

ESSAY: Bettina WitteVeen's Searing Poetics Mingled with Metamorphosis Continues in Berlin in "Whiteout"

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by Charles A. Riley II

Resonance can seem like too much to ask of an art exhibition in these parlous times of so-called "Insta" critique. Because the calendar fills so quickly with the ominous closing dates of month-long shows, critics and curators note with trepidation the "important" ones they hope to catch before those exhibitions pass into oblivion.

That context makes it crystal clear how very lucky I was to make it to Berlin in time to experience *Whiteout*, Bettina WitteVeen's masterful and meaningful installation at an absolutely unnerving location: the deserted WünsdorfSoviet military camp, once known as the "Forbidden City," complete with the last remaining Lenin monument on German soil. Despite the fact that I had to go without the *aides memoires* of photographs and notes, the installation's incandescent imagery and deep-shadowed meaning seared my memory.



Whiteout” by Bettina WitteVeen, Installation View, 2018.
Artwork © Bettina WitteVeen. Photography by Bettina
Bönisch. Courtesy of the artist.

Part of an epic project that has included the transformation of the abandoned hospital of the old Brooklyn Navy Yard (reviewed [here](#) for Hamptons Art Hub in September 2015) and an earlier installation in an East Berlin bunker where armaments had been manufactured, *Whiteout* is that rare bird, a temporary art installation with permanent impact on anyone who views it.

WitteVeen’s modus operandi is to take an historically loaded locale (Berlin is a natural) and add her own compelling photographs in installations so meticulously curated that the result is more like choreography—moving the viewer with a plan—than the haphazard hanging of a show that leaves the interactions to chance.



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The artist first secured the temporary rights to the abandoned buildings of the military base, which include a decrepit but once fancy movie theater where the troops enjoyed propaganda films, as well as a swimming pool that she has turned into one of the most unforgettable venues for art I have ever encountered. Then she arranged for visitors to travel the hour-plus route from Berlin by coach along the Autobahn to see the show for free. There is a philanthropic as well as humanistic vein in these projects that goes a mile deep, reminding me of the civic purposefulness and magnanimity of Christo and Jean-Claude.

The installation began and ended in the musty, peeling, once-palatial cinema, where viewers watched a dreamlike color film, “Götterfunken,” shot by WitteVeen on location in Bali, Sri Lanka, Cuba, Cambodia and on a Native American reservation. Accompanied by a mesmerizing original score, the film set the tone for the site-specific fusion of sculpture, photography and film that came together in a stunningly elegant poetics of place.

The spark that built to the sublime heat and radiance of *Whiteout* began with the Promethean fire imagery in the film, which deftlywove together dance sequences united by a circular gesture. I have always especially admired artists who reveal themselves to be thinkers and WitteVeen (a graduate of Wellesley) is in the top tier. Her breathtaking intellectual scope and global vision—embracing history, cosmology, science, dance, and the dangers of technology—is reminiscent of Alexander von Humboldt, like WitteVeen a polymath with a profoundly pantheistic love of nature.



"Whiteout" by Bettina WitteVeen, Installation View, 2018. Artwork © Bettina WitteVeen. Photography by Bettina Bönisch. Courtesy of the artist.

Like von Humboldt, WitteVeen makes the leap from eyewitness to visionary. Even as the individual sequences in the film pull from a vast range of ethnographic sources, the narrative of the film reveals an overarching unity, described by the artist as "the cosmic dance of life and insights into the origin of the universe." As she writes: "I believe that our aptitude for, art, poetry, music, philosophy, and empathy as well as our scientific ingenuity distinguish us as humans. However, there are realms we should not enter. We don't have the right to place ourselves above all other creatures. We are life that wants to live, surrounded by life—and we must remember this—that also wants to be alive."

Throughout the installation I found myself captured by details. In the film, there are moments of preternatural absorption: 10 splayed fingers, waving like sea anemones in the current, of the Apsara dancer; the dislocated stare of the masked Bhutanese dancer; the thunderous downbeat of the Lakota brave; the insolently upraised chin of the Cuban flamenco *bailarina*; the dreamily radiant drummers and fire swallowers in a cone of light under a massive Sri Lankan tree; the looping gesture of the calcium white light inside the orange flames swinging in a blur against the tropical night.

After the film, my group of visitors strolled a path among long grasses and trees that buzzed with the sound of bees. We were headed to the heart punch of the exhibition, housed in the old swimming pool building. In one room, stark black-and-white photographs of military drones in the form of bees (and the size of bees) were spectral parodies of nature, death's shadow of life. Down another corridor, the ghostly blue glow from a photograph of a Google storage facility (at the core

of which WitteVeen has inscribed “whiteout”) invoked the ghastly technological nightmare threatened by the so-called artificial intelligence (AI) singularity.



