Neither to Criticize Nor Glorify: Paul Shambroom’s Studied Objectivity


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Although apparently opposites, vigilance and apathy operate in shared obscurity in Paul Shambroom’s photographs. We are barred entry to the installations in Nuclear Weapons and we prefer to let others attend to the procedures in Meetings. Depicting these polarized institutions with his trademark quasi-clinical objectivity, Shambroom captures revealing details of, and intriguing connections between, these little-seen loci of power.

He developed his stance of studied impartiality in 1990 when seeking permission to photograph America’s nuclear arsenal. “My intention is neither to criticize nor glorify nuclear weapons,” he wrote to Navy and Air Force officials requesting their cooperation. To Shambroom, nuclear bombs represented “the ultimate in power” and gaining access to depict them and show what was hidden “the ultimate professional challenge,” requiring the diplomacy, persuasion, and patience more often associated with doing business than with making art.

Shambroom was not the first photographer to attempt to depict the world of nuclear weapons. Robert Del Tredici had documented the entire nuclear cycle, from uranium mines through processing and manufacturing facilities, to weapons sites and nuclear waste dumps, for his project At Work in the Fields of the Bomb in 1987. But no one had attempted the systematic photographic survey of America’s nuclear weapons’ infrastructure that Shambroom intended. Yet despite the time demanded to negotiate with the Defense Department, and the secrecy that had surrounded nuclear weapons, Shambroom suspected that his project might succeed.

As the cold war ended and the Soviet Union collapsed, the military faced pressure to reduce its nuclear arsenal. Threatened with budget cuts, Defense Department officials might see Shambroom’s proposal as an opportunity to show taxpayers that they were getting value for their money, to demonstrate the importance of nuclear deterrence, and to emphasize the need for continued funding.

After extensively researching nuclear weapons and military processes (including such niceties as grasping the difference between unseen and classified information), Shambroom requested access to deployed strategic nuclear weapons and infrastructure that secrecy laws did not cover. Eventually his instincts proved right. In September 1991, after having rejected several earlier requests, the Navy approved his project as “an ideal way for the American people to see the complex and highly technological environment in which submariners work.” Using this permission as leverage, Shambroom wrote again to the Air Force, which had ignored his earlier letters. Within a month the Air Force, too, granted his request. Consequently, as a result of continued requests, from 1992 until the events of 9/11 put an end to the project, Shambroom gradually received unprecedented access to photograph nuclear defense facilities in the United States. He visited thirty-five military bases (plus hundreds of individual intercontinental ballistic missile silos) in twenty American states and in the South Pacific, photographing bombers, missiles, submarines, warheads, nuclear facilities, and their personnel.

Shambroom’s letter of introduction elided his opposition to nuclear weapons, and his photographs live up to his promise of neutrality. His elegant views of missiles and bases in Nuclear Weapons and the accompanying book, Face to Face with the Bomb: Nuclear Reality after the Cold War, let the viewer judge whether nuclear weapons are valuable deterrence or dangerous extravagance. Suppressing Shambroom’s subjectivity, the images betray neither the sense of horror he might have experienced in documenting weapons of mass annihilation nor his resistance to American defense policies. The calm professionalism of a work such as Ohio class Trident submarine USS Alaska in dry dock for refit, Naval Submarine Base Bangor, Washington (1992; Plate 19), depicting the massive vessel being serviced, would be appropriate in a Defense Department journal or the annual inventory of military vessels, Jane’s Fighting Ships. Shambroom’s notes in Face to Face with the Bomb include the submarine’s length (560 feet), weight (18,750 tons submerged), and cargo (twenty-four multiple warhead missiles), feeding the appetite for details that we would expect from a military specialist (Which Shambroom became) or enthusiast (Which he did not).

3 Bib, ev.


Peacekeeper missile W87/Mk-21 Reentry Vehicles (warheads) in storage, F. E. Warren Air Force Base, Cheyenne, Wyoming (1992; Plate 16) shows a glissing diagonal line of nuclear missiles denoting efficiency, expense, and technical sophistication. They also seem remarkably small for bombs that constitute, the notes tell us, America’s most powerful weapons. These notes could support just as easily as criticize nuclear deterrence, although their directness would not pass muster in military jargon. “Words such as bomb and warhead are rarely used,” remarks Shambroom. “I was sharply corrected the first time I referred to the MX missile and told that the official name is Peacekeeper.” The technician in fatigues who sweeps the floor beside the bombs introduces a disconcertingly domestic touch: Minuteman III missile silo, “India B,” Boss, North Dakota (1995; detail of Plate 22) also captures this state of coexistence with the bomb. A disturbing example of landscape photography, the image depicts a missile launch facility in the snow-crusted fields, a site that would make locals instant targets in an atomic war.

