



FIELD REPORT

PROTESTING CARTOGRAPHY: PLACES THE UNITED STATES HAS BOMBED

ELIN O'HARA SLAVICK

ELIN O'HARA SLAVICK IS A PROFESSOR OF ART AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL, USA, WHERE SHE TEACHES STUDIO ART PRACTICE AND THEORY (WWW.UNC.EDU/~EOSLAVIC). SLAVICK HAS EXHIBITED HER WORK IN HONG KONG, CANADA, FRANCE, ITALY, SCOTLAND, ENGLAND, CUBA, AND THE NETHERLANDS, AND ACROSS THE UNITED STATES AND HOPES TO SEE THE TRANSFORMATION OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM INTO SOME MORE EQUITABLE AND DEMOCRATIC FORM BEFORE SHE DIES.

ABSTRACT *Protesting Cartography: Places the United States has Bombed* is a series of protest drawings of US military interventions. Utilizing surveillance imagery, military websites such as the US Department of Defense battle plans, aerial photography, mass media, and maps, each drawing is based on a rendering of a place, almost always viewed from the air, which has been targeted by US bombers. I choose to make these drawings by hand rather than to employ photographic or other mechanical means in the hope that people will take their time with them

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acceptance of things as they are; different and multiple ways to access, interpret, and act on the magnitude of war and its aftermath; the truth; an uncovering of covert operations; and a remembrance of the dead for the living.

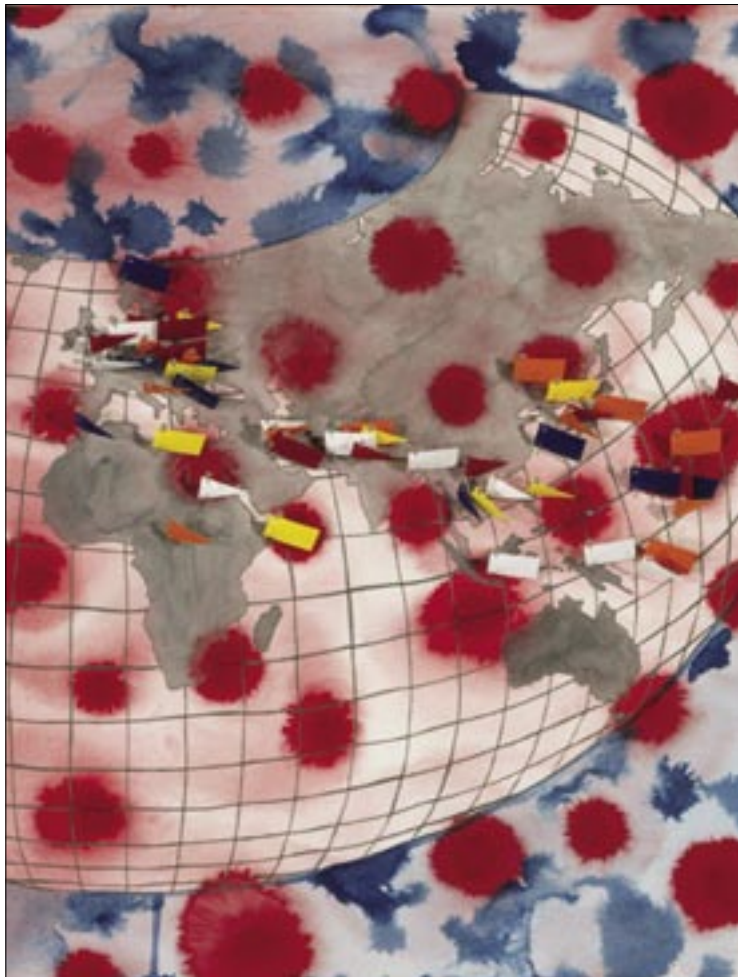
History is amoral: events occurred. But memory is moral; what we consciously remember is what our conscience remembers. If one no longer has land but has memory of land, then one can make a map.

Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*



Protesting Cartography: Places the United States has Bombed is an ongoing series of more than fifty drawings begun in 1999. They are first and foremost protest drawings,

Plate 1:
World Map, Protesting Cartography: Places the United States has Bombed, 2002–ongoing (Detail), with pins marking each bombed site for which there is a corresponding drawing. Photo credit: Karen Malinofski and Christopher Ciccone, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh.



taking as their subject US military interventions utilizing the geography, politics, history, cartography, art, and the language of war as their source material. Each drawing is based on a rendering of a place, almost always viewed from the air, which has been targeted by US bombers.

