

***Evidentiary Realism***  
**Chemical Interventions: Kirsten Stolle**  
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The late 1940s, 50s and early 60s provide a post-atomic theater where artist Kirsten Stolle stages her interventions with near perfect hindsight. The post-world war period revealed new tensions between prosperous domestic contentment and the insidious menace of nuclear war. Unfortunately, the threat of one-upmanship on a nuclear platform is, again, an increasingly uncomfortable reality with volatile and narcissistic leaders like the newly inaugurated Donald J. Trump of America squaring off against North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un, tutored since birth in nefarious tactics by his no less disreputable father, Kim Jong-il.

During roughly the same time, Monsanto Chemical Company, originally formed in the US in 1901 and now a publically traded multinational agricultural biotech corporation, was aggressively marketing their chemical products through magazine advertisements. Although less publically, Monsanto was also heavily invested in pre-WWII activities researching uranium for use by scientists working to develop the first atomic bomb for the Manhattan Project. The 1930s saw Monsanto's first hybrid corn seed at the same time the company was expanding their research into new detergents, soaps, and industrial cleaning products, synthetic rubbers and plastics.<sup>1</sup> Ubiquitous print propaganda promoted the company's chemicals for use in domestic contexts, agriculture and, of course, patriotic war efforts. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, Monsanto now bills itself as a "sustainable agricultural company" on its website and in present-day promotional material. Monsanto is currently the largest producer of genetically engineered (GE) seeds on the planet, accounting for almost one quarter (23%) of the global proprietary seed market and approximately ninety percent of GE seeds planted globally since 2003.<sup>2</sup>

What is important to understand is that, although difficult to comprehend from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective (that perfect hindsight again), in the 1940s and 50s, technology was seen as the ultimate

answer and chemical advances were an important part of technology. Rapid developments in chemistry had stopped the Second World War and made America “safe” again, (sound familiar?). There was a pervading universal belief that went largely unchallenged: advances involving chemistry would unquestioningly make better lives. There was little awareness of the on-going collateral damage from using minimally, or worse, completely unregulated, chemicals. The concept that unseen, unsuspected chemical contaminants could cause harm over time was just beginning to seep around the edges of public consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

William Souder, in his 2012 biography about Rachel Carson, *On a Farther Shore*, credits her environmental classic, *Silent Spring*, published in 1962 with igniting the modern environmental movement. Trained as a zoologist and marine biologist, Carson worked as an editor and publicist for the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Well aware of the global use of the pesticide DDT to fight malaria and other mosquito born illnesses on the battlefields and on civilians, Carson was part of the team at the Fish and Wildlife Service that began testing the harmful effects of DDT on fish and birds and its impact on the environment. These investigations were unprecedented; at that time, DDT was widely considered a “miracle chemical.” In fact, the Nobel Prize in Physiology/Medicine 1948 was awarded to the Swiss industrial chemist, Paul Hermann Müller “for his discovery of the high efficiency of DDT as a contact poison against several arthropods.”<sup>4</sup> Carson and her colleagues struggled with how to convince an unsuspecting public of the long-term effects of exposure to DDT when public health departments around the globe were staging safety demonstrations, newsreels touted its effectiveness and international governments endorsed its usage.

Souder credits Carson with brilliantly linking the long-term use of DDT and other pesticides to the contamination of nuclear fallout—which terrified the public. The most controversial book of 1962/63 when Carson was appearing on television and testifying before Senate subcommittees about pesticides, *Silent Spring* revealed for the first time to a general readership: “the biological forces that link all life through the ages, the interdependence of living organisms and the continual cycling of nutrients and genetic material through species and over time.”<sup>5</sup> Predictably, the major chemical companies fiercely opposed

Carson's meticulous and irrefutable research, spending nearly a quarter of a million dollars to discredit the scientist. The editors at *Monsanto Magazine* tried to counter *Silent Spring* with their own essay, *The Desolate Year*, that graphically detailed how disease would spread and crops would fail without the use of pesticides. The terms of the environmental debate still raging today were established in the early 1960s: many scientists and environmentalist continue to challenge big business and government. The language established in the mid-century is nearly the same language used today when presenting arguments both supporting and denying scientific evidence in relation to climate change. In direct contrast to the events of 1962, when President John F. Kennedy commissioned a government investigation into the claims of *Silent Spring* that substantiated Caron's research, on January 20, 2017, the day Trump was inaugurated, the White House website was wiped clean of any references to climate change. This time it is the National Park Service, the Environmental Protection Agency and their supporters that are carrying the torch for science in rogue or renegade twitter accounts that counter the apparent "gag orders" of the Trump administration.<sup>6</sup> Neither language nor politics have changed much in the last 60 some years except that information (real or fake) is spread much more rapidly thanks to ongoing advances in technology and the widespread use of the Internet.

