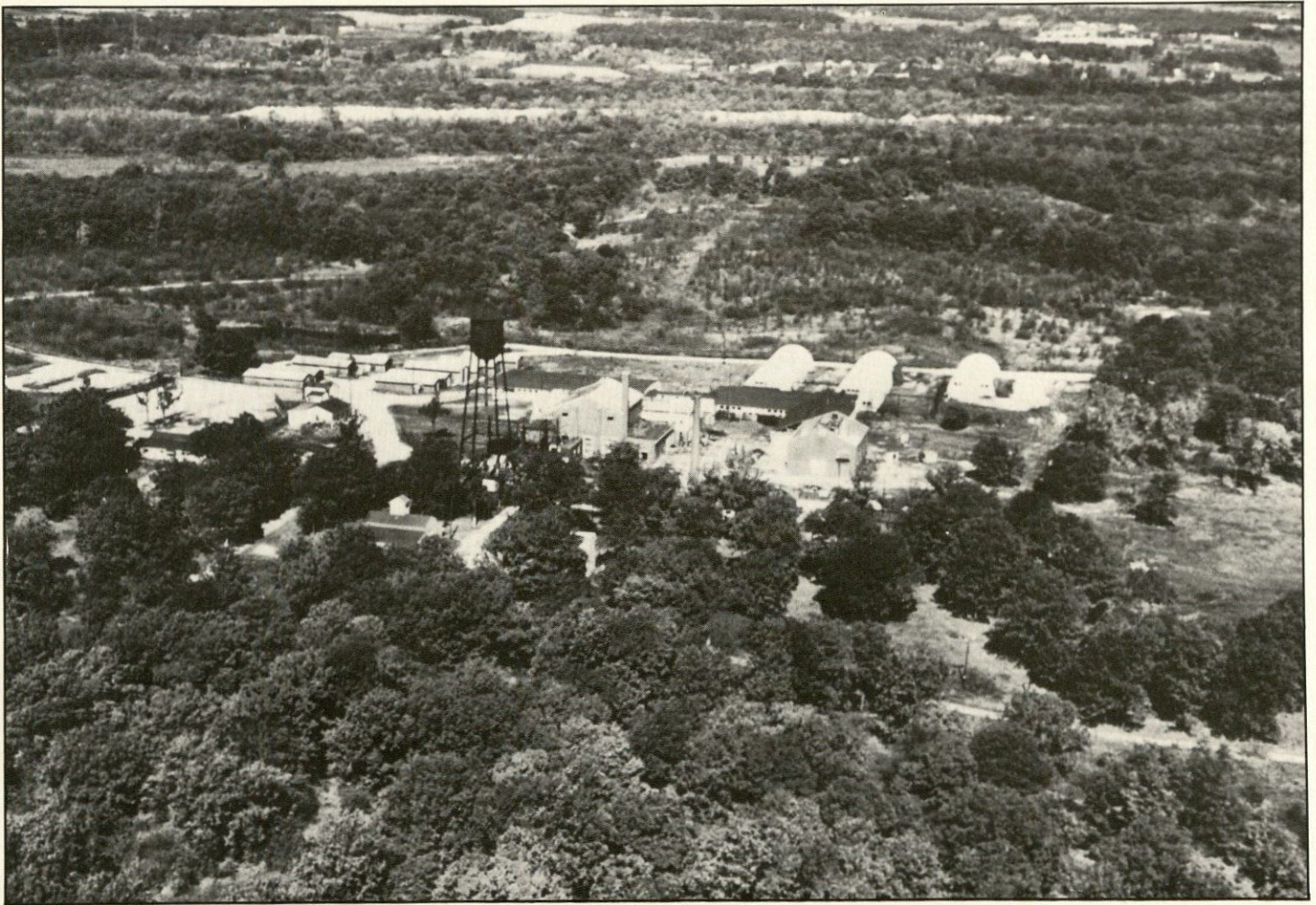


Deborah Bright



Textual Landscapes

Deborah Bright: Textual Landscapes

March 17-April 17, 1988

Nancy Gonchar, *curator*
University Art Gallery
State University of New York at Binghamton

Front cover: Palos Site, aerial view, c. 1950, detail from the installation **How the West Was Won** (*Caution—Do Not Dig*), 1985