An important common formal element in the drawings is that each one begins with ink or watercolor dropped onto the wet paper. When it dries this becomes the foundation or “blank page” upon which to tell a violent story. I chose this common ground of abstract swirling or bleeding to depict the manner in which bombs do not stay within their intended borders. Depleted uranium and other chemical agents contaminate the soil, traveling in water and currents of air for decades. Mines and unexploded bombs lay in wait for unsuspecting victims who were not even alive during the war. Bombs penetrate the planet’s surface and lay the groundwork for genocide, cancer, more war, terrorism, widows, orphans, and a vengeful populace on all sides of conflict. All this seems impossible to comprehend, much less change. However, *Protesting Cartography* attempts to do just that by illuminating US foreign policy, by making it visually accessible and by graphically revealing its part in the dire situation in which we find ourselves today.

As an interdisciplinary artist, studio art professor, activist, and an American, I am compelled to confront difficult and complex issues in my work out of a deep sense of responsibility. I work from the privileged position of an American academic, but I am filled with guilt, shame, and horror due to my government’s policies and actions. The American media fails us day in and day out by providing propaganda and half-truths. Although I do not believe that people are tired of knowing the truth or incapable of empathy, I understand that it may be easier for most Americans to choose a state of denial. *Protesting Cartography* is my personal creative response, my attempt to confront and unravel this criminal knot of lies.

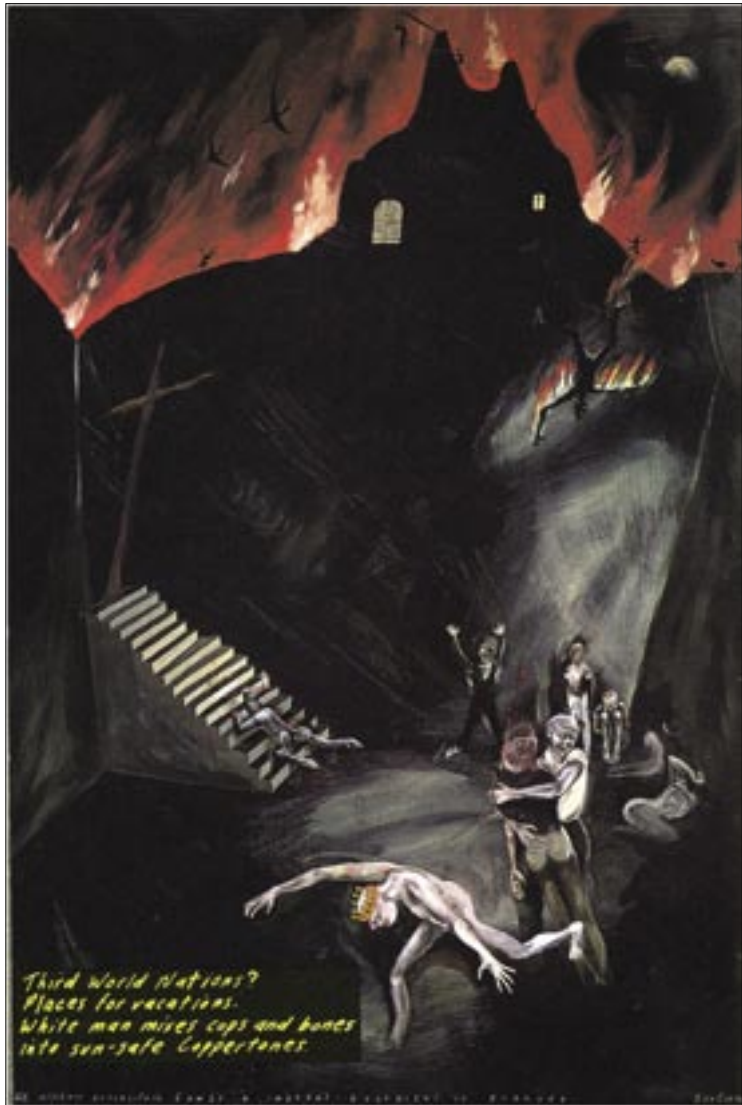
Art has had a traditional role as a catalyst for change. Lewis Hine’s photographs of children toiling in factories in the early twentieth century were instrumental in bringing about child labor laws. Picasso’s infamous painting of *Guernica* continues to provoke international and governmental debate about war and peace, the use of violence against civilians, and the power of art itself. From German artist Kathe Kollwitz’s expressive drawings and prints done during the First World War to Hans Haacke’s Vietnam-era antiwar pieces, protest art has utilized a variety of strategies to provoke viewers into becoming actively engaged participants rather than remaining passive receptacles of (mis)information.

