

LAND/ART NEW MEXICO: A COLLABORATION EXPLORING LAND-BASED ART

"Batter my heart three-person'd God..."

—From the poem by John Donne and used in the libretto for the character of J. Robert Oppenheimer in the opera *Dr. Atomic*, music by John Adams, lyrics by Peter Sellars.

We were on a bus headed for Los Alamos under the auspices of the Center for Land Use Interpretation, or CLUI for short. Matthew Coolidge, the director of CLUI and our tour guide, used the occasion to hone his vision of history. There is the PAST—which means everything that happened before The Manhattan Project, and there is the PRESENT—everything that comes after the creation of The Bomb. From 1943 to now represents not even one blink of the eye of Oppenheimer's three person'd God. (This poem was Oppenheimer's favorite.) Indeed, God, or the gods did not, however remotely, blink. *Did they?* I think if the gods had allowed themselves one little twitching of the eye, and a subsequent nano-catch of a breath, then perhaps Nevil Shute would not have had to write his devastating book *On the Beach* which limns the ending of the world as we know it by radioactive poisoning. We live in an era of interpretation. We try to decipher all the mixed signals that nature and culture present to us and then we have to decide what is worth caring about and how to go about caring.

"We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when, but I know we'll meet again some sunny daaay...." Some of us did sing along as the lyrics of this emblematic song from

the WW II era accompanied the final image of the movie *Dr. Strangelove*, which came up on the video screens installed in our bus. Then our extraordinary trip—shepherded by the real-life presence of the gnomic Coolidge along with the ghosts of Oppenheimer, General Leslie Groves, the late Ed Grothus of The Black Hole, and The Man Who Fell to Earth on a slagheap in Madrid—was over. And we were left with the question: Which "version" of New Mexico do you turn to and cultivate as you cruise its North/South, East/West axes in search of the memorable? Which version of itself does the New Mexico landscape present at any given moment when the sun rakes across the exquisite scenery, turning it shades of ochre and mauve, as the reality of our artificially created Big Bright Light blinds the future? There is no resolution, at this point in time, to the Faustian bargain that was made in the 1940s on the Pajarito Plateau; there is only the journey on these roads from hell, these paths of righteousness that go as the crow flies.

In between the poles of the unnatural and the natural are the activities of individuals doing interesting projects full of doubt and speculation. Here are some of these projects that are part of *Land/Art New Mexico*: Katie Holten's carbon footprints charted during a four month period of her life and crocheted in black yarn; Pipó Nguyen-duy's ironic photographs pointing to weird nature/culture non sequiturs; Bill Gilbert's long walk between his home in Cerrillos and his office in Albuquerque; the monoprints of Norman Akers that attempt to visually describe the boundaries that have

come to define him; Lynne Hull's habitats for humanity's wildlife; and lots of maps—representing private places and much less private ones where we can meet up and Twitter as dams are built, cities are flooded, mountain tops are removed, nuclear weapons are stockpiled, and five hundred volunteers move a sand dune, on cue, a scant five inches. Who would want to orchestrate a spectacle like that? The artist Francis Alys. And why? Apparently, just because he could.

The founding organizations for *Land/Art New Mexico*—with its stunning, six-month-long series of exhibitions, talks, walks, tours, poetry readings, and performances—are 516 Arts, The Albuquerque Museum, Contemporary Art Society of New Mexico, THE LAND/an art site, and the University of New Mexico Art Museum, plus numerous individuals, partnering organizations, and galleries in Santa Fe, Albuquerque, and beyond. It was this collaborative spirit, drive, and focus that brought CLUI to New Mexico along with a roster of artists who are based not only in the Southwest but from various parts of the globe. For those who like their art on the thorny and conceptual side, there is *Experimental Geography* at The Albuquerque Museum, a beautifully installed group show that includes a video *When Faith Moves Mountains* about the previously mentioned sand-dune transposition. I leave it up to you to decide for yourselves whether this piece is a self-indulgent and inane waste of time, particularly as it takes place in Lima, Peru, a country with many pressing social needs that are a far cry from this conceptual dead end. The Albuquerque Museum also hosted an overview of land-based projects presented by artist Lynne Hull followed by a symposium—with Matt Coolidge, Bill Gilbert, Katie Holten, Lize Mogel, and Lea Rekow—which, alas, ended after only one hour—just when it was morphing from good to really good.

Experimental Geography was curated by Nato Thompson, head curator at Creative Time in New York City, and in talking about "The New Geography" for *Bookforum*, Thompson said, "Ultimately all phenomena resolve themselves in space. Cultural and material production are not simply abstract ideas, but are forces that shape who and what we are, and they do so in places we can walk to, intervene in, and tour." This brings me back to our bus adventure and CLUI, widely acknowledged and respected for its category-defying research and documentation of sites looked at through the prism of cultural geography—or as Coolidge would have it, CLUI studies and interprets sites through the lens of Anthrogeomorphology—the shape of the Earth as rendered by humans. (*To be continued.*)

—DIANE ARMITAGE



Inside the Center for Land Use Interpretation Bus, on the way to Los Alamos, June 27, 2009