

From Metronome...

art as activism

This Land is Your Land: Deception in the Nuclear Era

AMERICAN GROUND ZERO
(MIT PRESS, 1993)
BY CAROLE GALLAGHER

WITNESS TO THE WIND
A VIDEO WORK-IN-PROGRESS
BY BRANDA MILLER

"WITNESS TO THE WIND"
DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY
BY DANA SHUERHOLZ

by Eric Gould

Boy y'know, dropping a bomb is like telling a lie. Makes everything seem so quiet, you don't even know it. You don't see anything, you don't hear anything.

The Misfits (1961), *screenplay by Arthur Miller*

The rugged landscape and the vast expanse of the West have long evoked myths of frontier individualism. Nevada and Utah, especially, have inspired hopes of the discovery of fortune and the possibility of a new dawn. Those stalwart pioneers drawn to the Silver State by the Comstock lode discovery -- and into Utah when Brigham Young declared "This is the place" -- have been followed by others still hoping to cultivate the desert bloom.

Nearly half a century ago, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) surveyed the Western desert to cultivate plans of their own design.

In 1951, small communities of Mormons, cattle ranchers, and Native Americans awoke shaken by the first continental atomic bomb test. Following the blast, radiation spread eastward towards the Atlantic Coast. This event launched the beginning of the AEC's nuclear weapons experimentation and stockpile at the Nevada Test Site located outside Las Vegas.

In the next 12 year, the AEC detonated 126 bombs at the Nevada Test Site, which is now one of six nuclear weapons facilities still operating in the United States. Over the past 40 years Nevada and Utah residents and military personnel employed by the AEC have been afflicted with cancer and disease attributed to radiation generated from these tests.

Recently, Northwest photographer Dana Schuerholz, New York photojournalist Carole Gallagher, and media activist Branda Miller have been focusing on this subject in social documentary, photography, and video. Schuerholz and Gallagher have explored the impact of these tests on radiation survivors throughout Nevada and Utah in their works, while Miller is currently finishing *Witness to the Future*, a project that documents three communities affected by diverse types of environmental contamination, including a segment about Downwinders affected by radiation at Hanford, Washington. Miller, an educator at New York's Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, completed her media artist-in-residency at [911 Media Arts Center](#) of Seattle in 1992 to produce this segment. Combined, these three artists' works question the deception involved in conducting these atomic tests, and the Cold War rhetoric used to justify nuclear experimentation and arsenal build-up at the expense of the American people.

In her 1993 book *American Ground Zero -- The Secret Nuclear War*, Carole Gallagher documented the lives of those residents of Nevada and Utah who were devastated by weapons testing. Gallagher found that the federal government, chiefly through the Atomic Energy Commission, repeatedly deceived Americans about health and environmental risks from atomic testing. (The old AEC was predecessor to today's Department of Energy).

She writes that deception was crucial in the effort to legitimize the Nevada Test Site experiments. This deception continued even after livestock in Utah began appearing with beta burns and radiation-related illnesses in 1953 (one of the most lethal years of weapons testing). Gallagher states: "Despite the fact the public health bureaucracy and AEC scientists camouflaged the consequences when they realized a public uproar might force them to close the Test Site, there wasn't a person alive in southern Utah, then or now, who didn't fear the deaths of those lambs or sheep were a precursor to a shared destiny."

Gallagher spent nearly a decade in St. George and Cedar City, Utah, working on the book. She has emerged with an impressive -- and visionary -- volume, and one which is highly respectful of her subjects. From her interviews with Downwinders and radiation survivors scattered throughout Nevada, Utah, and as far away as South Dakota, she had produced a compelling document of these communities and their social anguish in an undeclared war.

It is often an emotionally taxing book to read. Gallagher states that "Nevada is the single most nuked site on the planet outside of the Marshall Islands." She explains that nuclear testing began in Nevada in 1951, because it became too expensive to detonate bombs in the South Pacific. And Nevada, once considered as a "low use" population area, was deemed by *Armed Forces Talk* -- a 1950s publication describing atomic maneuvers for soldiers at the Test Site -- as a "damn good place to dump used razor blades."

American Ground Zero is divided into four sections with accompanying duotone photographs: Nevada Test Site workers, atomic military veterans (veterans who have worked at the atomic test site), and Downwinders. The fourth section is devoted to images of the landscape and to people at work and rest. Throughout, Gallagher has also included photographs of small-town life in Utah from the '50s by Dorothea Lange. In their evocation of a more innocent era, these images of Americana -- cafe signs, storefronts, and townfolk -- provide startling contrast of postwar optimism. Gallagher's photographs and oral histories, in turn, relate to Lange's images like the dark side of a Janusian guardian at the portal of the Atomic Age.

Testimony from Bob Carter, an Air Force veteran, offers one of the most chilling descriptions recorded in *Ground Zero*. Carter details his participation in the Operation Plumbbob military maneuvers at the Test Site's Camp Desert Rock in 1957. Following the largest U.S. continental and atmospheric test -- a 74 kiloton nuclear bomb dropped at 1,500 feet -- soldiers were ordered to practice their military maneuvers within the "Ground Zero" site. At the time, Carter witnessed human beings near the maneuver area who were handcuffed behind fenced enclosures. After he spoke of this to doctors -- who were treating him for "radiation exposure" -- Carter underwent questionable drug treatment, and was told not to repeat his "bizarre" story. "Nobody knew what we knew," he said. "You know that if you tell anybody it's like treason, you'll be hung."

