun on them; we find the victim's dead body at the side of the road, his skull shattered at the upper right; we observe solemn family members and neighbours reacting to news of his death with dismay or disbelief; we witness his daughters mourning at home next to their father's body, lying in state with a cloth draped over his shattered face.

Yet, contrasted with the central image of the two women breaking down, these additional photographs dilate with the agony of bereavement, or a more general sense of uncertainty and confusion. In the main photograph, the women's bodies appear set off against an unremarkable valley traversed by a simple dirt road. Indeed, the landscape in front of which they stand could be anywhere and, while their faces bear Central or South American features, their bodies' forms appear with a universally visceral spontaneity: an anguish that transcends the particularity of their physiognomies or nationality.



1



2

To this degree, Wessing's image – unwittingly, yet perhaps necessarily – approximates something of history painting, Jaar's inflation of the bodies to larger-than-life size on the screen heightens that sense of monumentality.

It is, however, Jaar's treatment of the photograph that endows *Shadows* with a further, implicit commentary upon its medium and its rapport with memory. The image, at first, briefly congeals on the screen in its original state. The women then appear, increasingly detached from the surrounding image, as their bodies in turn fade to white, which gradually became a glaring, even blinding, light, outlined by the silhouette of their forms. Meanwhile, a gentle hum becomes a frenzied whirring. Presumably originating from the fans necessary to cool such a high-intensity lamp, the sound becomes – in its high-pitched agitation – a fitting aural accompaniment to the blinding light.

If the light evokes a camera's flash, the image's gradual coming into focus instead conjures up a photographic print in a darkroom, its contours slowly revealed in the developer's bath, its graininess sharpening into detail. Once in focus, the picture gradually fades out, suggesting, perhaps, the slow leeching of memory from events or, more pointedly, the active, insidious erasure of memory by those for whom oblivion is politically expedient. As the women become drained of their personhood, leaving only empty outlines, we are reminded of the effect of politics upon actual bodies.

I was disappointed that Jaar's first-rate work did not name the women and their murdered father. This risked further stripping their agency and individuality, leaving them merely victims or archetypes. They are these, too, to be sure. To that end, Wessing is asked in the installation's video if his photograph recalls Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) or Osip Zadkine's *The Destroyed City* (1951), a large sculpture of a buckling figure with upraised hands, which commemorates Rotterdam's destruction by the Nazi Luftwaffe. 'No,' Wessing replies, 'It's more like a Greek tragedy; this had to happen in South America.'

ARA H. MERJIAN

VIVIENNE GRIFFIN

Bureau, New York

Intimacy (2015) is a circle made of alabaster placed atop a limestone base. The materials contrast – the alabaster shines in pink and blue hues against the off-white stone – but they also complement each other. An implied narrative – Are they connected? Can the circular form roll off the square? What sound will it make as it spins through the space? – enhances the sense, conveyed by the romantic title of the piece, that together they make something meaningful. Vivienne Griffin's exhibition examines sculpture and the attributes of matter, while constantly pointing away from it to more theoretical terrains. Regrettably, the artist never addresses these head on.

The gallery is mostly taken up by a collection of small sculptures on plinths made of steel and marble. There are six alabaster pieces, the mineral finely worked to create geometric shapes – circles, squares – then conflated with distinctly different materials. *The Nostalgia of an Object* (2014–15) is a polished rectangle resting on a piece of memory foam, the shapes in continual battle of mass and contact. In *The Bastardization of Dawn* (2014–15) Griffin morphs the material by painting the alabaster with acrylic, then enhancing the tints by placing a light bulb beside it. The light bulb makes another appearance in *Intimacy (again)* (2015), where the same circular painted alabaster is placed on a plinth with a light bulb behind it. Two other sculptures, *The Glamour of Ornament*

1
'The Radiants',
2015, installation view

2
Alfredo Jaar
Shadows (detail), 2014, video still;
original photograph by Koen Wessing,
Esteli, Nicaragua, September 1978

3
Vivienne Griffin
Intimacy (again), 2015, alabaster,
watercolour, limestone, tempered steel,
87 × 41 × 30 cm

and *The Glamour of Ornament 2* (both 2015) bring together Polyphant stones with golden hoops and chains pierced through them. The holes that puncture the decorative English stones (named after the village next to which they are quarried) also run through the idea of the ornamentation inherent to the material (casting further meaning on the alabaster pieces, too). The inclusion of the gold jewellery in them furthers the *fin-de-siècle* associations, beyond the use of the word 'ornament', which echoes Adolf Loos's 1908 lecture 'Ornament and Crime'. A series of ink-on-paper drawings deal with mundane subjects – a trash bin, a faucet – drawn with careful attention to detail. One untitled drawing of a gold bracelet (2014) brings to mind the gold hoops in the sculptures, and this relation between the drawings and the sculptures gives the exhibition a sense of being a very coherent body of work.

The value of Griffin's smaller inquiries is in the fact that this is not a show about process, nor is it about perfection, though the pieces are all exquisitely finished. Griffin's examination of modernism, from the design of the steel and marble plinths to the assessment of decoration and ornament, puts this focus on materiality in a historical perspective, one that could have benefited from a somewhat more direct discussion that goes beyond just the artworks' titles.

Though the space is filled with the sculptures and drawings, it is a sound piece, *The Only Way is Out* (2015) that sets the tone for the show. Playing from a broken iPhone on the floor, the two-channel audio track echoes through the room, with a woman singing a cappella ('I've been thinking about sitting in a chair in a room'), a drum hum and some soft electric guitar. In her previous exhibition at the gallery in 2013, Griffin also included a sound work, in that case a computerized voice reading playwright Sarah Kane's last script, *4:48 Psychosis*, written before her death in 1999. *The Only Way is Out* is not as haunting as listening to that digitized account of clinical depression, but it resonates just as strongly throughout the space. It's harmonic and wistful ('How could I be such a fool?') and draws the viewer in. This sonic presence highlights Griffin's complex, layered way of thinking about work and its presentation.

ORIT GAT



3