Back cover: detail from the installation, **How the West Was Won** (*Caution—Do Not Dig*), 1985

PREFACE

This exhibition is the first in an annual series by the University Art Gallery to investigate work by artists who are cultural activists committed to making art about their political concerns. This is not to say that they throw their aesthetic sensibilities out the window, but rather they find an appropriate balance between discourse and presentation. Having recently decided to return to a long-time interest and involvement in photography by curating exhibitions of contemporary photography, I find myself scouring the field and identifying my interests. I still find pleasure in all kinds of photographic images: portraits, landscapes, camera/optical trickery, personal snapshot diaries, etc. I am intrigued with anonymous snapshots, studio portraits, and the vast archives of instrumental photography used for various purposes. I qualify this statement by saying "I still find pleasure" in these photographs because my interests have become increasingly diverse, and I now search for images that not only give pleasure but that also address complex social issues. As a feminist, I am interested in the work of artists who have something at stake, those whose politics are not separate from their art production.

The 1980s represent a conservative political backlash to the more liberal climate of the '70s. This conservatism is certainly evident in the art world as well as in the world of politics, and can be seen as a resistance to art with political content, and a preference for a more self-referential, expressive approach. It seems

especially important, therefore, to show the work of artists who counter this conservative trend by deliberately producing work with a social and political agenda.

I am also attracted to this work because of a personal enduring fascination with the land. As a child, I loved the outdoors, nature, and, by extension, the landscape. My buddies and I played games in the woods surrounding our housing development. The woods—untamed, wild, and mysterious—were our territory. We explored it, staked out boundaries, established secret hideouts, and on a few occasions actively defended it against the intrusions of outsiders. This was my socialization into the laws of the land and its possession. Initially I was fascinated with nature as a place to conquer and claim as my own. Much later, I began to experience the land as a haven and a site in which to hone my newly acquired photographic skills. My photographic training, especially as an undergraduate, emphasized the spiritual and transcendent qualities of the photograph as metaphor and art object. Social and documentary uses were discussed only in history classes.

The traditional photographic landscapes of Adams, Weston, Steiglitz, Strand, Caponigro, Callahan, Freidlander, etc.—expressive landscapes with exquisite grey scales and subtle non-specific meanings—have dominated the art photography scene in this century, picturing the land as beautiful, sublime, and spiritual, and discouraging a critical and cultural interpretation of the land as

a site of human activity from farming, commerce, and recreation to violence and war.

Deborah Bright's landscapes provide beautiful views as well as an historical context, which together, subtly but forcefully, depict both our appreciation for and our interaction with the land.



AGINCOURT: Battle of Agincourt (France).
 October 25, 1415. Duration: one afternoon.
 View from the second position of Henry V of England
 (6,000 archers and men-at-arms on foot), looking toward
 French lines (25,000 mounted knights, men-at-arms on foot,
 crossbowmen), from extreme bowshot range, or about 300
 yards. The battlefield "between the two woods" has
 remained virtually unchanged; the rye fields shown here
 would have been sown with winter wheat. The French
 nobility was butchered when it charged the English yeomen
 until, as one chronicler put it, "the heaps of dead and
 dying were taller than a man's height." The stand of trees
 at the extreme right marks the spot where local peasants,
 under the direction of the Bishop of Arras, buried about
 6,000 French knights in hastily dug pits. Photographed
 June, 1981.

EMBATTLED GROUND

Their [the socially conscious photographer] work begins with the recognition that photography is operative at every level of our culture. That is, they insist on treating photographs not as privileged objects but as common cultural artifacts. The solitary, sparsely captioned photograph on the gallery wall is a sign, above all, of an aspiration toward the esthetic and market conditions of modernist painting and sculpture. In this white void, meaning is thought to emerge entirely from within the artwork. The importance of the framing discourse is masked, context is hidden. These artists, on the other hand, openly bracket their photographs with language, using texts to anchor, contradict, reinforce, subvert, complement, particularize, or go beyond the meanings offered by the images themselves.¹

Deborah Bright's photographic work exemplifies this description written a decade ago by Allan Sekula. Her work (both her critical writing and her art production) challenges the dominant view of landscape photography as an art that transcends history and is ideologically neutral. Bright's photographs and writings explore the landscape from a cultural and theoretical perspective, resisting an exclusive approach which privileges form and aesthetics. Instead, Bright encourages the viewer to explore

the land as a social space rich with cultural meaning.