Visualizing the Unthinkable

The psychologist Robert Lifton has defined the feelings of dread mixed with anticipation this perceived inevitability can be dangerously self-fulfilling. At the core of nuclearism lies our difficulty in visualizing atomic weapons and their effects. Shambroom’s clinical documents accompanying silence about Israel’s), make U.S. hypocrisy all too clear.

Yet the ambiguity toward nuclear weapons conveyed by Shambroom’s photographs has encouraged widely divergent interpretations. Robert Del Tredici lauded the book’s ability to “full viewers with the homegrown, then stir in the terror.” Also convinced of its critical power, amazon.com reader remarks: “This coffee table volume from hell gets under your skin; these images have entered my dreams… This is what lies under the rock of the national security state. We pay for it; thanks to Paul Shambroom, you can see what you’re buying into.” Another amazon.com reviewer, under the title “Featured in Mr. Shambroom’s book,” offers a strikingly different response:

It was an honor to have him among us as we performed our daily duties. We are not people of evil, we are all Americans bent on protecting our homeland from all who wish to destroy her… No one loves nuclear weapons. No even us who work with them. But the cat is out of the bag and we have to live with our decisions and support our fellow Americans.

The insistent neutrality of Nuclear Weapons contrasts with Shambroom’s more ironic tone in earlier projects. Offices (1989 – 90) depicts corporate culture’s sterility with the socially satirical eye that recalls Shambroom’s friend and mentor, the British photographer Martin Parr. Schambroom’s corporate photographic work for industrial and high-tech companies, a background that gave him firsthand insights into corporate self-presentation. The experience also cold war rhetoric notwithstanding, “Because we have seen the pictures, we know there are still five hundred missile silos with people sitting in them with their fingers on the button. There are over a dozen submarines, fully armed with nuclear weapons, on patrol in the oceans just as they were twenty and thirty years ago. Recent events, from the U.S. invasion of Iraq for possessing Weapons of Mass Destruction that turned out not to exist to the branding of Iran and North Korea as part of an “axis of evil” for their nuclear arms programs (and the accompanying silence about Israel’s), make U.S. hypocrisy all too clear.

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11. Ibid.


13. Shambroom, Face to Face with the Bomb, xiv.

14. Ibid., and.


Shambroom realized, entail surrendering much of the artistic autonomy that he valued. More than just the series’ themes, power and powerlessness, activity and passivity also encapsulate Shambroom’s experience creating it. Most visits to photograph for perhaps one afternoon required months — sometimes years — of liaison. Shambroom estimates that during some years he took photographs for no more than four days, and he “developed a sense that I was making art when I was sitting at my desk, writing letters, and going to the library … it felt workman-like.”11 He brought lightweight equipment to defense facilities in order to avoid unnecessary security checks. A public affairs escort accompanied him and determined which areas he could photograph without revealing classified information. Shambroom’s negatives were sometimes processed on site (much to his chagrin) and his images vetted for classified information. On one occasion, at a USSTRATCOM Underground Command Center, Shambroom didn’t even take his own photographs: after setting up a shot, he handed the shutter cable to his military escort, an Air Force photographer, who loaded and unloaded it and released the shutter at Shambroom’s request. Shambroom’s photographs are negotiations reflecting military concerns and conditions as much as his perspective. This immersion in military culture made Shambroom question his formerly antagonistic attitude toward the institution. Rather than view the Defense Department as homogeneous, he realized that its employees had varying attitudes toward the technology under their watch. Some military escorts expressed their support for the rights of demonstrators outside nuclear bases. Others shared their frustration with Shambroom about the military’s lack of transparency.12 “I could not do the work that they do,” Shambroom has stated, “but I have grown to respect them and the choices they have made. I’m sure they believe they are doing the right thing for America.”

