Ice memorial

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This text[1] serves as 'vehicular medium'[2] or thought projection towards the existence of an ephemeral *Ice memorial* on a stretch of intermittently frozen sea ice in the Bering Strait at 168° 58' 37" W. This 'work' is offered as a memorialisation to the consequences of collectively imagined fear—in this case the (first) Cold War. Its ephemeral material existence—comprehensible through this page yet clearly elsewhere in space and time—exemplifies the mutual insufficiency of material and contextual elements in creative expression.[3] But it could also perform as a temporary memorial to collective inaction on climate. Before proceeding, however, it is important to concede that the author has never physically visited the Bering Strait; instead, this work was produced through the limited infinitudes of web-accessible literature and tools such as Google Maps. Yet, despite not having physically visited the location, we can be more than reasonably convinced that it exists (at least materially). Through this text, I seek to demonstrate that this location's historical, political and aesthetic significance can be augmented through the imagination. In short, this text is an invitation to project our thoughts towards a small but significant stretch of water in the North Pacific Ocean.

Although sometimes disputed, 168° 58' 37" W marks the current maritime boundary between Russia and the United States. The boundary follows a USA–USSR agreement of 1 June 1990 that was not formally approved by Russia as the state that succeeded the Soviet Union. This sea border is also referred to as the Baker–Shevardnadze line, after the officials who signed the original deal. The need for this maritime boundary arose after the United States purchased Alaska from the Russian Empire in 1867. Although both sides agreed, at the time, on a straight line on a map, they could not agree on which map projection to use (Mercator or conformal). This wonderfully bizarre bureaucratic discrepancy would set the stage for a long running dispute. Although the 1990 line supposedly split the difference, many in Russia subsequently criticised Mikhail Gorbachev and Eduard Shevardnadze for rushing the deal. From the point 65° 30' N, 168° 58' 37" W, the current boundary extends north along the 168° 58' 37" W meridian through the Bering Strait and Chukchi Sea into the dark, cold waters of the Arctic Ocean.

From the same point southwards, the boundary follows a line specified under the agreement into the North Pacific Ocean.

During the (first) Cold War, the Bering Strait marked a physical border between the competing superpowers of the United States and the then Soviet Union. It's not possible to see across the 88 kilometre stretch of the Bering Strait, and yet – despite her ham-fisted command of international relations – as Sarah Palin correctly noted as part of her vice-presidential pitch in a now infamous 2008 interview '… you can actually see Russia […] from an island in Alaska'.[4] It is true that there are two islands in the middle of the Bering Strait: Big Diomede, the easternmost point of Russia; and Little Diomede, part of the United States. At their closest point, they are approximately 3.8 kilometres apart. The islands are typically blanketed by dense fog, but given the horizon is approximately 4.6 kilometres away at sea level, on a clear day it is indeed possible to see Russia from US territory. Although geographically remote to the key boundaries that historically epitomised Cold War tensions—such as Berlin, the Korean Demilitarised Zone and the Florida Straits—Little Diomede Island was once a place from which one could literally see, swim or walk between the Soviet Union and US territory. Significantly, the International Date Line also separates the two islands. Consequently, this location can be easily imagined as somehow floating anywhere and elsewhere in time and space. During winter, an ice bridge spans the distance between the two islands, making it possible to walk between them. During the (first) Cold War, this space was referred to as the 'Ice Curtain'. Today, the expanse of ice, which intermittently appears and disappears with seasonal freezes and thaws, might be reimagined as a memorial of sorts—and perhaps, by extension, a reminder of the ever-present, if ephemerally tempered, threat of apocalyptic human conflict. In 1987, long-distance swimmer Lynne Cox managed to swim from one island to the other, a feat that at the time attracted the congratulatory praise of both Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan. For some, the potential for détente was symbolically imagined through this crossing.