Even formal and personal choices do not emerge *sui generis*, but instead reflect collective interests and influences, whether philosophical, political, economic or otherwise. While most art historical/curatorial scholarship has concentrated on the artistic genius of a select few (and the stake in so doing is obvious), it is time to look afresh at the cultural meanings of landscapes in order to confront issues lying beyond individual intuition and/or technical virtuosity. The sorts of questions we might ask concern what ideologies landscape photographs perpetuate; in whose interests they were conceived; why we still desire to make and consume them; and why the art of landscape photography remains so singularly identified with a masculine eye.²

The ambiguity of much landscape photography has been preserved by the exclusion of a text which could provide specific, historical references. Deborah Bright works in opposition to this approach. She challenges the conventional notion of the photograph as authoritative document capable of revealing objective truth. By framing her images with specific historical text, she allows the viewer a multileveled reading of the

photograph. The past and present are displayed simultaneously, providing a more complex interpretation. These then are not the sublime and neutral landscape of Ansel Adams, or the metaphysical landscape of Minor White, or even the more culturally aware landscape of Walker Evans, but the landscape which history constructs.

The exhibition includes two bodies of work in which Bright employs different strategies to express her intention. In the earlier (1981-84) work, *Battlefield Panorama* series, she depicts famous historic battlefields throughout North America and Europe. The series was inspired by John Keegan's book, *The Face of Battle*, which analyzes specific battles from the point of view of the foot soldier rather than the general. The earliest battlefield depicted is Vale of Bulincamps (1346), part of the Hundred Years War, and the latest is Bastogne (World War II, 1944).

The series currently includes 15 panoramas with future pieces to include battles from the Indian Wars and the American Revolution. These ten-foot-long panoramas provide an expansive and information-packed view of the sites. Although many of the battlefields have been commemorated and marked with plaques listing the commanders and movements of the troops, there are some that have been returned to farmland or grasslands or have been developed into affluent suburbs. The images themselves are visually poignant, all displaying traces of what took place, from ravaged landscapes and ruins to concrete fortifications

and cast-iron machine gun turrets. These are presented in well-executed silver prints. Without the text, they would appear just as mysterious and ambiguous in their intent as the images of many current landscape photographers whose work celebrates the beauties, ironies, fierceness, or spirituality of the land. What distinguishes these photographs from others of the mainstream landscape genre is the intention of the artist to reclaim history for the viewer. The choice of charged landscape (historic battlefields) and the inclusion of a text that dryly and journalistically describes, in an economy of language chilling in its sparseness, the brutal events which took place bear witness to the crucial and dramatic events of the past.

How the West Was Won (Caution — Do Not Dig) is a multilayered analysis of the beginning of the nuclear age, using color slides interspersed with text. The projected slides are flanked on the wall by two murals—one of an aerial view taken around 1950 of the Palos Park area, the site of the first nuclear reactor, and the other of a marker on the site engraved with the following warning:

CAUTION—DO NOT DIG Buried in this area is radioactive material from nuclear research conducted here 1943-1949. Burial area is marked by six corner markers 100 ft. from this center point. There is no danger to visitors. U.S. Department of Energy 1978.

On top of the granite marker is graffiti with a skull and cross bones and the

words “nuclear wasteland.” Nuclear wasteland is an apt description of what we see as the slides move us through the forest preserve and the remains of the site of the world’s first nuclear reactor. The site was chosen because it is sequestered in the middle of a recreational park. One of Bright’s text panels reads, “It is a well-hidden region only twenty miles from Chicago.” We see views of the site interspersed with quotes from personnel who worked on the project—a U.S. Army general, a physicist, etc. The combination of visual and verbal elements provide a rich contextual fabric in which to contemplate the land. The images of the park are rather mundane and innocuous, often of the ground where evidence of past activities is most apparent or where radioactive material is buried. With the exception of some introductory material, most of the text is directly quoted from participants in the project. Instead of sensational “footage,” either in words or images, Bright opts for the mundane and everyday, life carrying on its daily business.