Rather than rail against the conditions imposed on him, Shambroom recognized that he would have to embrace them if he was going to stay the course. Adopting a “Zen-like mentality,” Shambroom recalls how: “I learned not to get angry. People told me ‘no’ all the time and some people were very dismissive or obstructionist — I had to love them rather than hate them and figure out a way to take the ‘no’ and turn it around into a ‘yes.’”13 A valuable precedent came from Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who view the prolonged negotiations preceding their projects as a part of their art. While their wrapped structures and environments have little formal connection to Shambroom’s photographs, the place of negotiation in the artists’ work provides an interesting link, as does the metaphor of veiling/unveiling institutional structures. Just as Wrapped Reichstag (1972 – 95) in Berlin (which resulted from twenty-four years of meetings with German, French, Soviet, and U.S. authorities, culminating in a vote at the German Bundestag) gives a snapshot of global politics during that period, so Shambroom’s exchanges with the military offer a glimpse into U.S. policies after the cold war. The ability of Christo and Jeanne-Claude to bring to the table politicians, business people, and artists impressed Shambroom, both for how these sessions exposed the processes behind artworks and for their ability to capture the public’s imagination. Shambroom also shares the desire of these artists to reach a broad public. For example, Richard Rhodes, a historian of atomic weaponry, rather than an art writer, contributed the essay introduction to Face to Face with the Bomb, which probably
enhanced the book’s strong sales outside the art world. Shambroom has also occasionally exhibited in non-art venues such as the Atomic Testing Museum in Las Vegas.

FOR THE RECORD

The idea Shambroom shares with Christo and Jeanne-Claude that their work mirrors institutions links them to the tradition of “objectivity” in documentary and art practices, a history that includes early uses of the camera as a tool for classification and regulation for legal, scientific, anthropological, and other purposes. In the 1920s, German New Objectivists like Albert Renger-Patzsch and Karl Blossfeldt drew on the camera’s descriptive abilities to produce deadpan depictions of urban and industrial settings (in Renger-Patzsch’s case) and botanical life (in Blossfeldt’s). While highly influential, their work also had its critics. Walter Benjamin, for instance, criticized Renger-Patzsch for “transforming even abject poverty, by recording it in a fashionably perfected manner, into an object of enjoyment.”

In the 1970s, New Topographics photographers such as Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and Stephen Shore honed this austere aesthetic. Drawing on nineteenth-century topographical photographs, Baltz created deadpan images of new housing developments and corporate buildings that eschewed political comment. While claiming that “the ideal photographic document would appear to be without author or art,” Baltz recognized even the most seemingly anonymous photograph was a construct, adding, “Yet of course photographs, despite their verisimilitude, are abstractions; their reality is selective and incomplete.” In 1977 the photographers Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel deepened the exploration of the document with Evidence, a book and exhibition of photographs culled entirely from corporate, government, educational, medical, and technical institutions’ files.

A forerunner to these ideas of objectivity, and a major influence on Shambroom, is the photographs that Bernd and Hilla Becher have taken since the late 1950s of houses and industrial buildings. The Bechers’ artfully artless style, achieved with a large-format camera, diffused lighting conditions, and consistent frontal camera position, embodies an ethics of objectivity. “You cannot afford to judge what is good and what is not,” says Hilla Becher about their approach. “There’s a kind of morality that you have to put aside if you want to be democratic about it and not to judge before you have experienced it … you have to force a kind of neutrality.” As teachers at Düsseldorf’s Kunstkademie, the Bechers influenced a generation of photographers (including Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Thomas Ruff, and Thomas Struth) whose detached, detailed works follow the conventions of objectivity. Yet the Bechers’ work originally moved beyond the interests of architectural historians into the art world through the enthusiasm of minimalist sculptor Carl Andre for its unadorned, systematic style.

This relation with minimalism and its conceptualist outgrowths — with their shared interests in corporate and institutional culture, systems, record-making, and photography as a descriptive tool — suggests potentially intriguing connections with Shambroom’s work. Yet Shambroom’s approach to graphic and linguistic data differs from that of conceptual artists. Where Shambroom regards the letters, maps, databases, and minutes that he produces as interesting but supplementary materials, conceptual artists like Conrad Atkinson, Hans Haacke, and Mary Kelly often incorporate such information into their art as means to investigate ideological values. Shambroom’s faith in the power of the photographic archive also diverges from that of conceptual artists who undermine the impulse to classify with a sense of the absurd. Douglas Huebler, for example, proposes his quasi-Mormon attempt to “photographically document, to the extent of his capacity, the existence of everyone alive” in his Variable Piece No. 70 (1971). The most important distinction between Paul Shambroom’s work and that of conceptual artists concerns notions of photographic truth. Without getting mired in debates on “authenticity,” Shambroom has claimed, “I feel no need to follow the conventions of the documentary police, and in fact I would be fired if I tried to present my work in a photojournalistic context. That said, I have my own standard for what is...
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So Shambroom sees Nuclear Weapons as a photographic archive with serious, albeit subtle, political ambitions. Yet archived open-endlessness makes them available to a range of uses. Blake Fitzpatrick demonstrates this point in his discussion of images by Robert Del Tredici that the U.S. Department of Energy published in its reports and stripped of critical intentions in the process. Allan Sekula has written on the myth of objectivity that has surrounded photography since its invention, urging skepticism toward visual and other messages that “are spoken with the voice of anonymous authority and preclude the possibility of anything but affirmation.” Shambroom engages in a complex and multivalent way with debates on photographic evidence. Although invested in concepts of visual proof, his photographs’ assumed neutrality subtly exposes institutional values.

