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**Article:**

Schofield, Arthur John [orcid.org/0000-0001-6903-7395](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6903-7395) (2018) *Reisen-iseki ni miru Ato-sakuhin to Hekiga no Juyosei*. *Kokogaku kenkyu*. pp. 25-30. ISSN 0386-9148

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# The Significance of Artworks and Murals in Understanding Former Cold War Sites: Perspectives from the UK

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Abandoned fortifications are nothing new. One thinks of Roman forts that must have dominated parts of the post Roman landscape, and the persistence of ruined medieval castles in the post-medieval period. But since the ending of the Cold War, former bases have proliferated as armed forces have reduced or rationalised, a process that is equally evident on both sides of the former Iron Curtain. And many of these former sites look set to persist in the landscape for years, decades or even centuries to come, by virtue of their scale, and the substantial (often reinforced concrete) construction that characterises them. Some of these sites are simply abandoned, while others have been re-used for safe storage, or redeveloped altogether but on the footprint of the original establishment. Some smaller establishments are now lost, but remain in the memory and in hard-to-reach official documentation. Many of these sites have been subject to various forms of heritage management and research, some of the more interesting aspects of which relate to what survives within some of these otherwise anonymous buildings, including war art – the murals, graffiti and official signage made by airmen and soldiers during the sites' occupation, and others referring to their afterlife. Some of this 'original' artwork was official signage, providing instruction or promoting *esprit de corps* among service personnel. Some however is in a sense subversive, providing a record of people's personal encounters at and interaction with the sites, and with their central mission. And then there is the artwork of opposition, outside the bases at sites like Greenham Common (West Berkshire, UK) and the Nevada Test Site (US), where protestors used art to express their concerns at nuclear armament and experimentation. This chapter uses examples of war art from all of these situations to critically examine the Cold War experience, East and West and the cultural significance of the art that remains.

## Cold war legacies

We begin with the places themselves. Given how long humans have been shaping the landscape, the traces of the Cold War period represent a tiny phase of human history but one that has left a diverse and monumental series of marks upon it<sup>1</sup>. These marks are often described as 'scars', the phrase deliberately chosen to represent these military interventions as a form of environmental pollution, a curse on what some consider the previously serene

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<sup>1</sup> Cocroft and Thomas 2003

and peaceful idyll of the countryside. Of course rarely is that true, the landscape always having been a busy, active and often untidy place where lives are lived, and livings made. The idyll of tranquillity is often idealistic or mythological, or both. But either way, and whatever one's political position on the expanded militarism of the Cold War (here presented in terms of the stand-off between communist East and Capitalist West that characterised the period 1946-1989), the impact on the landscape was significant, both in extent and in terms of the historical value of what remains. How else, other than through these extensive traces could society remember this important and potentially calamitous phase of human history? David Uzzell<sup>2</sup> once described the Cold War as a 'placeless war', in the sense of being a war without battles or battlefields. This is ironic, given that the Cold War was the dominant political and social theme of this period, and in view of the propensity of sites that cluttered the landscape.

Cultural heritage agenda have provided context and justification for studying these Cold War remains. After the end of the Cold War many countries reduced their military capabilities in light of reduced and realigned political agendas and budgetary constraints. Sites were increasingly 'sold off' as operations were scrapped or downsized, and these redundant sites became threatened therefore with imminent demolition or re-use. A priority for heritage bodies was to determine which of these sites met national significance criteria; which sites society (or more precisely heritage experts acting *on behalf of society*) might wish to keep, and which it could afford to lose. In several countries a comprehensive audit was undertaken to provide the information from which such decisions could be taken. In England this review was undertaken by English Heritage<sup>3</sup>, stemming from a survey and published report that has proved one of the organisation's best-selling titles. The survey was thematic, breaking the Cold War military resource into categories, site types and sub-types thus allowing all sites to be 'placed' typologically, so to speak. Categories are either functional ('early warning and detection') or virtually experiential ('mutually assured destruction'), recognising also the distinction within the Cold War landscape between an international dimension and the home front. Extensive sites include the airfields, many forming part of the United States 'Umbrella', itself a reflection of Britain's crucial strategic position within the Cold War political landscape, and its special relationship with the US. As the authors describe, 'What the United States Airforce built [in the UK] was distinctive, and directly echoes shifting American and NATO strategy, as advancing technology determined how a conflict between the superpowers might be fought'<sup>4</sup>.