What is most compelling about this piece is the sparseness of the information displayed, in contrast to the enormity of the project and its implications for the future. The visual image becomes the backdrop for the unfolding text which subtly and relentlessly reveals through personal recollection the ideologies, attitudes, and atmosphere in which the harnessing of atomic energy was perfected, paving the way for and rationalizing the development of the first atomic

bomb. Bright’s progressive project allows us to reconsider an intricate set of historical circumstances avoiding commemorative simplifications. This straightforward remembering of the site and its history reveals more complex, less optimistic layers of meaning and asks us to think over our collective responsibility.

—Nancy Gonchar
Binghamton, New York
February 1988

NOTES

1 Allan Sekula, “Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation),” *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983*, (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), p. 60.

2 Deborah Bright, “Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry Into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography,” *Exposure* 23.4, Winter 1985, pp. 6-7.

HOW THE WEST WAS WON (CAUTION—DO NOT DIG)

Gen. Groves: When I was a boy, I lived with my father at a number of the Army posts that had sprung up during the Indian wars throughout the western United States. There I came to know many of the old soldiers and scouts who had devoted their active lives to winning the West. And as I listened to the stories of their deeds, I grew somewhat dismayed, wondering what was left for me to do now that the West was won. I am sure that many others of my generation shared this feeling.

The following pages are detail views from the installation *How the West Was Won (Caution Do Not Dig)*, 1985, original in color.

In a remote spot in the middle of a forest preserve about 20 miles west of Chicago lies the abandoned site of the world's first nuclear reactor.



Gen. Groves: Compton raised the question: "Why wait for Argonne?" There was no reason to wait, except for our uncertainty about whether the planned experiment might not prove hazardous to the surrounding community.



If the pile should explode, no one knew just how far the danger would extend.



With the establishment of the Argonne National Laboratory in 1954, this site was returned to forest—the reactor buildings and laboratories were bulldozed into the ground.

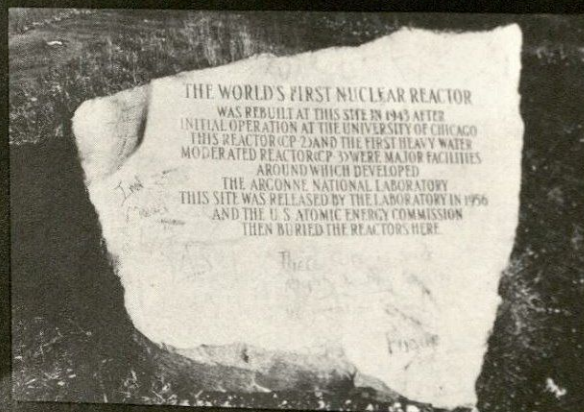
This meant, as he interpreted it, that we scientists need no longer concern ourselves about what would develop from the atomic project.



He had not chosen to build atomic weapons. The task had been assigned to him, and as a good soldier, loyal to his country, he would put into it everything he had.



Compton: In my mind General Groves stands out as a classic example of the patriot.



Compton: The degree of harmony in the cooperation between the scientists and the Army was rather surprising.



Compton: The day came when General Groves informed me that full responsibility for the atomic program had been transferred to him.

This harmony was possible because both groups recognized that their objectives were identical.



DEBORAH BRIGHT

- 1950 Born Washington D.C.
- 1972 BA, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois
- 1975 MFA, The University of Chicago

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1979 *Polaroid Multiples*, Midway Studios, University of Chicago
- 1980 *Goose Island Photographs*, Facets Gallery, Chicago
- 1982 *Battlefield Panoramas*, The Chicago Public Library Cultural Center
- 1983 *Battlefield Panoramas*, W.P.A. Gallery, Chicago
Battlefield Panoramas, Skokie Public Library, Illinois
Deborah Bright, Photographs, Schwayder Art Building, University of Denver
- 1985 *Battlefield Panoramas*, Lightfantastic Gallery, Michigan State University, East Lansing
- 1986 *Deborah Bright, Photographs*, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale
- 1987 *Deborah Bright, Photographs*, Red-Eye Gallery, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1978 *Illinois Photographers '78*, Illinois State Museum, Springfield
- 1979 *Upper Midwest Color Print Show*, Elvehjem Museum of Art, Madison, Wisconsin
New Photographics, Central Washington University, Ellensburg, Washington
- 1980 *Illinois Photographers '80*, Illinois State Museum, Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography
- 1981 *Chicago Photographers*, W.P.A. Gallery, Chicago
- 1982 *Recent Acquisitions*, California Museum of Photography, Riverside
Unseen Light: Contemporary Color Photography, Buscaglia-Castellani Art Gallery, Niagara Falls, New York
- 1983 *Chicago, The Architectural City*, Art Institute of Chicago