Although the (first) Cold War has since thawed (albeit now re-emerging in a new guise), international relations are still built in its now ghosted image. Despite its enduring legacies, there are few memorials to this definitive tension of the second half of the 20th century. In lieu of an internationally recognised memorial, perhaps we might reimagine this *Ice memorial* as a placeholder memorial of sorts for the tangible human implications of politically constructed fears. By conceptually marking the intermittently frozen 3.8-kilometre-wide space between the islands as a memorial to dangers lurking within ideologically charged fear, an aesthetic object is very gently superimposed on the physical space at 168° 58' 37" W. For most people, this 'memorial' will remain beyond the realm of direct sense perception. Yet it is nevertheless hoped that a simple exercise of orienting thought towards the location might provide both solace and a reconsideration of the legacies of conflict. To this end, we could even add a supplementary feature to assist in the task. While examining this location on Google Earth, the beholder is invited to imagine a modest sign placed on the far western coastline of Little Diomede Island. This imaginary sign, declaring the winter ice bridge between the islands as an *Ice memorial*, could potentially resemble a ghosted facsimile of the now iconic signage at Checkpoint Charlie, in Berlin. This sign and explanatory note would complement English and Russian text with the language of the radically displaced local indigenous Iñupiaq peoples. Perhaps, in quietly symbolising a world of forgotten peoples, turned inside out by the tectonic immaterial tensions between competing superpowers, the

Iñupiaq are emblematic of all peoples divided or repatriated during the (first) Cold War era. (The Indigenous population of Big Diomede Island was wholly relocated by the Soviets to mainland Russia to house a military presence, while Little Diomede now has an Iñupiaq population reduced to around 110 people.)

The use of perceptually minimal media to build works in the mind has its origins in 20th-century avant-gardes working on both sides of this (imagined) conflict. Like the propaganda machines that inspired revolt, artists have long sought to build experiences in the mind through the presentation of words, images, objects or gestures that refer to locations and events elsewhere in space and time. This *Ice memorial* exists at both 168° 58' 37" W and in the mind via the perceptual conduit of this text. Although its physical existence is mediated through this page, it should be apprehended in a manner that is ontologically distinguishable from ideas presented in the domains of theory, philosophy and history. Importantly, this is a work of art—i.e. a fictional apparatus with the capacity to illuminate something of the truth of other fictions. Like a nation, money, god or superpower, an artwork exists only insofar as people 'agree' that it does. Just as fashion magazines sometimes list, alongside other credits, the fragrances models are supposedly wearing, or just as a supposed wilderness might offer us some vicarious solace via our mediated knowledge of its continued existence in a changing world, art can offer a window to experiences that might otherwise remain beyond direct sense perception.

Conceptual art's implicit suggestion that absence can offer a vehicle for apprehending aesthetic content beyond that which can be directly seen or felt has certainly reshaped the practice of memorialising. (Although we still need something material to become aware of a void, for the dematerialisation of art was, after all, never actually possible!) Just as Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (1982) stands testament to a previous generation's reimagining of the ghosts of war made manifest through conspicuous absence, this *Ice memorial* seeks to represent something of the ineffable nature of conflict made manifest through the collective power of the imagination. We are now far beyond accepting memorialisation of conflict through a triumphant stone phallic evocation of dead white men; this memorial instead invites contemplation by directing our imagination towards an ephemerally present object in physical space. Given the complexities of human conflict, it is also envisaged that a paradoxical insight will be evident: full comprehension of the gravity of that which is being memorialised is impossible through the medium of this page. This imagined object has no defined edges, for it encapsulates a space that extends towards the fractured edges of a frozen sea disappearing into darkly frigid North Pacific and Arctic waters.

One of the most enduring characteristics of the Cold War was its seeming invisibility. Largely played out beyond the realms of direct sense perception, its underlying raison d'être was that of the mutually assured deployment of ideologically driven and consensually imagined fear capable of controlling the imaginations of entire civilisations. Today, as we stand at the precipice of another (profoundly unprecedented) existential threat in the form of climate emergency, we might reasonably wonder if another Cold War will distract us from requisite action. We might also reasonably wonder if this *Ice memorial* will soon melt away permanently.

Works Cited

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[2] David Davies, *Art as Performance*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2004, p. 59.
[3] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London 2013.
[4] In an 11 September 2008 interview on US television with ABC's Charlie Gibson, Sarah Palin defended her command of US–Russian relations: 'They're our next-door neighbors [sic], and you can actually see Russia from land here in Alaska, from an island in Alaska'.