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NEW ART EXAMINER

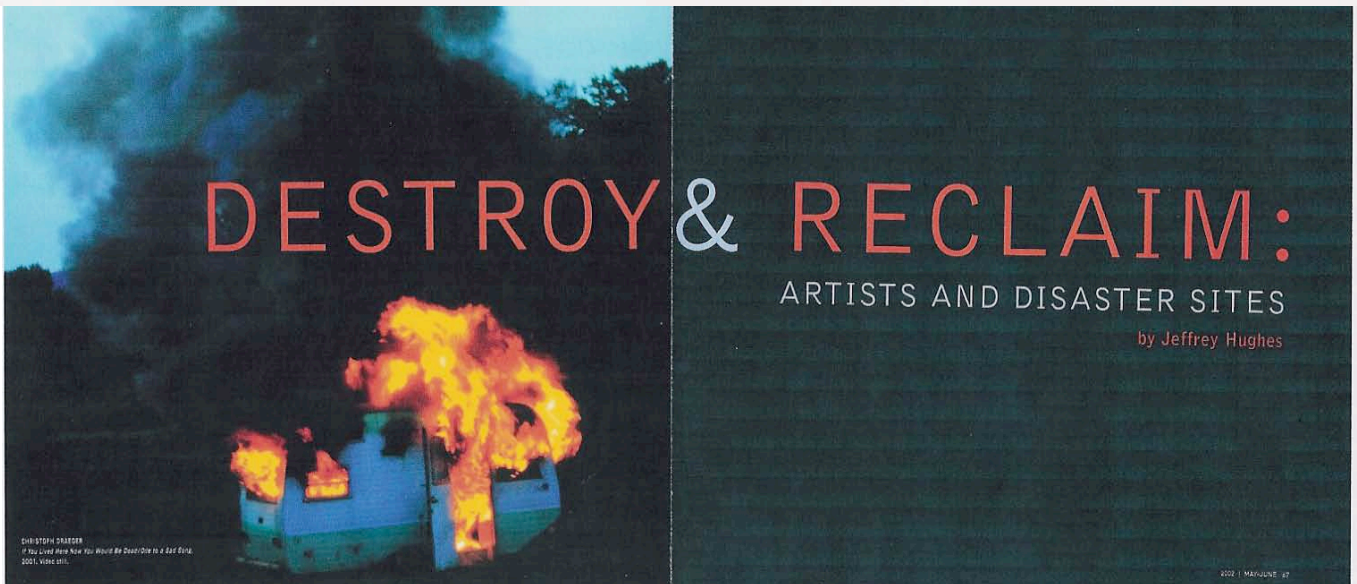
ART & VISUAL CULTURE FROM THE GREATER MIDWEST

SEVERAL CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

and artists' groups have addressed the effects and consequences of technological society, using various conceptual and aesthetic strategies to examine the environmental and human costs of post-industrial cultures. With this work artists have examined and shaped our personal experiences of fear, loss, and the existential quandary of how to cope with destruction brought about by technological misuse, abuse, and accident. The question arises: Can art be a vehicle both to describe disaster and its effects and to proffer redemptive possibilities?

The creation of art often has been closely tied to an impulse both to destroy and to reclaim. During the 1960s, this trend was especially prevalent in various, now rarely celebrated instances such as John Baldessari's destruction of the entire contents of his studio, Niki de Saint-Phalle's shoot pieces, or the Destruction in Art Symposium and the activities surrounding one of its primary proponents, Rafael Ortiz. Andy Warhol's chilling "Disaster" series from the 1960s remains among the most strident visual commentaries on that decade.

Recently, Michael Landy's infamous *Break Down* proposes a self-possessed and highly self-controlled examination of the value of commodity. Landy's wholesale mechanical destruction of his personal possessions, including a Gary Hume painting, was staged as though all objects were the raw material of industrial processes of demolition and remaking. Although it has several historical precedents, Landy's obliteration of material commodity and personal possession speaks to an ironic and substantive rejection of the products of manufactory.