- 1984 *A Year in Grant Park*, Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College, Chicago
Tenth Anniversary Exhibition, San Francisco Cameraclub
Artists Call, Puerto Rican Cultural Center, Chicago
- 1985 *Wide Perspectives*, Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College, Chicago
This Is Not About the Artist's Ego: Some Political Photographs of the '80s, Artemisia Gallery, Chicago
- 1986 *Expanding Commitment: Diverse Approaches to Socially Concerned Photography*, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore
Photomosaics: The Landscape Reconstructed, Photographic Resource Center, Boston
Images of War, CEPA and Hall Walls, Buffalo, New York
- 1987 *Boston Now: Projects*, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
- 1988 *Beyond the Frame*, Minneapolis College of Art and Design
That's What It's All About, curated by Lucy Lippard for International's Women's Day, Erector Square Gallery, New Haven

Collections

- State of Illinois Center Permanent Collection, Chicago
- Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College, Chicago
- Illinois State Museum, Springfield
- California Museum of Photography, Riverside
- Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Richard Slade Collection
- University Art Gallery, State University of New York at Binghamton

Awards

- 1979 Illinois Art Council Project Completion Grant

- 1980 Juror's Purchase Award, Illinois State Museum
- 1981 Illinois Art Council Project Completion Grant
- 1982 Illinois Art Council Project Completion Grant
- 1983 Illinois Arts Council Artists Fellowship
- 1984 Purchase Award, State of Illinois Center, Chicago
- 1986 Illinois Arts Council Artists Fellowship
- 1986 National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar Fellowship
- 1987 Faculty Development Grant, University of Massachusetts, Boston

Bibliography Selected Reviews

- Anthony Bannon, "Artists Cast New Light on Photos," *Buffalo Evening News*, September 23, 1982.
- Susan Blake, "Deborah Bright," *The New Art Examiner*, February 1983.
- Anita Douthat, Introduction to "Photomosaics: The Landscape Reconstructed," published by Photographic Resource Center, Boston, 1986.
- David Elliot, "Deborah Bright," *Chicago Sunday Sun-Times*, January 22, 1982.
- Carol Harmel, "Deborah Bright: Goose Island Photographs," *The New Art Examiner*, April 1980.
- Ken Johnson, "Boston Now: Projects," *The New Art Examiner*, November 1987.
- Vince Leo, Photography's New Frontier, *Art-paper*, January 1988.
- Chuck Nicholson, "Nighttime Views," *Artweek*, October 25, 1980.
- Henry Scarupa, "Photography with a political conscience," *Baltimore Sun*, March 18, 1986.
- Robert Taylor, "Art that widens the boundaries," *Boston Globe*, June 29, 1987.
- Hedy Weiss, "Deborah Bright," *The New Art Examiner*, March 1982.

Selected Publications

- Deborah Bright, "Battlefield Panoramas," *CEPA Quarterly*, Fall 1985

Photography for Collectors, Volume 2: The Midwest, 1984.

CMP Bulletin, California Museum of Photography, Summer 1982.

"Beyond the Frame: Photographic Alternatives," Minneapolis College of Art and Design, 1988.

Published Criticism by Deborah Bright

"Michael Bishop: The Mystique of Mediocrity," *The New Art Examiner*, April 1979.

"Reconsidering the Stieglitz Era," *The New Art Examiner*, March 1980.

"By Arrangement," *The New Art Examiner*, February 1981.

"Transformations in Photography," *The New Art Examiner*, July 1981.

"Double-Edged Constructions: The Work of Barbara Crane," *Afterimage*, October 1981.

