

On Half-Lives

Khairani Barokka

In response to 'Terminals' (1986), 'Plutonium Blonde' (1987), and 'Serpent River' (1989)

a flickerance

an utterance

a metronomic buzzing

bodily choreography

inwards: seawater is river

is an x-ray of blood-ripple

outwards, the filters colour fear

a nuclear mushroom head drawn

onto islands, diegetic unease

'Terminals' (1986), 'Plutonium Blonde' (1986), and 'Serpent River' (1989), by the late British artist Sandra Lahire, are sibling artworks (together with 'Uranium Hex', they form Lahire's quartet of anti-nuclear films). Non-linear in form, they collage the horrors of and resistance to uranium mining's effects; the nuclear industry's masculinist, colonial tendrils. This threat is grounded by the director, always, in the effects of nuclear technology on bodyminds, and feminist attunement to these effects as resistance.

Lahire's impressionistic editing makes the dangers of this particular brand of technopositivism a haunting; a nightmarish trickling of socioenvironmental horror; a countdown blaring in the strings-accompanied vocals of Warren Smith's 'Uranium Rock' (1957).

Soundtracked by repetition of sonic motifs in each of these films – industrial buzzing, to river rush, to the voices of children, to feminine-presenting adult voices, against a patronising masculine voice declaring untruths about 'progress' and false safety – the dread is percussive, insistent. And so is the looping presence of collectivity, and the feminine, presenting environmental and health violences for what they are.

In 'Terminals', the sound of a click is repeated five times, as 'escape' is typed five times, one below the other, on an early computer screen. 'Feeling more and more disjointed', says a voice. What we hear is always, to put it mildly, a reminder of the present: of how a certain coordinated means of destruction, and a certain and increasing sense of disjointedness, is deliberate, preventable, and by no means new.

'Microelectronics is like any other technology of military origin.'

'It's always about these half-lives as well.'

'It's not coincidence that we have so many rates of thyroid cancer now.' This line is spoken as a woman is shown putting a white cloth around her naked body, with an ominous black hood. Evoking the head of an undertaker, or of a torture victim (another consequence of militarism), sitting above the reverent wrapping of one's body.

With overlay upon overlay, orange, white, and blue filters enhance images of technology (a truck, a keyboard), in juxtaposition to a person with a Ouija board. She invites us to intuit: a feminist attunement to what, on a cellular level, is being done to us.

'Almost all the microchips are made in so-called Third World countries [...] and that's it, their eyesight's fucked.'

A drawing of an atomic mushroom cloud is placed above a map of Tahiti.

Before she passed, Banaban, I-Kiribati and African-American scholar and poet Teresia Teaiwa dedicated her life to writing on how the environmental violation of Tahiti and its population stems from centuries of colonial harm, culminating in the desecration of beloved land and sea as militarised by the west, as a nuclear testing ground. Inextricable from the lack of value assigned to Tahitian people, not least Tahitian children and women, and rooted in perpetrators' perverse pride in knowing the least amount possible about a place, beyond projections of 'tropical paradise' to be used with impunity. Meanwhile, succour and joy persist throughout the Pacific Islands, as evidenced in the work of disabled writer and artist Pelenakeke (Keke) Brown, which reinterprets myth and peoples as regenerating forces.

This planet covered in military bases continues to reel from unchecked technologies, which have been developed for the purpose of strengthening the military industrial complex, all while these technologies convince millions of people that the only way forward is to renounce their ability to think, to create, and to protect their data in favour

of artificial 'efficiency'. Everywhere, constantly, corporations governing plagiarism technologies contribute to the deaths of millions of innocent civilians at the hands of cruel leaders, amidst a sense of terrifying social apathy.

Lahire's work stands out in sharp relief to the idea that these developments have been anything but urgent and felt; that artists in western countries have always been ignorant to them, and that solidarity with peoples and lands decimated by nuclear test sites has not been present in British art.

This is not Christopher Nolan's universe.

Lahire called 'Terminals' a 'stream-of-consciousness' collage, and the word 'consciousness' can clearly be read in multiple ways. Refusing to entertain these aesthetics as inseparable from action; the final title card impels the viewer to 'Contact: Zohl de Ishtar | Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific' to find out more, and to join in activist efforts.