Landy's activities indicate not merely a destructive impulse toward the art object, but rather a nihilistic act of creation itself. However, even with these antecedents, the subject of disaster has been only occasionally investigated by artists.

Even without the recent devastating images of war and terrorism, mass media pushes daily reminders of the aesthetics of horror. These images come on all fronts: While we are inundated (perhaps invaded) by cataclysmic imagery from various print, television, and Internet news coverage,

seemingly benign popular television entertainment offers an abundance of programming dedicated to "real-life" catastrophe. Cable television shows such as the History Channel's ongoing series of World War II documentaries, Discovery Channel's programs on natural disasters, and Animal Planet's scenes of veterinary emergencies provide a non-stop message of the immediacy of disaster.

This mass-media vision has been taken up by artists in ways that both explore popular reception of disaster imagery and

attempt to use art to expose and reclaim disaster sites. Martin Heidegger's writing on the dangers of technology provides a possible theoretical framework for assessing art about industrial disaster. Heidegger asserted that technology at its essence is an organizational activity. In modern technology all the powers of nature can be organized for the sake of utility or exploitation in order to bring forth commodities in the form of stored energy and other products. According to Heidegger, technology usurps the essence of nature, so that the

natural world is no longer an independent entity but a force controlled by technological processes. The human and environmental devastation brought about by industrial machinations is, therefore, directly symptomatic of the Western world view, which diminishes nature and privileges human consciousness. Artists reveal this nature/technology division using various strategies. Swiss artist Christoph Draeger reframes images of real and invented disaster sites, while Adam Frelin and Frances Whitehead reconfigure and reclaim the physical sites of potential and actual industrial disasters.

For the past decade Draeger, who lives and works in New York, has documented and commented on the sites of both natural and manufactured disasters. Unlike many of its art-historical predecessors, Draeger's work deconstructs images that have been widely and sometimes indelibly etched into the collective consciousness, by presenting their subjects in unexpected ways. Draeger approaches the multi-dimensional subject matter of disaster through strategies such as re-enacting action or thriller films. He creates photographs, video installations, and complex gallery environments that replicate ruinous sites, destroyed houses, or burned trailer parks, all involving a resounding critique of the preponderance of the mass-media sound byte.

Draeger reveals that unconstrained technology is both the cure and the cause of disaster. In the ongoing series "Voyages Apocalyptiques," begun in 1994, Draeger visits and photographs the sites of well-documented acts of violence and occasions of natural disaster. The stylistic quality of these re-tellings or re-visualizations imitates objective reportage. But Draeger's strategy of reframing familiar sites in unfamiliar ways is more a critique of the supposed objectivity of the photojournalistic document, a myth that is at least partially constructed by the ubiquity of mass media. His journeys to disaster sites temper the iconic impact as well as the redundancy (produced by media overexposure) of the emotionally charged original occurrences.

In *18,250 Days After*, Draeger photographed the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the fourth and seventh days of August 1995, at the precise moments when 50 years earlier the atomic

bombs were dropped on these densely populated industrial cities. In Draeger's photographs the build-up of post-war industrial development is obvious, but because he denies them iconic status there is no way of moralizing or fetishizing the images of the contemporary Japanese cities. All the information of disaster one expects to find in documentation of the historical events is extraneous to the "healed" environs of the present. The cities are again densely populated and display panoramas of urban sprawl. Our knowledge of the tragic beginning of the atomic age lies just below the surface of the tranquil image of the sun setting over present-day Hiroshima.

