

# NEITHER TO CRITICIZE NOR GLORIFY PAUL SHAMBROOM'S STUDIED NEUTRALITY

HELENA RECKITT

1 Paul Shambroom, [Face to Face with the Bomb: Nuclear Reality after the Cold War](#) (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), xi.

2 *Ibid.*, xiii.

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,"<sup>1</sup> 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 well 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."<sup>2</sup> 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).

1607 Dupont Avenue North  
 Minneapolis, MN 55411  
 (612) 521-5835

August 24, 1990

Rear Admiral Brent Baker  
 Chief, Office of Information  
 Department of the Navy  
 The Pentagon, Room 2E-340  
 Washington, DC 20350

Dear Admiral Baker:

I am an artist and photographer living in Minneapolis. The following request for assistance was originally made through my Congressman, Representative Martin Olav Sabo, Minnesota 5th District, who suggested I direct it to your attention.

I wish to undertake a photography project that would involve photographing the interior workplaces of the delivery systems of the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal. The enclosed "Artist's Proposal" explains the idea in further detail. It states, in part: "The main theme I wish to explore is the demystification of areas of hidden power. . . . My photographs of these areas will not be strictly documentary in the sense of describing the hardware of nuclear weaponry. Nor will they be meant to criticize or glorify. My intention is to present areas that have existed only as powerful concepts in our collective consciousness, in a way that viewers can relate to their own realities."

Enclosed, you will find a resume and copies of letters of recommendation from Peter Galassi, of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and Carroll T. Hartwell of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

The photographs would be shown and published in a fine art context, such as museums, galleries, and art books. I am currently working on a Photography Fellowship from the McKnight Foundation/Film in The Cities. I am confident that further funding can be obtained from similar sources if I am able to proceed with the project.

I would like to photograph at least one site of each leg of the strategic weapons triad: submarines, ICBMs and long-range bombers. I would prefer to work at sites that have the most modern weapons systems in place, because these would better fit my stated goal of photographing areas of "hidden power." In the Navy's case, this would be the Trident submarine. I would, of course, be able to work with older Poseidon submarines if the Tridents were not possible. I do not have information on basing sites for these systems, so I cannot be more specific in requesting particular locations at this time.

Initially, I would request one or more days to photograph at each site. I would mostly be interested in the areas where the weapons are actually deployed, although not necessarily the weapons themselves. I would prefer to photograph submarines when they were operational (at sea), although I realize this would be extremely difficult to arrange. I could certainly accomplish my goals photographing a submarine in port, as well.

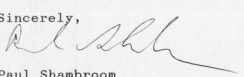
My photographs are generally of rooms and spaces, and do not concentrate on people. I am aware that security considerations may require that personnel not be identifiable, and I am able to work around that, if necessary.

If dictated by your security requirements, I would be willing to give you approval rights on all pictures before they would be released.

I have had a great deal of experience photographing in high security environments, both for my fine art work and for commercial clients. In the former category, I have shot at the Rockwell Space Shuttle Assembly plant, Hughes Aerospace, and McDonnell Douglas Astronautics plants, all in the Los Angeles area, Boeing, in Everett, WA, as well as Texas Instruments missile production and Bell Helicopter in Texas. My commercial jobs have taken me to Cray Research, Honeywell Ordnance factories, and the NASA research facility in Langley, VA. Cray Research, in particular, has been a long-standing client, and I'm sure their upper management would provide a letter of recommendation if requested. It may also help to note that I have received Secret Service clearance for magazine assignments on several occasions, most recently for the Soviet President Gorbachev's visit to Minnesota.

You may note that my Artist's Proposal also mentions a desire to photograph Soviet nuclear arms facilities. I intend to address this seemingly impossible task after I have made some progress with the U.S. facilities. Things seem possible today that I wouldn't have dreamed of six months ago.

While I am no better at predicting the future than anyone else, I believe and hope that the world wide changes we are currently seeing will permanently reduce today's level of nuclear readiness. This possibility adds to my conviction that today's nuclear weapons capabilities should be artistically interpreted and recorded for future generations.

Sincerely,  
  
 Paul Shambroom  
 (enc.:4)

Letter requesting permission to photograph nuclear weapons sites, sent by Paul Shambroom to Rear Admiral Brent Baker, U.S. Navy Office of Information, August 1990.

3 Ibid., xv.

4 Robert Jay Lifton and Richard Falk, [Indefensible Weapons: The Political and Psychological Case against Nuclearism](#) (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 11.

5 Robert Hirsch, "Paul Shambroom: Face to Face with the Bomb," [Afterimage](#) (May/June 2004); included on [paulshambroomart.com](#).

