# TOPOGRAPHIES OF ANTI-NUCLEAR ART IN LATE COLD WAR LOS ANGELES

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With the tenth anniversary of the end of the Cold War drawing near, museums around the world mounted exhibitions that focused on the cultural aspect of the conflict. From the Victoria and Albert Museum in London to the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art , almost all considerations of culture in the Cold War focus on the first two decades. The periodisation of these exhibitions reflects the dominant trend in scholarship, which centres on the years in which the slow simmer conflict experienced frequent flare ups. Studies of Cold War culture take one of two tacks, exploring the impact of the bomb on manifestations of culture, such as art, literature and film, as well as fashion, design, and everyday aesthetics. Another school concentrates on the ways that high art was pressed into diplomatic service during the Cold War. This narrative strand ties the formalist concerns that dominated aesthetics to the zeitgeist of the Cold War. Since very little political content could be imputed to non-figurative or non-realist art, the story goes, this art made the perfect expression of American culture for use by cold warrior administrations. In recent years, both accounts of culture in the Cold War have received considerable elaboration in some finely wrought studies. However, the focus still remains on the 1950s and early 1960s, with the rare work moving past the Cuban Missile Crisis. The influential historian of the Cold War, Charles S Meier, divides the long conflict into eight epochs. The lengthy period of dormancy in the 1970s, which Meier characterizes as 'domestic reform and détente' resulted in a decline in the Cold War cultural battles. It also coincided with the fading of the first wave of anti-nuclear activism, as Paul Boyer has persuasively demonstrated in his analysis of the trajectory of anti-nuclear protests. By the 1960s, the American public had lost interest in the issue.

However the 1980s saw frightening developments in the area of U.S. foreign relations that led to a revived anti-nuclear movement. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Polish government's crack down on solidarity worsened relations between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. The ascendance of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in January of 1981 ushered in a new era of

nuclear uncertainty. Reagan's support for NATO plans to place cruise and Pershing missiles in Britain and several other Western European countries seemed evidence enough to some people that nuclear Armageddon was imminent. Reagan's frank, and to some frightening remarks about the possibility of nuclear war in Europe as well as his proposed $180 billion military budget further fuelled fears about nuclear war. After four years of treaty making and arms limitations under Carter, the nuclear threat once again became real as the government of the United States spoke of civil defence and strategies for surviving a nuclear bomb. While efforts to limit the proliferation of nuclear arms had begun almost as soon as the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the nuclear freeze movement in the United States grew rapidly in early 1980s in response to Reagan's proposed defence initiatives.

In a reversal of the early years of the Cold War, the anti-nuclear movement of the 1980s was most notable for artists who protested against the state. Indeed, the very events that knocked Russia and the nuclear threat off the front page of United States' newspapers in the 1960s, the escalating civil rights movement and conflict in Vietnam, changed the practice of art for many artists. No longer dominated by coolly removed formalism, artists began making work that directly addressed political issues. Socially engaged and often overtly partisan, this art could not be used by political administrations to illustrate the superiority of the United States. Instead in the final decade of the Cold War, the past was inverted. Artists made work that directly challenged what increasingly appeared to be an inevitable nuclear war.

This early 1980s art had a distinct edge. The earnestness of the 1960s no longer played well. Instead humour, irony, and sarcasm became stratagems of the activist artist. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Los Angeles. Some three thousand miles from the long shadow of New York, artists developed their own oppositional art world style. Art critic Linda Burnham's description of L.A. performance art as 'an art that tries to right the world, that plucks images and philosophies, histories and music from the whole of human knowledge and tries to roll it together into one great ball of meaning to turn humankind from its fearful path' is an apt description of the strand of the L.A. alternative art scene that explored in this article.[1] Developed at sites as diverse as the California Institute for the Arts, Woman's Building, and the Social and Public Art Resource Center, this art scene was indebted

as much to the identity politics of the 1960s as it was to the new art genres of that era.

Building on Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, this article takes the reader on a virtual driving tour of early 1980s Los Angeles anti-nuclear protest art. L.A. is, to borrow Banham's felicitous phrase, 'the uniquely mobile metropolis' best viewed from behind the wheel of the car.[2] The fourth section of his classic riffed on the popular Disney attraction Autopia in which children play at driving. Endless circles of the track may be seen as a metaphor for the mindless, purposeless vapidity, of L.A. Yet for Banham the car became the ultimate metaphor for the freedom of the west, embodied in the sprawling architecture of Los Angeles. His influential work serendipitously appeared concomitantly with the rise of Los Angeles as a cultural capital, not just of popular entertainment, but as a city that vied with New York to be the centre of the American art world.

