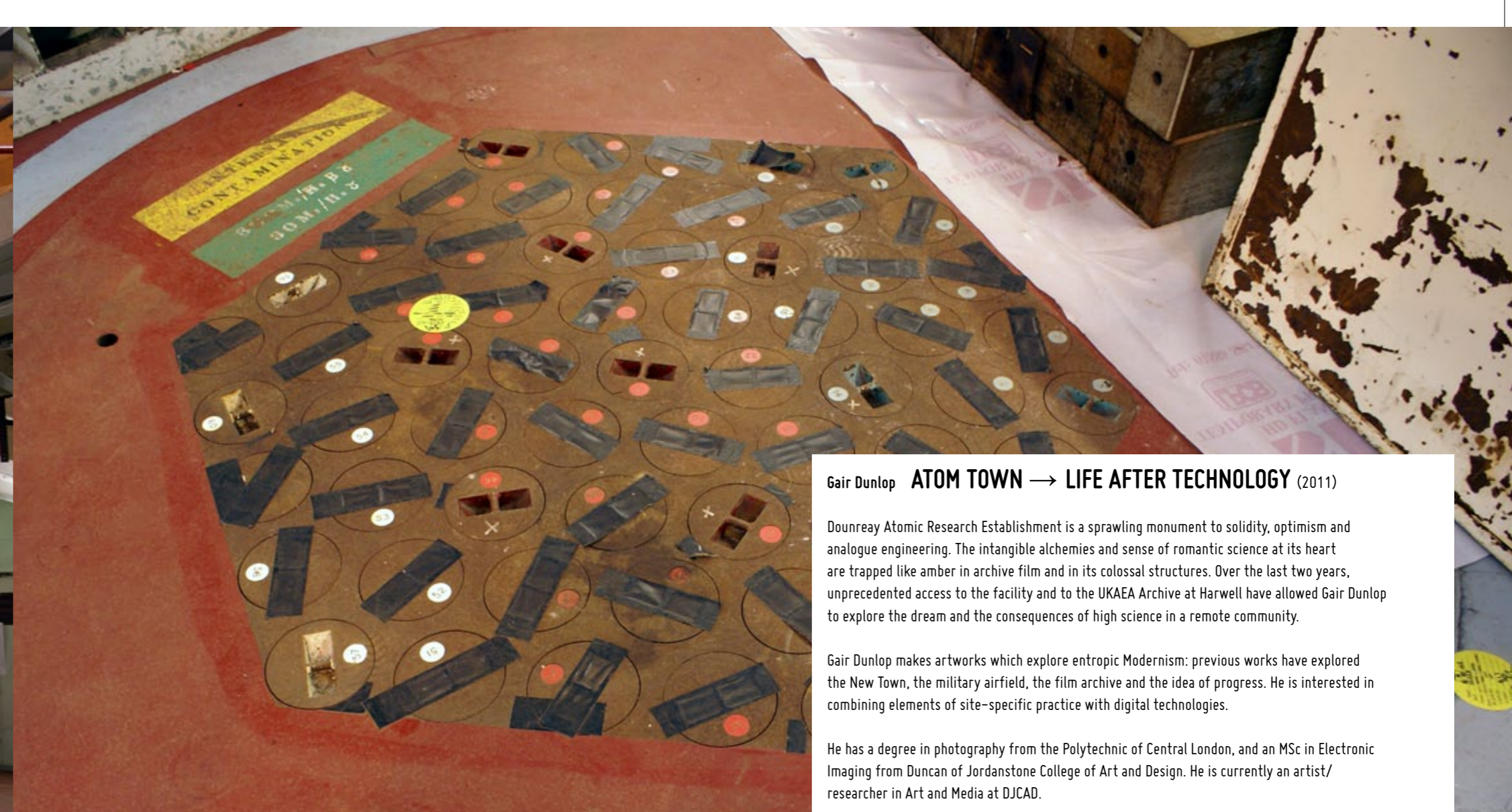




Gair Dunlop **ATOM TOWN:**
LIFE AFTER TECHNOLOGY (2011)
→ is available in single or multiscreen formats
→ running time: 22min

Produced with the help of a Scottish Arts Council/Scottish Screen Artists Film and Video Award.