6 See Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts, [Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War](#) (London: Verso, 2005).

7 Robert Del Tredici, "We live so others may die," [Los Angeles Times](#), August 3, 2003; included on [paulshambroomart.com](#).

8 Bob Mielke, "An Unprecedented View into the Abyss," [amazon.com](#), June 12, 2003.

9 "Featured in Mr. Shambroom's book," [amazon.com](#), August 19, 2003.

[Peacekeeper missile W87/Mk-21 Reentry Vehicles \(warheads\) in storage, F. E. Warren Air Force Base, Cheyenne, Wyoming](#) (1992; Plate 29) shows a row of hooded bombs, defended like so many crown jewels by an armed guard facing away from us at the picture's vanishing point. [B83 one-megaton nuclear gravity bombs in Weapons Storage Area, Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana](#) (1995; Plate 18) presents a glistering diagonal line of nuclear gravity 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 circles. "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.'" <sup>3</sup>The technician in fatigues who sweeps the floor beside the bombs introduces a disconcertingly domestic touch. [Minuteman III missile silo, "India 8," Ross, 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-crueted fields, a site that would make locals instant targets in an atomic war.

### VISUALIZING THE UNTHINKABLE

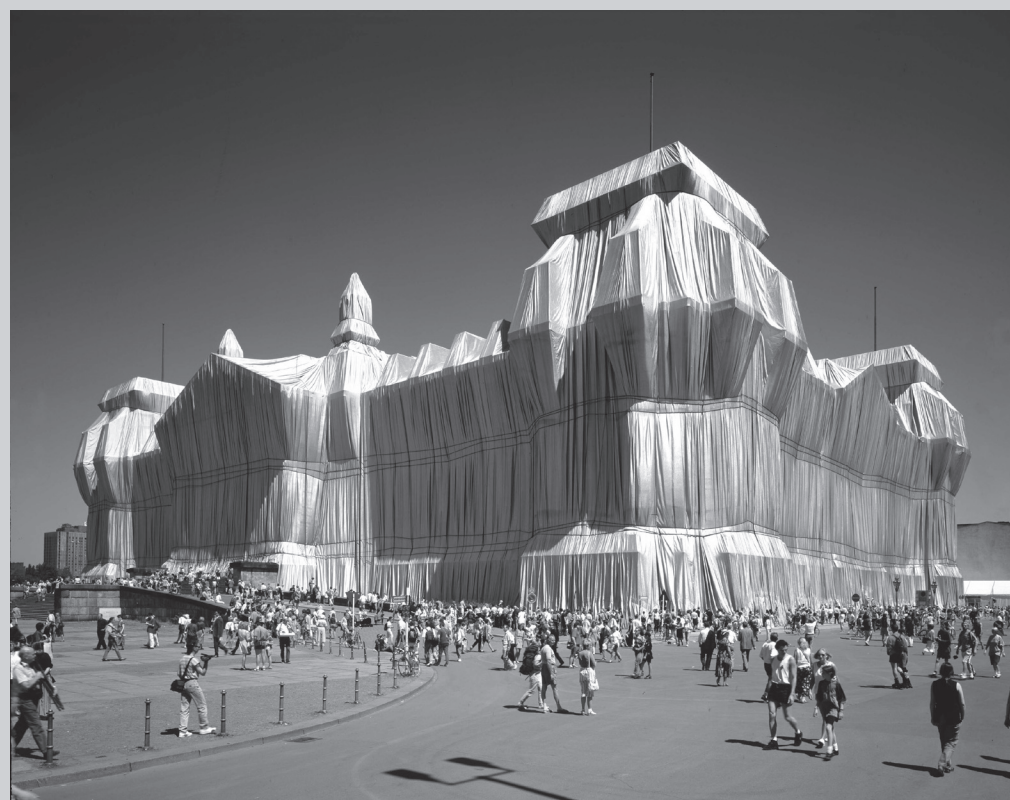
The psychologist Robert Lifton has defined the feelings of dread mixed with anticipation toward nuclear war as "nuclearism." In an environment in which people believe that "weapons systems have so expanded, technologically and bureaucratically, that no one person or group has the capacity to control them completely," <sup>4</sup> 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 of nuclear weapons stockpiles try to counter this crisis of imagination by making the unthinkable visible. Face to face with the bomb in Shambroom's work, we see that atomic bombs look disconcertingly like other bombs, and we can be in no doubt about their existence, post-

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."<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 "lull viewers with the homegrown, then stir in the terror."<sup>7</sup> Also convinced of its critical power, an 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."<sup>8</sup> 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. Not 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.<sup>9</sup>

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. Like [Factories](#) that preceded it, [Offices](#) stemmed from Shambroom's commercial photographic work for industrial and high-tech companies, a background that gave him firsthand insights into corporate self-presentation. The experience also



Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Wrapped Reichstag*, 1972 – 95, Berlin.