Los Angeles developed its own influential aesthetic. Unlike New York City, dominated by major institutions and with a street life more akin to European cities, Los Angeles is a fractured and dispersed metropolis. Appropriately artists working in LA developed a drive by aesthetic, fuelled in equal parts by advertising, Hollywood, and the peculiar sense of inventiveness that characterizes the west combined to create a 'sense of possibilities still ahead.'[3]

In early 1981, the average motorist driving around Los Angeles might have done a double take at the sight of a now well known political poster *Nuclear War?! ... There Goes my Career* (figure 1). Still some years before Robbie Conal gained fame for his scathing caricatures of Reagan, Mark Vallen, a well known chronicler of the punk scene and member of the growing Chicano art movement, created a piece calculated to appeal not only to the aesthetics but the pragmatics of activism in Los Angeles. Vallen modelled his figure in part on Wonder Woman, and with its obvious nod to Lichtenstein's pop art, his piece was both aesthetically familiar and initially non-threatening to the viewer. The deceptively brief text undercuts the familiarity of the image with a deeply ironic commentary on the priorities of the average American citizen. Vallen recalls that the work was intended as 'a critique against those self-possessed and upwardly mobile individuals who were too busy with their careers to notice they were in part responsible for the state of the world.'[4] It offered a grim view of American complacency in the face of the nuclear threat.

Vallen was inspired to create *Nuclear War?! ... There Goes My Career* after the election of Ronald Reagan in the fall of 1980. Reagan's description of the Soviet Union as the 'evil empire' along with his support for N.A.T.O. plans to place Cruise and Pershing missiles in Europe and his proposed $180 billion military budget for a ramped up defence initiatives convinced some people that nuclear Armageddon was imminent. Finally Reagan's frank, and to some frightening, remarks about the possibility of nuclear war revived the anti-nuclear movement in the United States.[5]

Return to our imagined motorist, stopped by a traffic light at the busiest intersection in Los Angeles. Wilshire Boulevard, the main east –west drag of Los Angeles, is bisected by Veteran Avenue, so called because it passes by the Los Angeles National Cemetery. Stuck at that seemingly interminable intersection, where gridlock means a car may remain for several cycles of the light, this driver might have glanced aimlessly out the window. On one side of the street stands the Spirit of '98, a monument to the long forgotten Spanish American war.[6] Liberty, her lamp aloft, is nude save for a flowing cloak. She is flanked by two soldiers, weapons at the ready, to defend her and her ideals. Looking the other direction on 17 May 1982, that driver might have been startled by the view. In front of Federal Building, four nuns, clad in rainbow-hued habits, stood among a graveyard of shovels that invoked the acres of tombstones behind Liberty in the VA cemetery.

This concrete reminder of the outcome of war was *Shovel Defense,* a collaborative effort of Los Angeles artist Marguerite Elliot and a performance art group, Sisters Of Survival (S.O.S.) comprising Nancy Angelo, Jerri Allyn, Anne Gauldin, Cheri Gaulke, and Sue Maberry, all participants in the L.A. feminist art scene.[7] Inspired by a cover story in *Time* magazine about anti-nuclear demonstrations in Amsterdam that drew 300,000 people in November 1981, S.O.S. decided to organize to let Europeans know that despite Reagan's aggressive cold warrior stance, they, and other Americans, 'heard their cry.' [8] The group used the image of the nun because it represented an ordered community of women working to combat the chaos of nuclear war, but it was also humorous and slightly mischievous, characteristics of all S.O.S. work.

The impetus for and imagery of *Shovel Defense* derived from a comment by T.K. Jones, an undersecretary of defence in the Regan administration that in a nuclear war 'if there are enough shovels to go around, everybody's

going to make it. Dig a hole in the ground, cover with a couple of doors, and then cover the doors with three feet of dirt. It's the dirt that does it.[9] In response, Paul Conrad, a Pulitzer Prize winning political cartoonist for the *Los Angeles Times*, drew a shovel graveyard captioned 'Administration's civil-defense plan for nuclear war.'

Elliot saw Jones' remarks as 'sheer lunacy' and her piece mocked the idea that 'nuclear war can be survived.'[10] She created an elaborate parody of Jones' comments drawing on the imagery of Conrad's cartoon. Fifty shovel handles formed a triangular graveyard, a reference to the geometric symbol that marked civilian fallout shelters. The banner 'Shovel Defense: A Grave Mistake' provided the backdrop of the piece and continued the satirical message by punning on the meaning of grave as a burial site as well as an adjective that means weighty, momentous, or important. Among this graveyard, the Sisters Of Survival performed a macabre dance of death that pantomimed a reaction to an imagined nuclear attack. The dance drew on the familiar 'duck and cover' drills propagated by the Federal Civil Defense Administration in the 1950s. An additional performer clothed in a radiation suit, distributed an explanatory flyer to the car-bound audience. It outlined the purpose of the art piece and offered contact information for viewers interested in nuclear disarmament.