At the Imperial War Museum in London is a display presenting the context for these shifting strategies in the form of a Cold War clock – a countdown to Armageddon one might say. Over the forty-three years of the Cold War, the likelihood of it becoming a much hotter war shifted repeatedly from 'low' to 'imminent'. Sites constructed or redesigned through the

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<sup>2</sup> Uzzell 1997

<sup>3</sup> The work undertaken by English Heritage's Monuments Protection and Thematic Listing Programmes, and an assessment of surviving Cold War sites arising from the survey published as Cocroft and Thomas 2003

<sup>4</sup> Cocroft and Thomas 2003, p52

Cold War will reflect the political position of the time. Technology also developed significantly over time as a result of these changing dynamics. Many examples survive of sites with various phases of use that highlight these changes and developments, such as at Greenham Common where 1950s bomb stores exist alongside 1980s cruise missile shelters. Greenham also shows clearly the internal political divisions of the West, between those favouring a nuclear deterrent, and those against. The Peace Camp at Greenham Common has also been studied from an archaeological viewpoint, mapping traces of its ephemeral form, a wire fence away from concrete installations that cost millions of pounds to install and equip. Similarly in Nevada, where the Test Site at which nuclear weapons were tested over some forty years is also accompanied by a Peace Camp comprising distinctive and fascinating traces highly symbolic of the communities that created them. Comparing the Greenham Common cruise missile shelters to the ephemera of the protest movement, and similarly with Nevada, presents one clear set of distinctions that characterise the period; the comparison of equivalent sites from East and West is another. Finally, one might consider scale, with the massive Cold War testing grounds (Nevada covers 1761 sq km) at one extreme, and the tiny Royal Observer Corps monitoring posts or air-raid shelters and defence positions at the other. Some of these sites are well-known, and prominent in terms of public awareness; many it seems await rediscovery. Together these sites constitute a heritage of global significance for the evidence they provide, and as pointers to a history that will quickly fade from memory.

## War art

Having outlined the broad character of the Cold War landscape<sup>5</sup>, I will turn now to a particular but significant component of many of these sites, one that can introduce colourful and surprising ingredients to what are often otherwise rather mundane and 'grey' places, and one that can imbue them also with a degree of social significance, not to mention providing evidence for how the buildings and spaces were used. A previous survey of artwork on military sites (including but not only Cold War)<sup>6</sup> described their significance in terms of their providing coded information about the ways that space was appropriated, used and re-used by a succession of its former occupants. Artworks, it argued, provide information on the values attached to those spaces, spaces that may have been used for training personnel (represented by instructional drawings or text), or areas that were private and with restricted access. Sometimes art was used to boost morale or promote *esprit de corps* - unit badges or colourful murals in air-raid shelters for example. Sometimes they are intensely personal. At Forst Zinna barracks in East Germany for example, a Soviet conscript at the end of his tour of duty wrote *Cood bay Forst Zinna* ('Goodbye Forst Zinna') on his barrack-room wall, unwittingly providing the title and closing scene for a film about the site by the artist Angus Boulton<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> For further examples see Schofield and Cocroft 2007, Schofield 2009

<sup>6</sup> Cocroft et al. 2006

<sup>7</sup> See Boulton 2006, and Boulton 2007

This essay began with an archaeological comparison drawn between recent fortifications and those of much earlier periods. That comparison can be helpfully extended into a consideration of artwork. Understanding the use of space has long been a staple of archaeological investigations. Documenting how people used the spaces they occupied can provide information and insight into such things as social structure, privilege and hierarchy, and the variable access of different groups of people to different spaces. While documents survive to tell us something about this for the recent past, those documents are not always easily accessible, and they may not be entirely reliable. Without some independent ground-truthing, how can we know? And that is where archaeological recording can be so useful, for modern sites just as for ancient ones.

Given the archaeological significance of visual representation, and a long history of research for such representations in earlier periods, it is interesting that much war art, the artistic interventions made officially or unofficially on recent military sites and bases, has often been recorded not by archaeologists but by artists and photographers. And it is interesting also how far artists and photographers extend their interest to the ruinous and monumental architecture of the time, and the surreal landscapes that often arise from the abandonment of functional military spaces. We can begin in the East. Angus Boulton is a film-maker and photographer whose work has focused typically on the abandoned former Soviet bases of East Germany, now crumbling away to the east and west of Berlin, in what is now the Land of Brandenburg (Germany). It is an orphan heritage that appears out of place and time, washed up on an unfamiliar shore. In fact during the Cold War, Brandenburg (250 by 150 km) contained more than half the total number of Soviet military bases inside the German Democratic Republic, accommodating some 250,000 troops and other personnel. As Angus Boulton<sup>8</sup> explains, while many of these were adapted from their former use as Prussian or Nazi-era establishments, most underwent further expansion in Soviet hands. Most also underwent alteration, and a significant part of that alteration often comprised the production of artworks, designed for a range of purposes. Some of the artworks were instructional. The Soviet army was a conscript army, with soldiers from across the Union, embracing its full cultural diversity, with multiple languages, dialects and cultural traditions. Verbal instruction would therefore have proved challenging, and artworks provide a practical alternative. Some artworks were clearly intended to foster what in the west was referred to as an *esprit de corps*, a kind of shared mission that ensured the overarching aims of the ultimate mission were never overlooked. Some official artwork may have been largely decorative, but with the intention of recalling 'home'. And recalling home was the motivation behind the graffiti, left in a barrack room in Forst Zinna, as a soldier bode it farewell.