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Gair Dunlop **ATOM TOWN** → **LIFE AFTER TECHNOLOGY** (2011)

Dounreay Atomic Research Establishment is a sprawling monument to solidity, optimism and analogue engineering. The intangible alchemies and sense of romantic science at its heart are trapped like amber in archive film and in its colossal structures. Over the last two years, unprecedented access to the facility and to the UKAEA Archive at Harwell have allowed Gair Dunlop to explore the dream and the consequences of high science in a remote community.

Gair Dunlop makes artworks which explore entropic Modernism: previous works have explored the New Town, the military airfield, the film archive and the idea of progress. He is interested in combining elements of site-specific practice with digital technologies.

He has a degree in photography from the Polytechnic of Central London, and an MSc in Electronic Imaging from Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design. He is currently an artist/researcher in Art and Media at DJCAD.

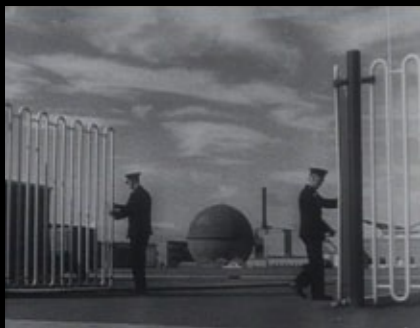
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Gair Dunlop **ATOM TOWN:**
LIFE AFTER TECHNOLOGY

Project website → www.atomtowntown.org.uk
Artists website → www.gairspace.org.uk
Entropic Modern Blog → <http://entropicmodern.blogspot.com>
Contact → gairmail@gmail.com

design ~ *in the fields*



TEMPORARY STORAGE

Notes on the Dounreay Fast Reactor, Citadel of the Future

→ 1

Even by the most optimistic estimates, the decommissioning of the Dounreay nuclear facility will not be completed until 2336 at the earliest. Having recently struggled from the twentieth century into the twenty-first, we can perhaps appreciate the effects of such a transition being repeated a further three times before Dounreay ceases to be anything other than a protracted timeline. Restoration of the site has so far uncovered a Bronze Age cairn, a manmade stone-covered mound used for the storage of human remains. It had been broken into and emptied at some point in its history, the robbers leaving behind them a solitary piece of worked flint. The excavated cairn is destined to form part of a subsoil repository for radioactive waste from other great excavated cairns: the demolished reactors themselves. While the modern world's flint flakes wait patiently for archaeologists from the distant future to discover them, the entire area becomes transformed into a time capsule that preserves nothing except the space it occupies: a presence that slowly erases itself over the centuries.

→ 2

A theme park dedicated to a disaster that must never happen, Dounreay represents a future that is perpetually receding. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, international trade fairs and universal expositions have traditionally offered temporary storage for the world of tomorrow before also becoming its final resting place; for a brief period, visitors can wander as carefree tourists in a future that is both briefly glimpsed and carefully controlled. Dounreay, however, remains fixed in a landscape capable only of decay. Invisible yet exerting a powerful influence, its presence is best detected through the behaviour of those who have shaped their lives around it: the way fingers form themselves blindly around the handle of a cup in order to hold it steady.

Due to the ideological pressures of the Cold War, under whose influence the Dounreay Nuclear Facility came into being, atomic science became equated with alchemy. Both represent hermetically controlled operations that subtly and radically transform nature, thereby unleashing occult powers that remain hidden in all but their effect, whether socially, culturally or materially. The temporary storage of

radioactive materials profoundly disturbs the entire landscape: it becomes reworked. 'The atomic pile, an essential instrument for the manufacture of the bomb,' wrote Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier in 1960, exposing the perceived gap between scientific method and alchemical practice, 'was actually "a geometrical arrangement of highly purified substances"'. Atomic reactors supply the archaeological sites of the future; but this has nothing to do with notions of progress.

When an event has a half-life, everyone becomes a visitor. The atomic pile, however, lies at the centre of a theme park that must inevitably be deserted, so long as the prospect of disaster continues to hang over it. Just as the dynamiting of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in 1972 was thought to mark the death of modernism as a social aesthetic, so the decommissioning of Dounreay indicates the end of modernism as a strategic cultural deployment of the Cold War. Its alchemic counterpart can still be found in the chaotic postmodern landscape stretching along the north coast of Caithness in the Scottish Highlands, waiting to be decontaminated.