Sue Coe, one of the most important political artists today, produces graphic and dark images of homelessness, AIDS, the American meat industry, labor, protest, war, and more wars. She creates biting illustrations for magazines such as *The Progressive*, *Rolling Stone* and *Mother Jones*,¹ providing incentives for turning people into vegetarians

and activists. If one is already an activist or vegetarian, her work provides courage to persevere. While Sue Coe's work has inspired me since childhood and has had perhaps the most influence on me as an artist, I use an entirely different strategy in my own work.

For example, Coe's painting of the US bombing of a hospital in Grenada (plate 2) is far more representational than any of my bomb drawings. Red flames leap across the high horizon line. There is a dark and tragic sense of perspective. A person on fire falls to his death into the hellish pit where civilians cower and embrace their wounded loved ones. A corpse missing a right foot lies at the base of the stairs while planes fly over another figure hanging from a

Plate 2:
Sue Coe, *US Military Successfully Bombs a Mental Hospital in Grenada*, 1984, Oil on paper, 44 × 37.5", Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Courtesy of the artist.



gallows on the horizon. Coe never shies away from gory details, bringing to mind such artists as Goya and Kollwitz. But for *Protesting Cartography* I deliberately choose the different visual strategy of colorful abstraction, a form I had never before employed. I chose relative abstraction (“relative” since the drawings are literally maps and include recognizable cartographic symbols and forms, as well as some architectural and geographical details) to reach people who otherwise might turn away from the bloody realities that Coe depicts. People are apt to approach abstraction with fewer defenses. Since the drawings are intentionally beautiful, they seduce the viewer into taking a closer look at the accompanying information that explains the horror beneath the surface.

Each drawing is distinctive in color, form, and tone. Some are purely abstract and expressive; others like the *World Map*, which opens this field report, with pins marking each bombed site for which there is a corresponding drawing (plate 1), and *Haiti* (plate 3), are recognizably and semiaccurately cartographic, whilst *Shifa Pharmaceutical Plant, Sudan* (plate 4), for example, depicts specific topographical details like landed planes, buildings, and roads.

Sources for these drawings include surveillance imagery, military websites such as the US Department of Defense battle plans, aerial photography, mass media, and maps. Also, to further my intention of seducing the viewer, I choose to make these drawings by hand rather than to employ photographic or other mechanical, less visceral means, in the hope that people will take their time with them and not just quickly turn the page, change the channel, or close the website.

While working on this project I have communicated about its form and content with a group of scholars, playwrights, geographers, art