Artworks give colour to the grey, drab and often mundane spaces that characterise the military estate. They enliven the spaces, and embellish the ruins, creating narratives that are at once informative, shocking, and invigorating. They can surprise the visitor at any turn,

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<sup>8</sup> Boulton 2006, 2007

with a flashlight catching bright colours on a distant wall, with images consistent with the site's original purpose or with its afterlife. During the original use of the site every artwork, however formal or *ad hoc*, would have had a purpose, and was the result of careful often skilled intervention, deliberately weaving meaning onto the monotonous functional surfaces of gymnasia, common rooms, training facilities, or outside on the walls facing parade grounds. Art is intensely personal. It was the work of an individual or a group of individuals, who made a mark and whose marks survive as evidence of the former use of these spaces.

Arguably similar motivations underlie war art amongst forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (or NATO). Of the various members of NATO, examples of British and American war art are abundant, both online and in the literature<sup>9</sup>. These together provide an interesting example not least as the styles are very different. British bases are characterised by a more reserved and formal style of representation, neatly providing continuity from the heroic spirit of Second World War examples. Slightly more brash, however, are examples from the later Cold War and early post-Cold War periods. At former RAF Coltishall (Norfolk) for instance are anthropomorphic cartoon depictions of Jaguar aircraft from this base serving in the First Iraq War. A party was held in the hangar on the squadron's return, and these aircraft were painted to provide the backdrop. The images prevalent in US war art are of bolder form, both in style, execution and content. It is more aligned with street art and graffiti than conventional art, with some images occupying entire walls, or hangar doors. At RAF Bentwaters (Suffolk), on the veranda of a hut for visiting aircrew, is a 1980s pastiche in aerosol of the iconic Second World War image of US marines raising the stars and stripes over Mount Suibachi, Iwo Jima. This accompanies a mural incorporating the gryphon emblem of the 81<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing based here. Elsewhere on the site, the door of a hardened aircraft shelter is decorated with a brown bear superimposed on a red Star of David. This hangar was used by the 527<sup>th</sup> Aggressor Squadron who acted as a Soviet fighter unit to train US aircrew. In addition, unit badges are a common feature, as are the presence of cartoon characters such as at the US portion of the Cold War listening station at the Teufelsberg in Berlin, where Garfield appears. And there is the obvious adornment of private spaces. At Upper Heyford airbase (Oxfordshire), airmen passing through the entrance to a corridor in Dormitory 485 are greeted with the words from Dante's *Inferno*. Further into the Dormitory can be found: a life-size depiction of Judge Dread, the Doo Dah Man, and a hatted raven riding on an Electronic Counter Measures pod. Some of these artworks are attributable, by virtue of the fact the artists have signed the works. Several of the examples here are both named and dated. Many examples of war art however remain anonymous.

Beyond the base, art continues to enhance the understanding of the impact of militarism on society and on the landscape. Beyond the fence at Greenham Common airbase in Berkshire (one of six bases in Europe to house Ground-launched Cruise Missiles in the 1980s, and host to a significant Women's Peace Camp) are artworks created by the women in order to, in

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<sup>9</sup> Cocroft et al. 2006

their own words, make the place look less military, more ridiculous<sup>10</sup>. Fence posts were painted and decorated, and graffiti painted on road surfaces. Greenham women also decorated the fence, but these ephemeral traces are long since gone. Walking around the perimeter at Greenham today, on what is now publicly accessible common land, one encounters these flashes of colour emerging from the undergrowth, the faded remains of once brightly coloured posts that decorated the Common. And in Nevada, in the American Midwest, protesters opposing atomic testing at the Nevada Test Site lived outside the Site's main entrance, in challenging desert conditions, using rocks to create artworks, many of them (circles, rows, geoglyphs of various forms) reminiscent of both prehistoric stone arrangements and the late twentieth-century 'land art' movement, as well as being richly symbolic of the diversity and creativity of this unusual desert community<sup>11</sup>.

## Conclusion

War art of the Cold War period is impressive in its diversity, in the quality of execution, and in the degree to which it gives both colour and meaning to many drab and mundane industrial spaces. It will of course fade with time, and some examples will fare better than others, raising questions about cultural significance and conservation. But who is to say, without any intervention, that some isolated examples of this art, particularly in underground rooms and buildings, will not survive the millennia as many earlier artworks have done. Here the essay has focused on a few select examples from East and West, demonstrating in outline the types of examples that survive, and what novel information they can provide for visitors and researchers, about the site's former occupants, and the function of individual rooms and spaces, as public or private domains, with artwork to inspire, to instruct or to challenge convention and authority. Other examples survive. Many examples await discovery. One might even say the artistic or creative impulse is a characteristic of conflict – whether doodling in a book, writing poetry, carving shell cases for a loved one, or creating murals. Art is a powerful and diverse medium. It can be inspiring or enlivening; or it can act as a vehicle for things best left unsaid (in terms of subversion for example). Finally, the artworks, and the buildings in which it is found, can be an inspiration for a new generation of artists for whom the Cold War is genuinely historic.

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<sup>10</sup> Schofield and Anderton 2000 (this paper is also available in Schofield 2007)

<sup>11</sup> Beck et al. 2007

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