Northwest photographer and activist Dana Schuerholz has also produced a collection of photographs and acquired testimonies from atomic military veterans and Downwinders who worked and lived near the Nevada Test Site. James Gates, a homeless veteran from the 95th Engineers Combat Battalion, spoke to Schuerholz about human and animal experiments twenty miles away from Camp Desert Rock. Schuerholz recounted Gates' testimony about an incident that occurred here in 1955: "He once saw humans with livestock in these cages before a test. (His unit) would drive by and see them close to the detonation site. And during the test, his left arm was blown off when he was in this trench. You can't imagine what happened to these people in those cages, besides being burned to death."

Schuerholz, who has been documenting atomic military veterans and Downwinders in Nevada, has visited the Nevada Test Site several times since 1988. She explained that for many years atomic test veterans have kept silent about these military maneuvers, especially those that have involved human experimentation. She commented that once they open up about their experiences, they often become activists.

Her photographs were featured at last year's *Yes, In My Backyard?* exhibition in Richland, Washington. The show

focused on regional work that examined issues tied to the Hanford Nuclear Reservation and the nuclear era. In her work, she overlays text on the portraits of her subjects. The text is excerpted from her subjects' testimonies, which effectively places the viewer in intimate space with the anguished voices of these individuals. By foregrounding the testimonies, her pictures literally "speak" to the viewer.

Recently, media activist Branda Miller focused on Downwinder communities around the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in eastern Washington as part of *Witness to the Future*, a video work-in-progress. *Witness* examines the impact of environmental contamination around the country. Like Gallagher and Schuerholz, Miller concentrates on Hanford radiation in the Northwest as well as pesticide spraying in California's San Joaquin Valley and communities affected by chemical plants in Louisiana. Miller's educational tape is designed to generate environmental activism. Beyond this, Miller empowers her subjects with the creative process by democratizing the production: those interviewed were given input as to the content and presentation of their own testimonies.

In 1992, an initial rough-cut of the Hanford sequence was screened at 911 Media Arts Center in Seattle. 911 is acting as executive producer for the tape, with Robin Reidy, 911's executive director, an associate director for the project. Currently, Reidy has been working with Miller to distill the individual narratives into a final, hour-long, version. (The rough-cut Hanford segment ran for an hour, alone). "*Witness to the Future* is a collective portrait of political activism using media," she says.

In the rough-cut, former Hanford specialist Gary Lekvold from Pasco, Washington, describes the early history of Hanford's operation and its connection with the Manhattan Project (which engineered the first atomic bombs detonated over Hiroshima and Nagasaki). Lekvold notes, "At the time of war, there was a real need for classified information and secrecy stamps. But shortly after that, classified information and secrecy stamps were also a very good way to cover up mistakes, to hide misspent funds, to hide fraudulent reports, and a tremendous array of misdeeds and criminal activity."

But despite recent clean-up efforts at Hanford -- and with the uncertain future of President Clinton's initial call for a temporary moratorium on nuclear weapons testing -- the nuclear legacy remains. As Schuerholz commented, "The fact is that every test site in the world -- including the Nevada Test Site, Khazakhstan, Morura (Tahiti), and the Marshall Islands -- exists on indigenous land. These areas are still at the forefront of an ongoing war." Her self-portrait, taken at the Nevada Test Site underscores this point. The image reveals her shadow looming past a No Trespassing sign over the desert landscape -- an area that was homeland to the Western Shoshone Nation. In her testimony, overlaid across the image, she writes: "Our bodies and our environments are the battlegrounds. We all live downwind."

Gallagher, Schuerholz, and Miller allow their subjects to carry the narratives through the telling of their painful memories and bitter experiences. In the end, however, the incredible scale of tragedy documented in these works is rooted in the politics of deception. Pointing to the widespread nature of governmental deception, Gallagher cites *Lying: Moral Choice and Public Life* by Sissela Bok: "Negotiations must be carried on that are best hidden from public view; bargains must be struck that simply cannot be comprehended by a politically unsophisticated electorate...Every government, therefore, has to deceive the people to some extent in order to lead them." As Gallagher writes, "Each society produced its own slaughter of innocents, of those who are most expendable in dangerous times, whether the danger is falsely manufactured to achieve a political end or truly exists. 'My country right or wrong': the issue of blind obedience to authority is germane to all societies that value abstract ideals above life itself."

The recently ordered declassification of documents at the Department of Energy has brought increasing public attention to the nuclear abuses of the Cold War -- including documented cases of experiments involving direct injections of plutonium. Robert Alvarez, an aide for D.O.E. Secretary Hazel O'Leary, was quoted last month in *The New York Times* as saying, "The public record is very clear that the United States Government engaged in deliberate acts against the American public in the 1940s and 1950s in order to prosecute the arms race." At last, the criticisms of artists like Gallagher, Schuerholz, and Miller are echoed by the D.O.E. itself. Commented Secretary O'Leary on some 204 previously unannounced nuclear weapons tests in Nevada from 1963 to 1990: "We were shrouded and clouded in an atmosphere of secrecy. And I would take it a step further: I would call it repression."

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