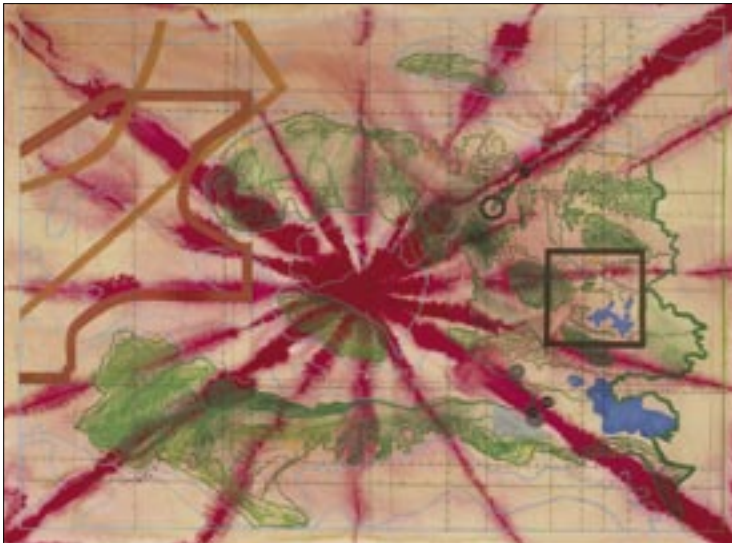
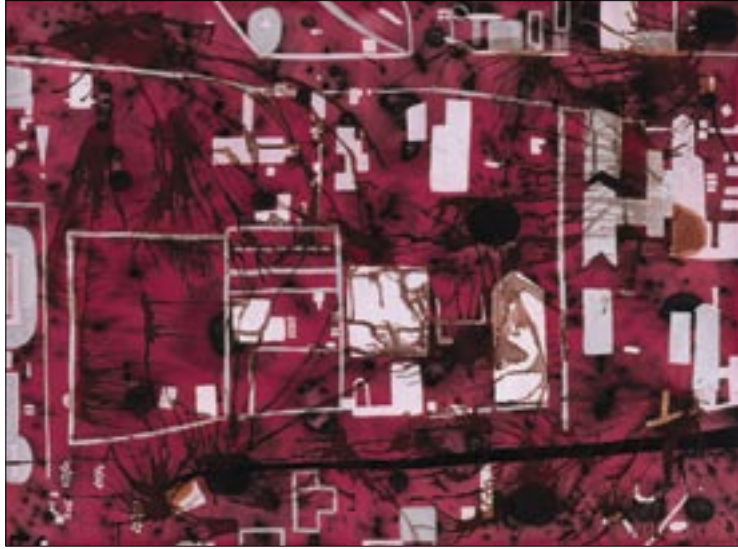


Plate 3:
Haiti, 1959 (for Aristide, Stan Goff, and my father), “The US military mission in Haiti, to train the troops of noted dictator Francois Duvalier, used its air, sea and ground power to smash an attempt to overthrow Duvalier by a small group of Haitians aided by some Cubans and other Latin Americans” (Blum 2000: 132). Photo credit: Karen Malinofski and Christopher Ciccone, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh.

Plate 4:
Shifa Pharmaceutical Plant, Sudan, August 20, 1998, "US Military Strike on a Chemical Weapons Plant."

The US government inaccurately thought the pharmaceutical plant was producing chemical weapons for Osama bin Laden. "The El-Shifa pharmaceutical plant had raised Sudanese medicinal self-sufficiency from less than 5% to more than 50%, while producing 90% of the drugs used to treat the most deadly illnesses in this desperately poor country. The US saw fit to send more than a dozen Tomahawk cruise missiles screaming into the plant, in an instant depriving the people of Sudan of their achievement" (Blum 2000: 231). Photo credit: Karen Malinofski and Christopher Ciccone, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh.



historians, anthropologists, writers, veterans, activists, historians, and participants in or witnesses to the bombings I have depicted in the drawings. They have contributed writings that often become part of the title information.² The variety of perspectives – from ex-soldiers and bombardiers to survivor-activists and geographers – presents a complex story to accompany the “illustrations” of bombsites.

Most of the people with whom I am in dialogue about this project are Americans, except for Chilean exile Ariel Dorfman, British expatriate in France John Berger, Swedish writer Sven Lindqvist, and Guam citizen Robert Celestial.

Ariel Dorfman, author of *Death and the Maiden*, for instance, was invited to speak at the first American teach-in days after September 11th that I organized with a few members of the Progressive Faculty Network at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. We naïvely thought that we could stop our government from bombing Afghanistan (plate 5) in retaliation. (Subsequently, I and two other organizers of the event received death threats, calls for our termination, and appeals for us to be tried for treason.) In his address, Dorfman linked the American September 11th in 2001 to the Chilean September 11th in 1973 when Chile lost its democracy in a military coup supported by the United States. John Berger, meanwhile, has compared September 11, 2001 to the bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 (plate 6). He writes, “The differences of scale and context are of course enormous. Both attacks, however, were planned as announcements.”³

Another contributor to my project, Robert Celestial, a citizen of Guam and retired US army sergeant, who was assigned to the Enewetak Atoll to participate in the postwar clean-up of nuclear waste, became sick from cleaning up the toxic residue and from