Does mass culture's encyclopedic indexing of catastrophe construct our sense of a present or immanent apocalyptic reality? Or do we use cognitive dissonance—a kind of *not* looking—as a method of coping? Rather than merely functioning like commentary on CNN, Draeger's images force viewers to confront our visual memories of public disasters. He photographed the World Trade Center for "Voyages Apocalyptiques" in 1994, during reconstruction of the building following the 1993 bombing incident. By choosing this comparatively benign and static moment in the history of the event, Draeger produced a photograph that was conceptually and literally outside the contemporaneous mainstream media imagery. While the latter arguably was intended to invoke an emotional response and ultimately to build the public's case against the perpetrators of the bombing, Draeger's piece now functions as a historical document in the life of the building as both an architectural object and a memorialized symbol. Last September, Draeger photographed the smoking rubble at Ground Zero, and plans to continue recording the further evolution of that site of grave disaster; presumably, his results will again involve non-standard images of the now-iconic locale. Draeger's photos of disaster sites are nearly an archaeological foretelling—a prediction of obvious and unstoppable change in which the past reverberates through a historical documentary image.

Disaster is often used as a metaphor for the post-trauma human activity of reconstructing a shattered reality from myriad possibilities. Movies have often capitalized on this device: after some difficulty with a

tornado Dorothy finds her way home, or Mel Gibson and Sissy Spacek in *The River* save the family farm and the nuclear family from the great flood. More recent Hollywood fare such as *The Perfect Storm* has given up on happy, redemptive endings for the survivors of disaster. In the "real" world, natural and technological disasters are cataclysmic events within a larger cycle of making and unmaking. Draeger's TWA 800 from 1998 is a large acrylic paint-jet print of the airplane's reassembled fuselage on a jigsaw puzzle. The enormity of the task of rebuilding the plane from recovered remnants to reconstruct the moment of missile attack, fuel-tank explosion, or whichever theory would prevail, all became encoded in the famous news photograph Draeger appropriated as the source of his piece. Like the process of reconstruction following disaster, the 7500 pieces of Draeger's print define an organizational activity. Like the engineers, the viewers are involved with the same series of determinations: How long does it take to put together such an intricate puzzle? Where's the first piece? More importantly, at the end of the exacting and exasperating process all that is revealed is the image—a doppelgänger—of the original object. As with news-media images, Draeger asks whether this reconstructed image can be trusted.

Opening just over a week after 9/11, Draeger's recent installation at a gallery in Brooklyn came at an uncomfortably close proximity to the horrific events. Originally titled "If You Lived Here You Would Be Dead Now," and retitled "Ode to a Sad Song" prior to its opening, the work simulates the terror of a rapid and uncontrollable conflagration within the confines of a trailer park. The installation included both video and a life-size maquette with an actual burned out trailer. A video inside the trailer depicted a young woman drunkenly self-immolating, while a stark conclusion was offered by another video of the trailer bursting into flames in a rural, outdoor setting, projected on one gallery wall. The remaining three walls were filled with projected images of a tropical forest, perhaps serving a restorative purpose.

Concurrently, Michael Rush's exhibition "Brooklyn!" at the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art included Draeger's 2000 video collage *Crash*. This video depicts a series of air catastrophes starting with the

1937 crash of the Hindenburg (the first real-time disaster caught on news coverage). It includes World War documentary footage, test crashes, news clips, and air-crash scenes from Hollywood movies. Fiction and reality are fused as seamless entities. The visual products of both Hollywood and the news-media are synonymous, as technologies that organize random information into fixed representations. Draeger's works are not voyeuristic; rather their questioning of visual authenticity uncovers the ways in which images exploitatively manipulate perception.

Where Draeger is concerned with repositioning public reception of images of technological disaster, other artists address the interaction of technological process and excess within the public sphere. A recent transplant to St. Louis from California, Adam Frelin has built a body of work addressing the hidden byways in the public domain through activities of subversion. He has examined the public water systems in several communities as examples of both social and environmental control. His works range from the clandestine rerouting of water systems in the "Public Bathroom" and "Drinking Fountain" projects to Oldenburger monument proposals. Some of these works have verged on something well beyond playful vandalism. *Water Rerouting Initiatives* from 2001 redirects water via Rube Goldberg-like series of pipes and funnels made of different colored duct tape. In these pieces the water is moved from one expected and authorized location (like a sink) to another, then circuitously returned either to its origin or to an unanticipated yet logical third location. For example, *Sushi Fountain* links a urinal that when flushed directs a small amount of water into a neighboring urinal, underscoring notions of use and disuse. In *Mesa Sprinkler Fountain* from 2000 the artist temporarily (and illegally) removed the cap of a sprinkler head on the lawn of a housing development, allowing all the underground water pressure to release in a single burst, creating a fountain that spewed 30 feet into the air.