Artists concerned about the looming nuclear threat seemed everywhere in the frightening days of the first Reagan administration. Once past the surprising sight of *Shovel Defense*, a quick drive down Wilshire Boulevard to the intersection of Third Street provides another stop on our anti-nuclear art tour of Los Angeles. On the cusp of revitalization, the Third Street Promenade as it came to be known was still a somewhat edgy alternative area in the early 1980s. Home to the fabled Midnight Special Bookstore, the promenade was anchored at one end by Santa Monica Place, a shopping mall designed by famed architect Frank Gehry. USC for a while had a satellite gallery, Atelier, in this mall, which is where Sheila Pinkel installed *Thermonuclear Garden*, an information artwork, in October of 1983 (figure 3).[11] Drawing on her own meticulous research into the military industrial complex, Pinkel used a sly humour to focus on Los Angeles' role in the worldwide production and distribution of nuclear weapons. Playing off the image of Los Angeles as an erstwhile garden of Eden, she created a *Thermonuclear Garden* of dead plants, punning on the double meaning of plant as a military production site, to show that what Los Angeles increasingly

grew was weapons of destruction. The visual invocation of the potential consequences for botanic life if the products of nuclear plants were ever used highlighted the vulnerability of Los Angeles as potential target of attack. This fifth version, which contained information about local Santa Monica companies, was appropriately installed within walking distance of Rand, the largest defence industry think tank in the United States. Pinkel's piece was not only site specific but quite timely. After viewing *Thermonuclear Garden* a city official voted to reject an application for the expansion of the facilities of Lear Siegler Corporation, since she recalled from viewing *Thermonuclear Garden* that is was the second largest defence contractor in Santa Monica. When she withdrew support for the permit, other members of the committee followed suit and the permit was not granted despite pressure from local defence contractors who were outraged.[12]

If our imagined motorist left Santa Monica and travelled far, far downtown on 3rd street eventually she would arrive at the site of *Target L.A.*, an anti-nuclear art and music festival that occurred on 8-9 August, 1982. Appropriately for a city dominated by car culture, *Target L.A.* took place in one of the hulking concrete parking structures that dot the landscape. Occurring on the anniversary of the droppings of the bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, *Target LA*, occurred at the intersection of 3rd Street and Alameda, two of the four streets that bound 'Little Tokyo.' Two Asian American anti-nuclear groups, Asian Pacific Americans for Nuclear Awareness and Asian Americans for Nuclear Disarmament, helped organize *Target L.A.*

The origins of *Target L.A.* lay in the anti-nuclear art of Lee Waisler. In May of 1981, *Los Angles Times'* art critic Suzanne Muchnic derided Waisler's anti-nuclear paintings. In response, Waisler dumped a truckload of manure outside the *Times'* office. Subsequent anti-nuclear pieces such as a protest against nuclear proliferation that Waisler publicized by stencilling 'Target L.A.' at intersections throughout the city gained Waisler considerable notoriety. Dave Lumian, director of the Southern California Alliance for Survival contacted Wasiler regarding artist participation in Alliance events. What began as a group of eight artists meeting in Waisler's down town loft soon expanded to over three hundred artists, calling themselves L.A. Artists for Survival (L.A.A.F.S.), an offshoot of the Alliance for Survival. By January of 1982 L.A.A.F.S. began planning a series of *Target L.A.* events, which included, among other things, *Shovel Defense*. An estimated four thousand people attended *Target L.A.* S.O.S. member Gaulke, along with the

veteran alternative music impresario Ed Pearl, coordinated an impressive roster of musicians and a host of poets and spoken word artists. Thirty or so visual artists displayed works, including Lee Waisler, Marguerite Elliot and SOS.

Mother Art, a feminist performance art group with a long history of addressing political issues in Los Angeles, created Mother Art, a feminist performance art group with a long history of addressing political issues in Los Angeles, created *L.A./Guernica* a transposition of Picasso's famous anti-war mural to the skyline of Los Angeles (Figure 4).[13] Life sized cut outs of women, based on the figures of Mother art members, stood throughout the installation in poses reacting to a nuclear attack. Picasso's bomb light became a mushroom cloud. Recalling the infamous 'daisy' commercial (from the 1964 LBJ campaign), in front of the Picasso-inspired backdrop stood a sandbox for children's play. The effect was a chilling tableau of the potential consequences of nuclear devastation in Los Angeles.