'The "work faster" ethic is written on the door to the terminals. Hazards to fertility or risks of cancer are not criteria in setting 'acceptable' levels of exposure to radiation at work. At the Visual Display Terminal, women are staring directly at a source of radiation. Bomb tests and waste disposal are the white man's cancer imposed on the people of the Pacific.' — Sandra Lahire

Are the fish in 'Terminals' aware of mutations? Are the fishermen?

The titular 'Plutonium Blonde' has curly hair and wears a lab coat. She dutifully attends to the screens, as befits her education and responsibilities. She intermittently hears children singing of crocodiles, but of course the official line is that she must drown this out, just as she must hustle through the film of magenta, or orange, or blue that floods then vacates her vision.

Meanwhile, the men are turning knobs. Read that as a definition.

At first the only thought is that she must prove herself to them, even as a beach with seagulls! A child crying, a child speaking! Someone else speaks of nuclear blasts!

Plutonium Blonde is increasingly turned to rebellion, trying to turn the knobs with a tremor resembling fury.

A man says: 'In Britain, there's a total of 42 nuclear reactors. They provide electricity for the national grid. They are all very different from the one at Chernobyl.'

Another man says: 'Chernobyl hasn't changed my life at all. I was happy before and I'm happy now.'

Another man says: 'I feel there's no problem at all.'

'There's been built-in safety procedures.'

In this universe, certain voices become inked in newspaper: 'Nuclear plant deaths "trivial".' Plutonium Blonde wonders about other universes.

Dear Sandra Lahire,

I write these words from Indonesia, from the Riau Islands, ever threatened with the effects of mining and its threats of expansion, as all parts of the archipelago are. The ocean waves I hear constantly are an echo of the relentlessness of resilience, solidarity, and hope alongside harm in your three works. The bauxite mine, on a nearby island to the one I am writing on, is encroaching on indigenous populations, is drowned out by the vastness of the sea.

////////// The sound effect of a
uranium metre. //////////

But the sea is also a witness. Its bulk has borne the weight of every toxicity, and being composed of salt, it is difficult for many humans to know if it produces grief in the form of tears.

////////// Fish swimming, leaves drifting in water, a human filling a bottle from the
tap. //////////

When I saw 'Serpent River', I was thrumming with the beat of a familiar grief that grew perceivably louder as soon I read that your film was about Rio Tinto's violations on First Nations lands.

////////// 'You have a hard time
seeing, and you have a hard time breathing.' //////////

That company's name has been cut deeply into the rock belonging to so many indigenous peoples in Papua, where Rio Tinto owned the Grasberg gold and copper mine for decades, and was the cause of the Indonesian government (including the dictatorship I was born into and raised in) engaging in US-backed genocide. Rio Tinto is etched into the bodyminds of the women who were injured, killed, poisoned, and violated by military and police, because these women's communities stood up against the gouging of the mountain, the dumping of tailings into bodies of water, the toxicities that have accumulated over many decades.

////////// 'An extraordinarily high rate of Down's syndrome.' //////////

Papua has been illegally occupied by the Indonesian government in large part because of Rio Tinto.

An extremely broad timeline goes:

In 1965-1966, western countries orchestrated, armed, and funded a genocide of Indonesian 'suspected Communists', including anyone who could be accused of leftist tendencies, sexual and ethnic minorities, and the largest feminist movement in the world at that time: Gerwani (the Indonesian Women's Movement, whom we were taught in school were sadistic violators. A horrific inversion).

////////// 'Money, money, money. /
Rake it in, rake it in.' //////////

This genocide was carried out alongside the instalment of dictator Soeharto, who would rule for over three decades, with continued human rights abuses, to act in western governments' interests. These days, when I complain about information overload, my mother gently reminds me of when she found it difficult to get any true information at all, about so many things, beholden to state-controlled media.