Although primarily concerned with redirecting viewers' assumptions, Frelin's *Sleubreak* also addresses the threat of environmental catastrophe by highlighting awareness of a factory's water run-off as the locus of interrelated aesthetic and envi-



ABOVE, TOP:
CHRISTOPH DRAEGER

World Trade Center, New York City, USA, Sept. 11, 2001, 2001, from "Voyages Apocalyptiques."
Color photograph.

BOTTOM:
CHRISTOPH DRAEGER

World Trade Center, New York City, USA, June 24, 1994, 1994, from "Voyages Apocalyptiques."
Color photograph.

ronmental issues. With a pick-axe he surreptitiously smashed open a section of a hidden concrete water slew below a factory, then rerouted the water through a winding channel he constructed from steel plates and curved terra-cotta roof tiles. As it dynamically coursed along the tiles, the utilitarian, environmentally suspect (potentially disastrous) water was removed from its functional origin, and thus regenerated and made over as a decorative contrivance. In a recent collaboration with printmaker Tom Lang, Frelin is attempting to focus such covert activities into the realm of public land usage. The pair is working on a local park project that would redirect the water run-off from a public golf course in a functional, aesthetically interesting, and environmentally responsible manner.

Chicago-based artist Frances Whitehead is similarly concerned with attempts to reposition the artist as environmental activist, expanding the subject matter of disaster to include art as a means of reclaiming disaster sites. For several years, Whitehead has created intricate conceptual works addressing the imposition of authority, often critiquing the visibility and implicit scientific legitimization of the museum exhibition. For example, her recent work *Strange Attractors* replicates and enlarges to human scale the traditional spreading board for mounting insects, replete with display case, giant pins, and instructions for creating specimens.

As many of Whitehead's works have been predicated on language and science, it seems a logical progression for the artist to turn her attention to environmentally based public projects. The environmental destruction and economic impact of surface mining in Appalachia and certain parts of the Midwest is an often-overlooked remnant of an earlier, pre-regulatory period. There remain pockets of mining culture, essentially small relics of the mentality and abuses of company towns like the notorious coal-mining town of Herrin, Illinois of the 1920s, in several rural communities today. Whitehead has been working in collaboration with engineers and planners on the *Ball Diamond Project* for Murray City, Ohio. In this pilot project of the Arts and Appalachian Clean Streams Program, supported by the National Endowment for

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the Arts and the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Surface Mining, the design team has sought to conceptualize a technologically safe, aesthetically satisfying, and utilitarian reclamation of an acid mine drainage pollution site. The Murray City site is intended to provide recreation, community awareness, and interaction. Whitehead's in-depth proposal, which will be used by the local community to raise funding to build the project, includes the writings of local children and various vernacular words and phrases as visual reminders of the indigenous coal-mining culture, prominently and iconically imbedded as part of the sculpted park setting. Since underground mine drainage is the greatest cause of pollution at the site, the collaborative team of artist, historian, landscape architect, and engineers has sought to include aspects of recreational water usage in the overall plan. Sculpted concrete ponds that purify the acid-tainted water will double as wading areas, skating rinks, and (when dry) skate bowls, while a creek-side amphitheater will function as both a performance space and a flood gauge.

Whitehead envisions a place where cultural events, recreation, education, and environmental reclamation will coexist within an overall sculptural environment.

Whitehead's attempt to move reclamation to the forefront of creation is an important direction both as it narrows the distance between art and life, and defines the former as a meaningful force for social change. Taking different conceptual approaches, Whitehead, Frelin, and Draeger have all framed the disaster site, despite its magnitude, within the politics of the universal-as-local. ♦

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