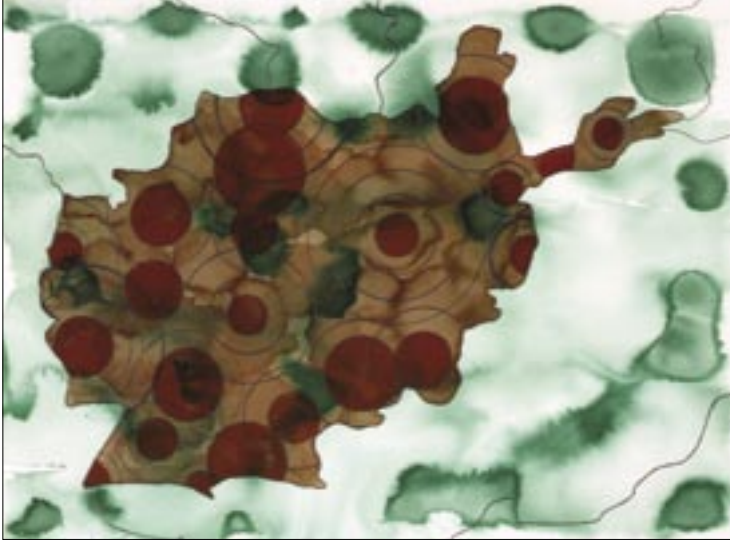


Plate 5:

Afghanistan I, In August 1998, the US announced “Infinite Reach,” antiterrorist missile strikes against targets in Afghanistan and the Sudan. According to William Blum, “from the 1970s to the 80s Afghanistan had a government committed to bringing the underdeveloped country into the 20th century, including giving women equal rights. The US, however, poured billions of dollars into waging a terrible war against this government, simply because it was supported by the Soviet Union. In the end, the US and the Taliban ‘won,’ and the women and the rest of Afghanistan, lost: More than a million dead, three million disabled, five million refugees, in total about half the population” (Blum 2000: 155). Photo credit: Karen Malinofski and Christopher Ciccone, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh

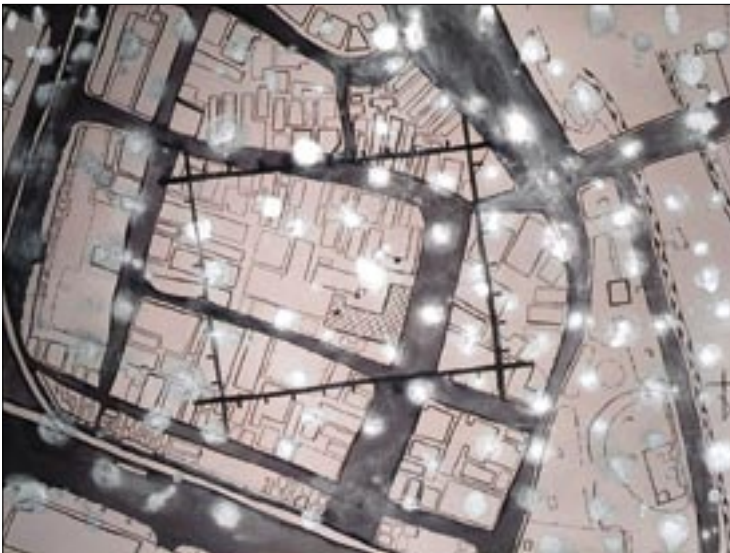


Plate 6:

Hypocenter in Hiroshima, August 6, 1945, “the first he atom bomb exploded without warning over Hiroshima . . . A new kind of war had begun . . . When the rescue teams managed to get into the area later in the day, they did not find many to rescue. Their task consisted primarily in gathering and removing tens of thousands of corpses . . . About 100,000 people (95,000 of them civilians) were killed instantly. Another 100,000, most of these civilians as well, died long, drawn-out deaths from the effects of radiation” (Lindqvist 2000: 234).