"Kathryn Lehar: Contemporary Classicism," *Stuart Court Installation* catalog, DePaul University, Chicago, 1982.

"Before Photography," *The New Art Examiner*, June 1982.

"Plowden's Photography: Images of a Changing Conscience," *The New Art Examiner*, November 1982.

"Looking (Again) at Photographs," Graduate Portfolio essay, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1984.

"Pfahl's Power Places Defused," *The New Art Examiner*, February 1984.

"Once Upon A Time in The West," *Afterimage*, October 1984.

"Photography Show Exposes More Than Sex," *The New Art Examiner*, February 1985.

"Many Are Called, Few Are Chosen," *Afterimage*, Summer 1985.

"Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry Into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography," *Exposure*, Volume 23, No. 1, Winter 1985. To be reprinted in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Politics of Photographic Representation: Alternate Histories of Photography*, New York: New Museum of

Contemporary Art and MIT Press, 1988.

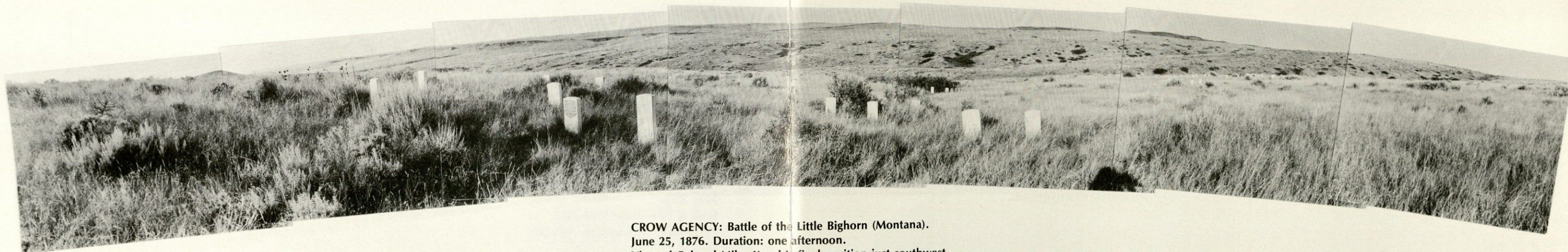
"Georgia O'Keeffe," *In These Times*, March 26-April 1, 1986.

"The Museum Under Fire," *Afterimage*, January 1987.

"Landscape as Photograph/The Essential Landscape," *Exposure*, Volume 25, No. 1, Spring 1987.

"Public Projections and Private Images," *Afterimage*, May 1987.

"The Other Body of British Photography," *Afterimage*, November 1987.



CROW AGENCY: Battle of the Little Bighorn (Montana).
June 25, 1876. Duration: one afternoon.
View of Colonel Miles Keogh's final position just southwest of Custer Hill. Here, Keogh and Company 1 of the U.S. 7th Cavalry were caught in the lethal crossfire of Sioux and Cheyenne warriors as they apparently attempted to rejoin Custer's command on the ridgetop. Of Custer's five companies who engaged the Indians that day, no soldier is known to have survived. Three days after the battle, burial details interred the mutilated corpses where they lay; hence, the array of marble headstones reflects approximately the formation of the final, desperate skirmish line. The marker for Lieutenant James Porter (left of center) was provided presumably for the comfort of his bereaved survivors, for Porter's remains were never identified. Photographed August, 1982.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Agincourt: Battle of Agincourt 1415

1981, silver photographs, 14"x133"

Bloody Lane: Battle of Antietam 1862

1983, silver photographs, 14"x133"

Beaumont Hamel:

Battle of the Somme 1915

1981, silver photographs, 14"x110"

Crow Agency:

Battle of the Little Bighorn 1876

1982, silver photographs, 14"x133"

Missionary Ridge:

Battle of Chattanooga 1863

1982, silver photographs, 14"x113"

Vimy Ridge:

Battle of Vimy Ridge 1914-1917

1981, silver photographs, 14"x110"

How the West Was Won

(Caution—Do Not Dig)