How is evidence best presented or, in this case, re-presented? In her ongoing series *Monsanto Intervention*, Stolle alters and redacts mid-century Monsanto magazine advertisements pointing out a wrinkle in time. The Monsanto ads were ubiquitous, seen everywhere from *Life Magazine*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Fortune* and *Time* to many other popular magazines. Using primary and secondary source materials including 20<sup>th</sup> century medical books, agricultural magazines, archival photographs, US Department of Agriculture promotional videos and print advertisements, Stolle's work challenges the dominant public narrative, reflecting the artist's concern with industrial food production and the influence of biotechnology. Influenced by Carson and public radio, Stolle is firmly committed to the idea that art can bring new perspectives to contemporary scientific and social issues; through direct critique she challenges her audience to read between the lines. Using collage, cutting and drawing, Stolle redacts the original text of Monsanto's colorful publicity, altering the intended messaging and

reframing the visuals to expose the true threat posed by toxic chemicals. The reconstructed ads criticize a history of overusing harmful agricultural chemicals and the US government's weak regulations on corporate agribusiness. Her creative investigations continue to examine the influence of corporate agribusiness and biotech companies on the food supply. The artist asks us to consider the on-going connection between influential corporate interests (read, financial bottom-line) and public health (read, a serious lack of information). Stolle's work focuses our attention on the motivations and deliberate misinformation propagated by the corporate machine.

Using public texts, Stolle creates elegant, carefully composed collages. Her layered, yet visually economical works probe issues of corporate green-washing, government propaganda and agricultural rhetoric, exploring the complex relationships between economy and ecology, prompting the viewer to contemplate where their food comes from, how it was grown and how the decisions big businesses make "behind the scenes" impact everyday choices about consumption. Stemming from personal health problems from eating GM soy products, Stolle became acutely aware of the potential risks of eating foods that contained genetically engineered ingredients. Since then, her artwork has been deeply grounded in a research-based practice making the personal political. An important note: neither Stolle nor Carson before her, were entirely against the use of chemicals altogether; rather, their argument is that the chemical industry with government support, was and is pushing the overuse of chemicals and genetically modified crops for economic gain at the expense of public health and the environment.

The titles Stolle uses in the *Monsanto Intervention* pieces are deliberately provocative, for example: *Sweetness is a Material of War*. How can war be sweet? What is marked out and why? What is the tension between what is seen and what is unseen? This viewer wants to scratch through the thick, deliberate black lines to reveal what has been covered. In the same way, we are asked to reread all paid advertising and ask is this claim true or is this false advertising? What is the hidden agenda here? Stolle's redacted text is hauntingly similar to many of the notorious and now public FBI files from the infamous McCarthy era of the 1950s, where thousands of Americans were accused of being

communists or communist sympathizers—a charge leveled against Rachel Carson. McCarthyism refers to accusations of subversion or treason without evidence. Perhaps “*Monsantoism*” will have a similar connotation in the future, referring to the introduction of genetically modified substances to the food chain without sufficient testing as to their long-term effects. Stolle mimics the government’s heavy-handed technique of blacking out words to obscure meaning, and in doing so, creates a kind of poetry, constructing truthful and relevant narrative.

In light of the current political upheaval in the United States and, indeed, the nationalistic tendencies around the world, Stolle’s artwork takes on a greater importance as members of the US government reject overwhelming scientific evidence of climate change. The Republican regime publically challenges the integrity of all journalists and the biases of the media, accusing them of propagating untruths—lies actually—in the face of empirical evidence. Art is, historically, one of the most potent antidotes to collective unconsciousness. Take Vaclav Havel’s trajectory from philosopher/poet/playwright to political prisoner to the last president of Czechoslovakia/first president of the Czech Republic. Havel spent five years in and out of Communist prisons, lived for two decades under close secret-police surveillance and endured the suppression of his plays and essays. He served 14 years as president, wrote 19 plays, inspired a film and a rap song and remained one of his generation’s most seductively nonconformist writers.<sup>7</sup> Through all of the turmoil and considerable political and personal risk, Havel kept writing, kept agitating, kept faith in humanitarianism and environmentalism. Like Carson and Havel before her, Kirsten Stolle’s artwork challenges us all to see the evidence in front of us even when it means sweeping out the propaganda to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-complete-history-of-monsanto-the-worlds-most-evil-corporation/5387964>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gmwatch.org/gm-firms/10558-the-worlds-top-ten-seed-companies-who-owns-nature> and <http://web.mit.edu/demoscience/Monsanto/players.html>

<sup>3</sup> KQED Forum with Michael Krasny. PBS Podcast:  
<https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/kqeds-forum/id73329719?mt=2>

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<sup>4</sup> The Official Website of the Nobel Prize:

[https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/medicine/laureates/1948/](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/medicine/laureates/1948/)

<sup>5</sup> Royte, Elizabeth. The Poisoned Earth: ‘On a Farther Shore’ by William Souder. The New York Times Sunday Book Review, September 14, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Davis, Wynne. It’s Not Just the Park Service: ‘Rogue’ Federal Twitter Accounts Multiply, NPR. January 27, 2017.

<http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2017/01/27/512007632/its-not-just-the-park-service-rogue-federal-twitter-accounts-multiply>

<sup>7</sup> Bilefsky, Dan and Jane Perlez. Vaclav Havel obituary, New York Times, December 18, 2011.

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For Further Reading:

Caron, Rachel with an introduction by Vice President Al Gore. *Silent Spring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994.

Lear, Linda. *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997.

Souder, William. *On a Farther Shore: The Life and Legacy of Rachel Carson*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2012.