The Half Life Of Messages

Radioactive waste remains harmful for approximately 100,000 years and as yet (globally) hundreds of thousands of tonnes of the stuff is stored at ground level in facilities which require constant monitoring, refurbishment and management. At the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in Carlsbad, New Mexico and at the Oncalo project near Olkiluoto in Finland, engineers are developing monumental underground storage spaces, designed to host decades of waste material, to be capped and to remain infinitely undisturbed. The sheer ambition of the engineering required is not the most interesting element of these projects. The bizarre apex of the problem at hand seems to be the extensive abstract, philosophical, theological and anthropological discussions the engineers and architects must embark upon in order to agree on an appropriate method of message delivery to warn off the culturally evolved (or devolved) humans of the distant future[1]. The sheer weight of the problem of promulgation in the face of cultural evolution is almost comical. How to comprehend such an overwhelming catastrophe? How to communicate the fear? How best to enable that communication to resonate across infinite time? There is no method of dispatch capable of containing and amplifying the horrific implications of someone excavating the site.

I travelled from London to Lisa Wilkens' Cambridge studio on the 70th anniversary of the US deployment of a nuclear bomb over the city of Hiroshima. I knew in advance that the advent of my conversation with Lisa would take place on this unhappiest of days, as it falls on my birthday, August 6th. I had an optimistic hunch that at some point that day I might eat cake. What I wasn't prepared for was #Hiroshima. On this occasion the primary mode of conversation seemed to be Twitter and that hashtag was riding high on the global charts all morning. My assumption is that the manifestation of this trend was not a result of millions of people simultaneously reflecting on "a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth"[2], nor was it a genuine acknowledgement of an incomprehensible moment of human conflict. More likely, was that it was a trend in every sense; an opportunity to unconsciously carry the label of consciousness, a pronouncement to be chewed up and stuck to the forum wall rather than actively digested. It struck me that the rapidity with which it was possible to contain, encapsulate and dispatch this word #Hiroshima was baffling. It shouldn't be so easy. Some things should be more abstract, harder to process, harder to author.

In the face of such impossibility, how can an artist navigate this territory? Moreover, what if that artist is already charged with a very particular moral imprint? Lisa Wilkens' childhood environment primed her to be "prepared to tell people that you did all you could have done", to be braced for complicity and to be on the right side of your morality when the time comes. Culturally of course this is a reflection of Wilkens being born in the post-war Germany of the 1970s. More acutely, it relates to the moral positioning of her politically proactive parents. She reflects with solemn fondness on their attendance of anti-nuclear demonstrations – something which informs many of her earlier drawings of power stations languishing in pastoral settings. This is the theatre of Wilkens' memories … this is her caravan holiday, her candy floss on the pier.

As a child, fear instructs boundaries. Perhaps we can all remember the first examples of our understanding of jeopardy or mortality? The knowledge that we are vulnerable to injury or to accident. The understanding that life is impermanent. But something such as 'The Bomb' or nuclear fallout is so infinite, that boundaries never really form. Being born into the cold war, the age of Duck n' Cover[3] or Protect and Survive[4]; living in Northern Europe in 1986 when the Chernobyl Nuclear Reactor failed, watching info-graphics of the radiation cloud teasing its way across neighbouring territories at the whim of meteorological pressure systems … a generation of kids grew up having to adjust to the fact that they could never properly contemplate or rationalise the silent, omnipresent threat to their being. In the UK Raymond Briggs shifted gear from idealised tales of Snowmen and sardonic Santas to the cold bath that was When The Wind Blows[5]. As a child in the early 80s, Wilkens had an even more acute awareness of a boundless 'unseen power' than most. Her parents were informed activists, both also associated with the German Marxist-Leninist Party (MLPD). Her sister used to whisper to her about the toxic cloud, which would inevitably come and that one must hide inside from the rain. She organised her first demonstration before she was eleven. The by-product of this engagement and clarity is her work. There comes a point where curiosity, responsibility and awareness become altogether awesome, a point where we are overwhelmed by fear. A point where a child rapidly accelerates towards a very adult understanding that all is not well with the world, that we are somehow frustratingly complicit and that it is seemingly beyond our control. Perhaps in the purest sense this is the sublime. Somewhere on the edge of all this is where Lisa Wilkens now dwells. Where her work quietly oscillates. At the very centre of time-aged sheets of paper (sourced from old GDR stocks) sit these tightly rendered images. A compressed lozenge of information and implication leads us through paranoid messages, jingoistic icons and silently tainted consumables. Hands appear a lot. Industry perhaps? Or craft – the sense that we are creators, we are responsible for what we do. Something that is deftly confirmed in the highly crafted, modestly intricate ink drawings.

Each studio day begins for Wilkens in the same way: 8.30 am, a pot of peppermint tea, freshly ground Chinese ink is drawn from a block (a technique she honed on a scientific illustration degree). Perhaps there is solace here? Perhaps the process to which Wilkens returns is the eye of the storm, the moment of regularity and control? Because what is ultimately represented is a trembling, densely packed capsule, charged with questions, with suggestions of place, legacy, archive, dialogue; but nothing is resolved, all that is confirmed is that the conversation is too vast now. All we can ever glimpse are fragments cleaved from history, echoes from an archive of terrible decisions with a half life which will outlast our current cultural idiom. These tiny pieces of painstakingly drafted information sit almost silently (one might imagine that they hum). The borders surrounding them are disproportionate. Safe zones perhaps, like the 5 km of rock we hope will contain the toxic treasures of Oncalo. The old East German paper is already yellowing with age. These pieces were decaying before they were even born. Their vulnerability is vital to Wilkens, who is often reluctant to frame her work. The messages with which they are charged are so much more important than their value as artefacts and yet Wilkens very deliberately acknowledges the impossibility of their translation.

Reece Jones, London, 2015

1 For further information: Into Eternity. 2010. Documentary feature directed by Michael Madsen. Expert Judgement on Markers to Deter Inadvertent Human Intrusion Into the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant. Sandia National Laboratories Report. Considering the Desire to Mark Our Buried Nuclear Waste: Into Eternity and the Waste Isolation Plant. Andrew Moisey. Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences Vol 20, Number 2, 2012.

2 From Harry S. Truman's speech announcing the detonation of an atomic weapon on Hiroshima. August 6th 1945.

3 Duck n' Cover was a US Civil Defense instructional film about nuclear attack featuring a cartoon tortoise, directed by Anthony Rizzo in 1951.

4 Protect and Survive was a series of public information leaflets produced in the 70s and 80s by the British Government, designed to inform the reader on how best to survive the impact and aftermath of a nuclear strike.

5 When The Wind Blows. Raymond Briggs. 1982. was a graphic novel about a working class suburban couple coming to terms with the aftermath of a nuclear attack on London.