1985, multi-media installation

UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY STAFF

Lynn Gamwell, Director

Nancy Gonchar, Curator

Michael O'Kane, Technical Coordinator

Norma Moses, Secretary

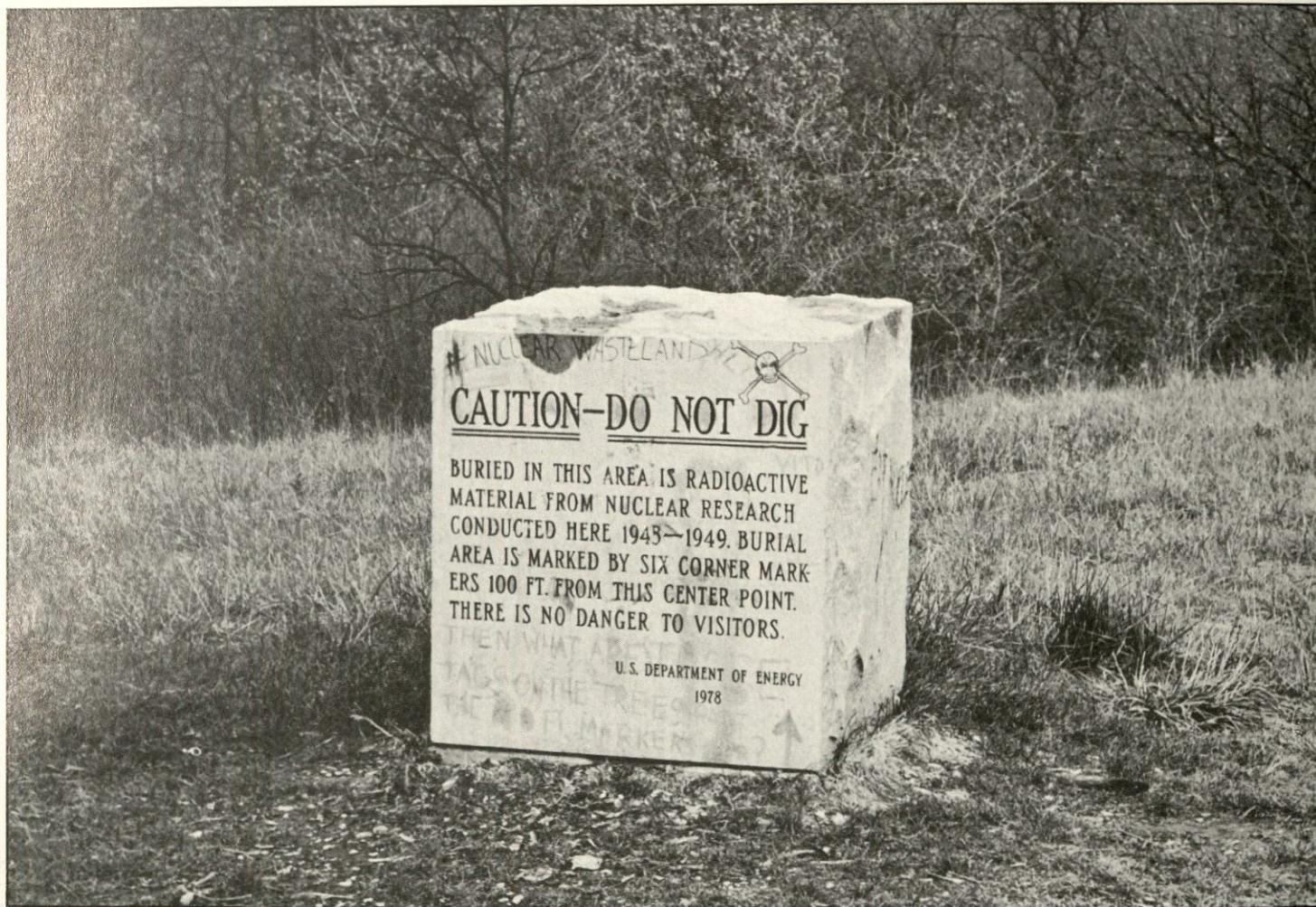
CREDITS:

Photography: Chris Focht, Mark Poore

Design: Vikki Gould

Production: University Publications

Special thanks to Linn Underhill and Lynn Gamwell.



University Art Gallery
State University of New York at Binghamton