

Preface

The scholarly and artistic investigation into the photographic visibility of ionizing radiation—commonly referred to as radioactivity—began during my 2010–2011 fellowship at the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) in Wendover, Utah. Wendover is a small town located approximately 320 kilometers west of Salt Lake City. I was housed in CLUI's fellows' trailer, located directly adjacent to Wendover Air Base, where the pilots of the United States Army's 509th Composite Group had trained the flight maneuvers for the bombings of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima (August 6, 1945) and Nagasaki (August 9, 1945).

As my attention was drawn to the history of the atomic bombings, I began researching the world's first atomic bomb test—the Trinity test (July 16, 1945)—and traveled to what are often described as the “origins” of the nuclear weapons age: the Trinity test site in New Mexico. There, I investigated photographic inscription and, through selected examples, examined the photographic legibility of radioactive contamination resulting from the Trinity test.

Useful to this end were photographic-indexical readings. Unlike an iconic approach, these focus primarily on the conditions of origin rather than on iconically coded information. To track down the Trinity test thus meant proceeding indexically and seeking its “extended presence” in the photographic material.

I developed the theoretical framing of the inquiry in my dissertation at the Research Training Group “Ästhetiken des Virtuellen” (*Aesthetics of the Virtual*), a doctoral research program at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Hamburg (2015–2017). During this time, I produced a substantial body of photographic work emerging from sustained engagement with the Trinity test site, unfolding through an ongoing process of research and artistic practice.

Presented at the beginning of the book, this photographic body of work directs attention to the Trinity site itself in its present condition and to what is visible there—elements that remain materially and situationally connected to the history of the place. They are complemented by historical black-and-white photographs documenting the test shortly before and after the detonation, ranging from images of the camera bunkers and camera installations to photographs of the fireball and the scorched ground thereafter.

In the temporal unfolding of the images, the past becomes present as part of the photographic serial itself: while the color photographs register the site in its present, seemingly quiet and reclaimed condition, the historical black-and-white photographs point to the radioactive event whose material effects persist materially within the

site. One of the former camera bunkers, visible as a structural remnant in some color photographs and originally used for the photographic recording of the test, marks the location from which the visual documentation of the event was produced. Fragments of former infrastructure remain scattered across the ground, including displaced objects, while plants grow and animals move through this environment. These conditions indicate that the Trinity test is not confined to the past but persists materially in the present configuration of the site, extending beyond what is immediately visible.