POWER TRIPS

“Command, Control, and Communications (C3),” the fourth section of Face to Face with the Bomb, depicts command centers, control rooms, and detection and warning systems devices. Perhaps more than anything else in the Nuclear Weapons series, these pictures capture our fears about nuclear weapons: who’s in charge, and what if things go wrong?

Systems of communication and interconnectivity have long featured in Shambroom’s work, from the geometric pipes and tubes prevalent in Factories to the mounds of phone and computer lines under floor panels in Offices. As Nuclear Weapons wound down, he decided to develop his investigation into sites of decision-making with a new series. Having become rather cocky about his negotiating prowess, he was surprised when corporations with no responsibility to record their own meetings rejected him. Consequently, he switched his focus from the most influential forms of power brokerage to those representing the smallest increment of elected governance: local council meetings.

This shift appealed to Shambroom for several reasons. After the labyrinthine negotiations of Nuclear Weapons, he relished the lack of red tape in photographing public assemblies, although he did contact councils in advance and introduced his “study of representative democracy in action” at each meeting. Only once was he prevented from photographing a meeting. In a nice reflexive touch, Shambroom’s presence often appears in the minutes, some of which were reproduced on onionskin in the publication for this series. Meetings: By homing in on small towns (of two thousand or fewer people), he proponed strong regional differences that survive in an increasingly homogeneous world. The improvised spaces where councils meet especially attracted him, with state and U.S. flags proudly displayed or casually propped up against walls, blackboards and art projects hinting at the rooms’ regular uses, and make-shift furniture that often matched the casual attire of the people in the photographs. Describing his first visit to a small-town council meeting, Shambroom recalls, “I walked into the room and I thought wow, this is something. They were all lined up, and I loved the linear layout. They were sitting at a table in the front of the room, very engaged, and the set up was beautiful. I realized the way to do this was not to be clever, just put a camera in the middle and let subjects make their own photographs.”

Meetings gives a glimpse of American demographics, from the mixed-race assembly of stressed-out men in the economically stretched Florida town of Pahokee, to the suggestion of a growing African American power base in Wadley, Georgia (population 9,468) City Council, August 19, 2001 (Plate 34), where one white and three black men gather under portraits of one black and three white men. Women’s grassroots involvement emerges strongly. Dassel, Minnesota (population 1,134) City Council, March 15, 1999 shows four serious-looking white men listening to an unpicturesque citizen, all but one (with her travel mug) accompanied by a different variety of Coca-Cola Classic, Diet, and Diet caffeine-free. In Robbins Heights, North Carolina (population 844) Town Council, November 8, 2001 (Plate 30), the African American female officials, together with one recorded citizen, meet, following a reading of Thank God for Little Things, to consider issues
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Supper, 1498.

Linking to Paul Shambroom’s computer mapping program.

Database of 15,000 communities, showing meetings that take place on the second Monday of the month in Georgia.

As Regarding the Rural made clear, Shambroom’s depictions of rural self-governance contrast strongly with the FSA’s stoic images, while the matter-of-fact approach and humorous undertones protect the photographs from sentimentality.

The publication for Meetings opens with an extract from Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America (1835), including his description of local assemblies in New England as “a field for the desire of public esteem, the want of exciting interest, and the taste for authority and popularity.”

Capturing these mixed motives for political participation, Shambroom gently indicates the vanity and self-satisfaction that can motivate community service.

The absence of strong moralizing in Meetings allows viewers to see it as reflecting their own attitudes toward power and democracy.

Computer mapping program linked to Paul Shambroom’s database of 15,000 communities, showing meetings that take place on the second Monday of the month in Georgia.
Presented in tandem with Nuclear Weapons, Meetings might suggest that more time spent in open discussion could have prevented the impasse of nuclear proliferation. Yet a critic reviewing an exhibition including works from both series read them as indicting the lack of real democracy in the United States: “the two series, when taken together, present an America that is a wasteland, almost unremittingly bleak . . . The people in his pictures are fiddling while the world is about to burn.”

Acknowledging his photographs’ susceptibility to multiple interpretations, Shambroom would not have it any other way. Ultimately he sees the aesthetics of neutrality as both more formally successful and more ethically respectful than those of overtly political art. As he has remarked, “I go to peace demonstrations, but I leave my camera at home.”

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