10 Conversation between Paul Shambroom, Diane Mullin, Helena Reckitt, and Christopher Scoates, July 12, 2006.

11 Ibid.

12 Telephone conversation between Helena Reckitt and Paul Shambroom, February 8, 2007.

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

14 Ibid., xvii.

15 Conversation between Shambroom, Mullin, Reckitt, and Scoates, July 12, 2006.

convinced Shambroom that he could find ample evidence of American domination and globalization's effects close to home. "It was partly a reaction to the idea that photographers were supposed to go elsewhere in the world and report on what they saw and bring it back as a sort of treasure, which always struck me as being a form of cultural colonialism."<sup>10</sup> As a result, Shambroom abandoned the rather aimless street photography he had been pursuing and began to work on hidden-in-plain-sight loci of power: factories, corporate offices, and police stations. "I felt kind of smug and clever. Okay, you guys can go to Africa, you can go to Mongolia, I'm going down the street to photograph the jungle behind the factory wall."<sup>11</sup>

### MIRRORING THE MILITARY

Working on *Nuclear Weapons* would, 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."<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> "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."<sup>14</sup>

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.'"<sup>15</sup>

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



Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Wassertürme (Water Towers)*, 1972.

16 Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography" (1931), cited in Kim Sichel, *From Icon to Irony: German and American Industrial Photography* (Boston: Boston University Art Gallery, 1995), 7.

17 Lewis Baltz, review of *The New West* by Robert Adams (1974), cited in Sichel, *From Icon to Irony*, 10.

18 Bernd and Hilla Becher, "A Conversation with Jean-François Chevrier, James Lingwood, and Thomas Struth" (1989). Reproduced in David Company, ed., *Art and Photography* (London: Phaidon Press, 2003), 232.

19 Cited in Bob Nickas, "John Miller," *ArtForum* (April 2004).

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."<sup>16</sup>

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 information is selective and incomplete."<sup>17</sup> 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."<sup>18</sup> As teachers at Düsseldorf's Kunstakademie, 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).<sup>19</sup>

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



Variable Piece no. 70 (In Process)  
Global

Throughout the remainder of the artist's lifetime he will photographically document, to the extent of his capacity, the existence of everyone alive in order to produce the most authentic and inclusive representation of the human species that may be assembled in that manner.

Editions of this work will be periodically issued in a variety of topical modes: "100,000 people," "1,000,000 people," "10,000,000 people," "people personally known by the artist," "look-alikes," "overlaps," etc.

November 1971  
— Douglas Huebler

As of this date tens of thousands of people have been photographed in America, Europe, and Israel for the "everyone alive" projects usually photographed in crowded streets. Few appear strongly individualized and most seem little more than indeterminate/unidentified pictorial phenomena situated somewhere within that grainy, out-of-focus continuum normally called the "background."

Two 8"x10" photographs (seen above) typify the many from which 250 faces have been individualized through a series of darkroom procedures whereby all have become equally expressive as discrete "portraits" newly located on the frontal plane size of those have been further enlarged and put forward, within this context, to characterize:

AT LEAST ONE PERSON WHO WOULD SPEAK NO EVIL

251 photographs join, altogether, with this statement as the form of this piece.

600/Variable Piece #70/1971

May 10, 1976  
Douglas Huebler

Douglas Huebler, *Variable Piece No. 70 (in Process)*, May 10, 1976, 1976.

20 Joerg Colberg, "A Conversation with Paul Shambroom," *Conscientious* weblog, December 6, 2006; included on paulshambroomart.com.

21 Blake Fitzpatrick, "At Work in the Fields of the Bomb," *Fuse Magazine* 27, no. 3 (September 2004).

22 Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," in Allan Sekula, ed., *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973 – 1983* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 3.

23 Michael Fallon, "How Does Democracy Look?" *Art Papers* (November 2004); included on paulshambroomart.com.

true: Would the people in the photograph look at it and agree "Yes, this is what this experience, this moment, this place was like?"<sup>20</sup> So Shambroom sees *Nuclear Weapons* as a photographic archive with serious, albeit subtle, political ambitions.