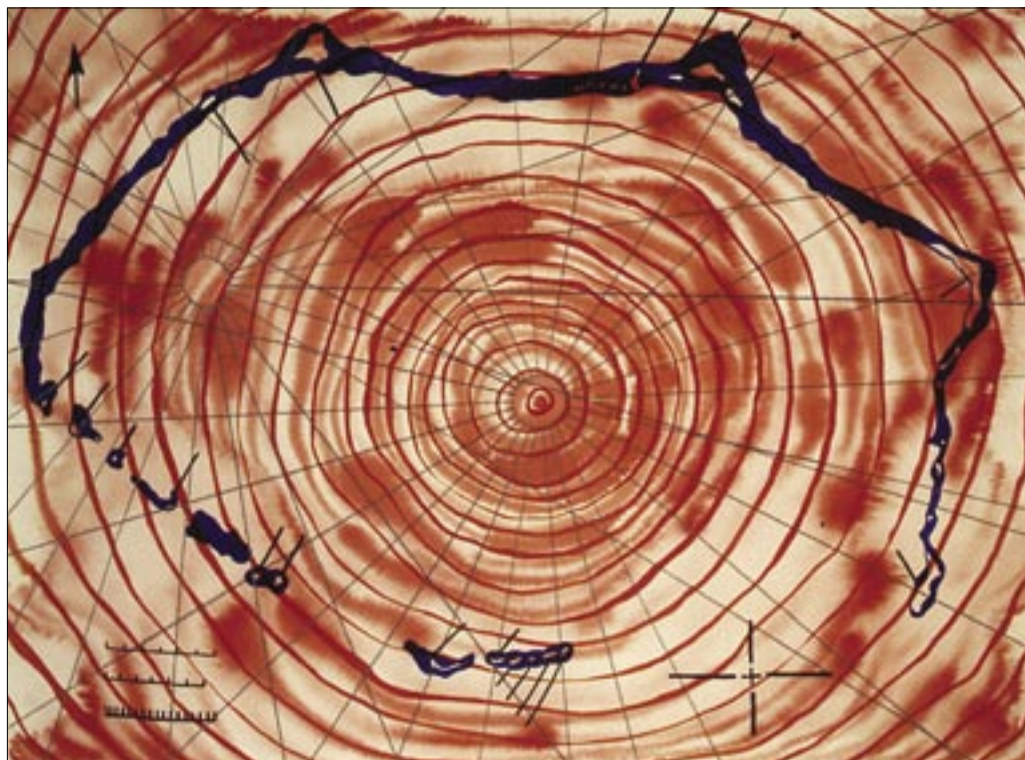


Plate 7:
Bikini Atoll, Operation
 Crossroads, 1946;
 Operation Castle, 1954;
 Operation Redwing, 1956;
 Operation Hardtack I,
 1958 – each operation
 included multiple nuclear
 tests.

living “downwind” of the tests. Celestial is spearheading the current advocacy to include Guam in the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act.⁴ As an activist and survivor, he tries to provide a historical account of nuclear testing – not just on the Enewetak Atoll but also on the Bikini Atoll (plate 7) and elsewhere – and the subsequent fallout and cancer clusters to anyone who will listen and who could possibly help.

It is no accident that *Protesting Cartography* comes into being at a time when US bombing campaigns are being carried out relentlessly. While we may imagine and try to believe that the wars are happening “over there,” they are always begun here at home. The first nuclear test was in Alamogordo, New Mexico. The cancer rate on Vieques Island, Puerto Rico (plate 8), is ten times that of the national average due to decades-long nuclear testing by the US government.

When I exhibit these drawings there are always people who ask me if I worked for the CIA or where I found all this information, because they never knew we bombed so many places. This project is an attempt to provide: a comprehensive and more humane acknowledgement of war; a revelation and analysis of our own complicity and passive acceptance of things as they are; different and multiple ways to access, interpret, and act on the magnitude of war and its aftermath; the truth; an uncovering of covert operations; a remembrance of the dead for the living.



Plate 8:
Vieques Island, Puerto Rico (Detail). On April 19, 1999 an errant 500 lb US bomb kills David Sares Rodriguez, a 35-year-old security guard, and seriously injures four others. Over 267 depleted uranium-tipped bombs have been fired on this island. The US has been dropping bombs and napalm on Vieques for five decades.

NOTES

1. Sue Coe has many publications of her work, including the books: *Pit's Letter* (Four Walls Eight Windows, 2000); *X* (A book about Malcolm X) (The New Press, 1986); *Dead Meat*, with an essay by Alexander Cockburn (Four Walls Eight Windows, 1995).
2. This project is currently under consideration at Duke University Press in book form with essays by eighteen contributing writers.
3. John Berger, "War Against Terrorism or a Terrorist War?" While this has never been printed in the United States, it appeared in the London *Guardian*, Spain's *El Pais*, Mexico's *La Jornada*, France's *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and Germany's *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 2002.
4. On October 5, 1990, Congress passed the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA), providing payments to individuals who

contracted certain cancers and other serious diseases as a result of their exposure to radiation released during above-ground nuclear weapons tests or as a result of their exposure to radiation during employment in underground uranium mines.

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