////////// A shot of what could be
tall sculptures in a row, or trees wrapped up, or people in coats. //////////

There is a legacy of political resistance, imprisonment, displacement, (c)PTSD, that belongs to so many of our families. That still looms large, as today Indonesia is led by General Prabowo, who was Soeharto's right-hand violator.

////////// A sign saying 'ACCIDENTS
NEVER TAKE A VACATION'. //////////

In 1969, Indonesia 'annexed' West Papua for gold and copper deposits, to supply to the west. US company Freeport McMoRan opened enormous mines, including Grasberg, still one of the largest gold and copper mines in the world, located in Mimika Regency. They poured the tailings into the riverine system. Local law enforcement, including a heavy military presence, assaulted, killed, displaced and imprisoned local dissenters. This was the beginning of a genocide and occupation that continues today.

////////// A chain-link fence with
the signs 'STOP: REPORT TO SECURITY VISITORS PARKING' and 'NO
TRESPASSING'. //////////

In 1995, Rio Tinto struck a joint venture deal with Freeport. It was only in 2018 that they finally divested from the mine, leaving it a joint venture between the Indonesian government, the Papuan local government under occupation, and Freeport.

////////// A sign saying 'REMEMBER:
AFTER DEATH | THE JUDGMENT'. //////////

There are further sites in this archipelago that I call home (which does not include occupied Papua), where Rio Tinto has butchered its way into peoples' environments, futures, their children's bodies.

////////// Filmed: the facade of URANIUM CAPITAL NURSERY SCHOOL. Children
in snowsuits, finding it impossible not to smile and play. //////////

In 2005, for instance, the company finally closed the Kelian mine in West Kalimantan after opposition to tailings, and to gender-based violence in connection to community resistance. They did not leave the environment and peoples adequately cared for in their wake.

////////// 'It makes it cheaper, because they don't have to clean up.' //////////

'Serpent River' is a heartache which, forty years on, so many still share across continents because of the same corporation; and which too many are oblivious to, perpetuate, profit from.

In it, you remind us that there are laughing children playing in contaminated snow, and that there are First Nations women who are all too aware of the effects of uranium mine radiation on the bones, muscle and genes inside them.

//////////

‘Their risk of Leukemia and bone marrow damage, as well as of lung damage. You can see there are certain blood chromosome changes that only scan in response to radiation.’ //////////

If the value of human lives might also be measured in adverse proportion to how many lives we diminish, might we propose a parallel, new definition of ‘half-life’ – one that applies to what might be inhabiting the bodyminds of those who maim the earth and its still-colonised humans?

////////// A sign saying ‘Canadian Institute for Radiation Safety’: It’s not a preventative program by any means. There’s no critique of the work situation to say why is somebody getting lung cancer. //////////

Might we describe perpetrators of reckless atomic technologies – those who see the bedrock as unalive, who see the ore but not the silt of contamination – as living half-lives?

And what of the half-lives of these half-lives? How far into the future will the effects of their actions linger? In what year, when (we hope) indigenous land is rightfully returned to Papuans, First Nations peoples, and Palestinians, will bodyminds cease to harbour a sediment of nuclear history?

////////// holes drilled into the rock //////////

Sandra, we think of you as we see the continuance of cruelty coursing through the fingers of those who now hold the nuclear codes, who expand the mines, who ‘grow the economy’ by sowing death and a fraying of life. I am so glad for the women in these films. I hope you know that your work continues to sow emotion, wherever you are.

Khairani Barokka (b. 1985) is a writer and interdisciplinary artist from Jakarta, based in London and working internationally. Her work centres disability justice as anti colonial praxis, environmental justice, and access as translation. Okka has been a UNFPA Indonesian Young Leader Driving Social Change, the first non-British Associate Artist at the UK's National Centre for Writing, an 'Artforum' Must-See, a Defina Foundation Associate Artist, and the first non-British Editor of 'Modern Poetry in Translation'. In 2023, Okka was shortlisted for the Asian Women of Achievement Awards. Her latest books are 'amuk', published in 2024 by Nine Arches and long listed for the Jhalak Poetry Prize, and 'Annah, Infinite', her prose debut published in 2025 by Tilted Axis and named a 'Bookseller' Expert Pick.

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