Yet archives' open-endedness 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.<sup>21</sup> 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."<sup>22</sup> 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 (C<sup>3</sup>)," 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 make their meetings public 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

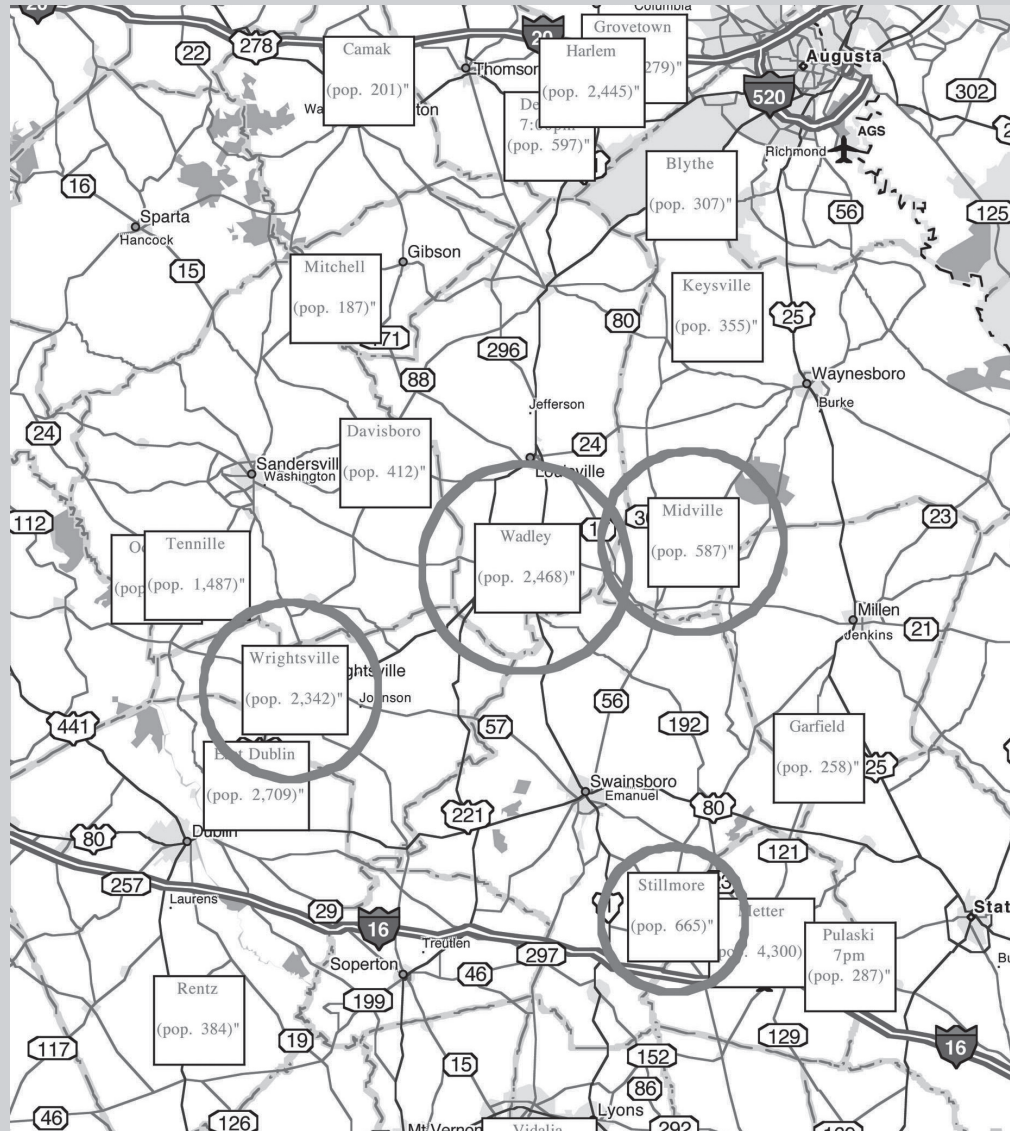
of *Nuclear Weapons*, he relished the lack of red tape in photographing public assemblies, although he did contact councils in advance and introduced his "study of representative democracy in action" at each meeting. Only once was he prevented from photographing a meeting. In a nice reflexive touch, 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 pinpointed 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 makeshift 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."<sup>23</sup>

*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 2,468) City Council, August 13, 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 women listening to an unpictured citizen, all but one (with her travel mug) accompanied by a different variety of Coca-Cola: Classic, Diet, and Diet caffeine-free. In *Dobbins Heights, North Carolina (population 936) 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



Leonardo da Vinci, The Last Supper, 1498.



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.