→ 3

The public information films designed to promote science and technology during the Cold War explain little about their supposed subject while revealing everything about themselves; they can only distract with wiring diagrams, equations scrawled in white chalk on blackboards, illuminated displays and flickering readouts. Their very indecipherability is the intended message; technology is hard to assimilate — in the end all you can do is accommodate it. At the same time Cold War architecture, together with the strategies that informed it, transformed home into an enemy territory: secure and defended to the point where it became unwelcoming to everyone but a select few. 'It's what they call a security area,' remarks a character in Quatermass II regarding the secret government research plant recently established at Winerton Flats on the English coast. To make way for it an entire village has been demolished, while the workers required to build the facility are forced to inhabit prefabricated barracks on a 'new build' estate, watched over by sullen patrols of armed guards. First aired by the BBC in 1955, Nigel Neale's second television series to feature British rocket scientist Bernard Quatermass takes place in a society overrun by civil and military authority. The effects are pervasive but also subtle; a ministry official refers to the changes taking place around him manifesting themselves as 'a face in the corridor, petty mysteries, an overheard phrase, altered routines'. Protective suits, respirators

and rubber gloves are all indications that the environment itself is changing: the clicking of the Geiger counter becomes the signifier of Cold War modernity.

The secret hidden inside the pressurized steel domes at Winerton Flats turns out to be a huge alien life form; writhing around in its own highly poisonous atmosphere, this shapeless multicellular being intends to invade and colonize the earth, except that it can never quite escape the same containment that restrains and controls everyone else in this new technological regime. Instead it remains trapped inside the tanks, ducts and pipes of the Shell Haven refinery on the Thames Estuary, which supplied exterior shots for both the BBC version of Quatermass II and its remake by Hammer films in 1957. In between the two productions came X the Unknown, another radioactive Cold War drama from Hammer in which yet another shapeless multicellular being draws energy from the reactor at the 'Lochmouth Atomic Energy' establishment in Scotland. The movie was originally to have been directed by Joseph Losey, but his black-listed status in Hollywood as a suspected communist sympathizer made this problematic.

→ 4

Losey ended up making The Damned for Hammer instead. Filmed in 1961 but not released in the UK until 1963, the movie depicts British society in a state of nuclear containment. Teddy boys prowl the seaside town of Weymouth, searching for unwary tourists to beat up and rob, while military patrols encircle a government research base built inside the neighbouring cliffs. 'Your security men have the imagination of prison wardens,' one scientist complains from deep within the secret compound. Screened off from the public behind barbed wire, chain-link fences, armed guards, concrete posts and intruder alarms, the Edgecliff facility is home to a generation of radioactive children. The offspring of contaminated mothers, they are impervious to the harmful effects of radiation and, as such, represent Britain's last line of defence when nuclear war begins — as it must surely do. 'I live with one fact,' declares Bernard, the project director. 'A power has been released that will melt these stones. We must be ready when the time comes.' Cut off from all contact with the outside world, surrounded by video monitors, tape recorders and modernist furniture, the children are not so sure of their destiny. 'You are always talking about "when the time comes"', one of them complains impatiently to Bernard via closed-circuit TV. 'What we want to know is: when does the time come?'

The children constitute a nuclear core, eager to escape into the outside world — it will be a disaster when they do. Nothing can prevent this from happening, however. Bernard is certain of it. The fallout unleashed by global nuclear war will unlock all the doors of the Edgecliff bunker, setting the children free. 'We're in a huge spaceship and we are going to a star,' one child explains of their protracted confinement. 'They're teaching us the history of Earth so we can build a civilization when we get there. It's going to be a long, long trip, and by the time we get there, our teachers will be dead.' As above, so below: disasters come down to us from the stars, linking alchemy with nuclear physics in the most sinister manner. Planning for disaster also means playing with chance and probability, which only makes sense when more than one outcome is at stake. To create a policy out of something is to maintain a distance from it — to be separated from it by intention. We can only glimpse this destructive relationship through a glass darkly, as a reflection or a projected image. The unseen presence of the atomic pile reveals itself through a heightened series of precautions: the prospect of looking directly upon it doesn't simply destroy us. It cancels us out: renders us less than nothing.

→ 5

Postmodernism is one more indication of how fragmented our understanding of the present condition has become: as such it reveals itself as just another form of modernism. The domes, sealed chambers and temporary storage tanks left over from the Cold War nuclear regime give shape to another, more chaotic school of modernism: one that demands closer examination. At the time of writing the crisis level at Fukushima is the same as that for Chernobyl. Contamination along the coast continues to rise alarmingly, while the wind that once blew the reactor's vented radiation plumes out to sea is now carrying them back to the mainland again.

Ken Hollings

London, March/April 2011