Whiteout” by Bettina WitteVeen, Installation View, 2018. Artwork © Bettina WitteVeen. Photography by Bettina Bönisch. Courtesy of the artist.

Yet the most profound moment in the installation was in the pool itself, at the deep end of which a black screen showed the famous TV interview footage of Robert Oppenheimer recollecting the first A-bomb test on July 16, 1945, in which he quoted the Hindu “Bhagavad-Gita” passage about “Death, the destroyer of worlds.” The pool, his pained expression as he recounted the memory, and the massive mortality it connoted pulled together three sacraments: baptism, confession, and last rites. Looking at the scuffed wall by the ladder, I thought of the bathers scrambling to leave the pool, an additional allusion to Plato’s cave.

I knew the film and the quote by heart (having taught the “Bhagavad-Gita” in literature classes), including the awful moment when Oppenheimer, clearly scarred forever by the awful recognition of what he has unleashed, flinches with a facial tic as he pauses between phrases. The text in full is well worth citing: ““We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried. Most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the “Bhagavad-Gita”; Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty and, to impress him, takes on his multi-armed form and says, ‘Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.’ I suppose we

all thought that, one way or another.”



“Whiteout” by Bettina WitteVeen, Installation View, 2018. Artwork © Bettina WitteVeen. Photography by Bettina Bönisch. Courtesy of the artist.

The clip loops, echoing in the pool on a seven-second delay. I watched it over and over again, then turned and listened to the other visitors’ voices echoing in the pool (French, English, German, no Russians) along with Oppenheimer’s indistinct murmuring, which followed me along the corridor and out into the air. The seven-second echo/delay was everything, because it is cyclic. However optimistically WitteVeen’s personal cosmology and morality may circle back to the dance of fire in the film as a life-giving force, an alternative reading would be a big-bang style creation and destruction by which the same fire, the divine arrow of the Sanskrit epic, obliterates everything.

WitteVeen, who lives part-time in Sagaponack in The Hamptons, has collaborated with Watermill Center’s Robert Wilson, whose opera “[Einstein on the Beach](#)” is canonic, on a project called “[Sacred Sister](#).” The week I returned to the East End from Berlin, I was reminded that Albert Einstein had walked right by my house on the North Fork to send a letter from the Peconic post office that attested to the viability of a weaponized nuclear explosion.

The thunderous finale to the three-part operatic *Whiteout* installation at Wünsdorf came after a brief walk along the overgrown paths of the military base to a parade ground over which the last remaining statue of Lenin on German soil presides. WitteVeen had surrounded the base of the column with 26 tons of asphalt, churned in a convulsive and cracked manner that unsettled the

viewer even further than the mind-numbing casualty figures surrounding the base.



“Whiteout” by Bettina WitteVeen, Installation View, 2018.
Artwork © Bettina WitteVeen. Photography by Keming Liu.
Courtesy of the artist.

I could not get beyond certain details in the works behind the barbed wire that wrapped the column, such as the bare hands of women shoveling snow. My eyes passed back and forth from these works to the setting: clouds scudding overhead past a stopped clock and a pole with no flags flying at that time. A severe chain-link fence kept us, the art tourists, separate from the off-limits areas of the compound. After the Oppenheimer film, the correlation to the nuclear-scale devastation of 1917, not just in Russia but across Europe, was potent, and the cynicism of autocracy fouled the air.

According to the artist, this part of the installation was much less popular with West Berliners than with those who had lived under Communism in the East. Along with the recognition of the grievous

perversion of brilliant mathematical and scientific minds being turned to destructive ends, the installation yielded the disgusting realization that sculptors and painters were compelled to turn their skills to propaganda in the creation of monuments of this kind all over China, Russia, Cuba and North Korea, where they remain so common that they do not even excite curiosity in the way that this remnant of the regime did.

The experience of the installation was not designed to end on such a note of pessimism. Cycling back to the film, and its beautiful evocation of the way fire emerges from the darkness, visitors were encouraged to view cosmic history in terms of rebirth.

Andre Malraux concluded "Museum Without Walls," which similarly used photography to outline the visionary company of global culture, with this paean to the limitless that WitteVeen so marvelously opened to viewers of *Whiteout* as well: "It is the song of metamorphosis, and no one before us has heard it—the song in which esthetics, dreams, and even religions are no longer more than librettos to an inexhaustible music."

BASIC FACTS: *Götterfunken fire drowned the Erbkönig: whiteout*, a temporary installation by Bettina WitteVeen, was presented June 16 to July 1, 2018 in the deserted Soviet military camp at Wünsdorf, Germany.

From October 28 to November 25, 2018, *II.II.18 Dämmerung*, an installation by Bettina WitteVeen commemorating the centenary of the end of the First World War, will be on view at the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, Breitscheidplatz, 10789, Berlin, Germany. www.Bettinawitteveen.com

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