24 Paul Shambroom, Meetings (London: Chris Boot Ltd., 2004), unnumbered.

25 Regarding the Rural, MASS MoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art), North Adams, Massachusetts, September 24 – December 31, 2005.

26 Maren Stange, "The Record Itself: Farm Security Administration Photography and the Transformation of Rural Life," in Official Images: New Deal Photography (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 3.

27 Shambroom, Meetings.

of sanitation, street repairs, fire safety, census reports, sales tax, double parking, illegal dumping, and the preponderance of leaves in the park. Along with recording the economic and administrative challenges faced by communities around the country, the minutes also reflect council secretaries' varying styles, from terse reports condensing lengthy debates into one line to the unintentionally amusing verbatim account from Pahokee, Florida, that includes Commissioner Branch's verdict: "WE CAN'T PAY OUR BILLS FOLKS AND I JUST WANT EVERYBODY IN THIS CITY TO KNOW IT."<sup>24</sup>

As in Nuclear Weapons, Shambroom approached his subject systematically. In a pre-Mapquest age, he devised a database that organized his itinerary according to meetings' schedules and region. This itinerant form follows the tradition of the road trip, an approach that attracted artists from Walker Evans to Robert Frank, Jack Kerouac to Stephen Shore, and included such conceptual adaptations as Tony Smith's epiphany while taking a nocturnal drive on the unfinished New Jersey turnpike, Robert Smithson's Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey (1967), and Catherine Opie's 2001 Domestic photographs of lesbian households throughout America. Just as the road trip often records ways of life that are dying out, the melancholic undertone of Meetings evokes the ritual of local democracy as valuable yet vulnerable. In contrast to the outsider status generally assumed by the artist traveler, Meetings has none of the romance of the road typically associated with the genre. Instead, its consistent form comes across as an archive of small-town democratic processes.

By manipulating color and composition in his seemingly straight images, Shambroom draws out connections with traditional portraiture and history painting as well as cinema. The panoramic format of the series echoes Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper, and Shambroom plays up Meetings' painterly qualities by inkjet printing on canvas that he varnishes, stretches, and frames without putting under glass. His need to photograph these local leaders in repose, in order to avoid blurring, gives them a theatrical quality that he heightens by toning the portraits so that

they pop against the background. Depicting the officials but not the audience leaves open the question of how many citizens actually attended. Through these techniques Meetings both ennobles and affectionately satirizes its subjects, imbuing them with gravitas that often conflicts with the mundane issues under discussion — what Shambroom, referring to the 1996 comedy about a small town's sesquicentenary, calls its Waiting for Guffman moments.

Photographs from Meetings were included in Regarding the Rural, an exhibition that contextualized the work of contemporary artists in relation to the Farm Security Administration's renowned photographic archive.<sup>25</sup> Publicizing the plight of the rural poor, especially in the South, the FSA aimed to generate support for Roosevelt's New Deal program of rural assistance. Its most famous photographs, like Migrant Mother by Dorothea Lange, promoted an aura of noble stoicism in the face of hardship that denied rural workers' political consciousness and activism. As Maren Stange attests, "few images in the file show workers' organized responses to the generally wretched conditions of agricultural production . . . the details of exploitation and resistance that might dramatize the emergence of a new consciousness among former farmers appear only piecemeal and by chance."<sup>26</sup> 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."<sup>27</sup> 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. Like Nuclear Weapons, the series has attracted a range of interpretations. In the exhibition



Robert Smithson, *Monuments of Passaic (The Bridge Monument Showing Wooden Sidewalk)*, 1967.

28 [John Q. Public & Citizen Jane: Private Americans in the Public Domain](#), University Art Gallery at San Diego State University, San Diego, California, January 29 – March 7, 2007.

29 Alan Gartner, "Shambroom's bleak view of U.S.," [Chicago Tribune](#), November 6, 2003, p. 3; included on [paulshambroomart.com](#).

30 *Conversation between Shambroom, Mullin, Reckitt, and Scoates*, July 12, 2006.

John Q. Public & Citizen Jane, selections from *Meetings* showed alongside polemical work by artists such as Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula as tributes to everyday democratic processes and community empowerment.<sup>28</sup> 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."<sup>29</sup>

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."<sup>30</sup>

---

Helena Reckitt is senior curator of programs at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto. She was formerly director of exhibitions and education at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. She is editor of [Art and Feminism](#) and coeditor of [Acting on AIDS: Sex, Drugs, and Politics](#), and has published in [Art Papers](#), [The Guardian](#), [C Magazine](#), [n.paradoxa](#), and [Art Asia Pacific](#). She worked at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London and was commissioning editor for film and performance studies at Routledge.