After listening to performers and viewing art, the audience at *Target L.A.* ascended to the upper level of the parking structure to play 'games of nuclear chance.' These clever participatory events drew in audience members to raise awareness about the personal threat of nuclear war, while stressing the need to pass the Bilateral Nuclear Weapons Freeze (Proposition 12) appearing on the upcoming November ballot. This citizen sponsored piece of non-binding legislation represented an effort by Californians to counter the increasingly aggressive nuclear posturing by the Reagan administration and it passed handily.

So maybe your average Angeleno did not make the long drive into downtown for *Target LA*, but happened to be driving over one of the odd little bridges in the Venice canals, another hotspot for the alternative arts in L.A.; a tide of light floats by. The poignant sight is toronagashi, a Japanese ritual during which lanterns are floated down a river to guide the souls of the dead back to heaven. Since this festival takes place in August, it has become a means of commemorating the dead of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. S.O.S. used the ritual as the closing ceremony for their exhibition *End Of The Rainbow*. The two and a half year international art exchange was in many ways similar to the cultural exchanges that occurred in the early years of the Cold War -- with one notable difference. It resulted in a very different sort of artists' diplomacy. S.O.S. signalled not a message of distress, but one of hope.

While S.O.S. created *Shovel Defense* and participated in events like *Target L.A.*, the group also collected documentation of North American artworks dealing with the nuclear threat, including among other pieces Mark Vallen's graphics. To circumvent diplomatic channels, S.O.S. decided to take messages directly to the people of Europe from American anti-nuclear groups. They translated these messages in to pictographic semaphore flags (figure 5A). These elements were combined in street installations in five sites in Europe during the fall of 1982 (figure 5 B). While in Europe, S.O.S. continued the visual dialogue by collecting documentation of European anti-nuclear art as well as messages of hope from Europeans to Americans. On returning to the United States, S.O.S. created a travelling exhibition of documentation and art works from all phases of *End Of The Rainbow.*

For a few years, overlapping networks of L.A. artists tweaked the consciences and the consciousness of Angelenos to provide a consistent reminder of the threat of nuclear war, at times supplementing the political process and at times supplanting it. However, by the mid 1980s a shift in the zeitgeist occurred. A harbinger was the failure of second *Target L.A.* in September 1983.

The nuclear freeze initiative passed in California in November 1982 was followed by a similar Congressional Bill in May 1983. In January 1984 Ronald Reagan began evincing his more conciliatory tone that would lead to the rapid conclusion of the four and a half decade Cold War. Then again, maybe it was nuclear burnout, a recurring phenomenon noted by historians of the anti-nuclear movement.[14] In November 1983, more than half the television audience watched *The Day After* a docudrama about the impact of a nuclear attack on the United States. Lacking the humorous touch of the L.A. artists, this movie shifted the tone to one of horror and dread. Faced with such a daunting vision of the future, it may have been easier to simply turn off rather than confront nuclear fear. Although still some years before the Cold War finally sputtered out, these events presaged the end of an anti-nuclear movement. As Meier so succinctly put it, by the mid 1980s, it was already apparent to many that 'the cold war was indeed history.'[15]

While the earlier phases of the Cold War provide more interesting historical events and more concerted uses of culture in the conflict, the longer phases of quiescence that occurred during the 1970s, and the reemergence of protests during the early 1980s need to be incorporated into the long span of

the Cold War and considerations of the role culture played. Artists were not simply collaborators in the struggle between East and West. Increasingly they became activists on the other side, for peace, and for an end to the nuclear arms race.

Because L.A. is not a city given to monumentality, to again quote Reyner Banham, most of the work discussed here was ephemeral.[16] While it was well known at the time, documentaries were made of both *Target L.A.* and about Lee Waisler's work, many of these pieces have been forgotten.[17] While the L.A. artists discussed in this piece continued to protest Reagan policies, particularly those in Latin America, by the middle of the decade, the network of anti-nuclear activism had faded.[18] The drivers of Los Angeles were left with something less weighty than their own destruction to ponder while stuck in gridlock. Still perhaps an echo remained, as they sang along to the radio to Sting's *Russians* (1985), with its haunting refrain 'I hope the Russians love their children too.'

**Figure 1.** Mark Vallen *Nuclear War? ... There Goes my Career* (1980)

**Figure 2.** Sisters Of Survival and Marguerite Elliot *Shovel Defense* (1982)

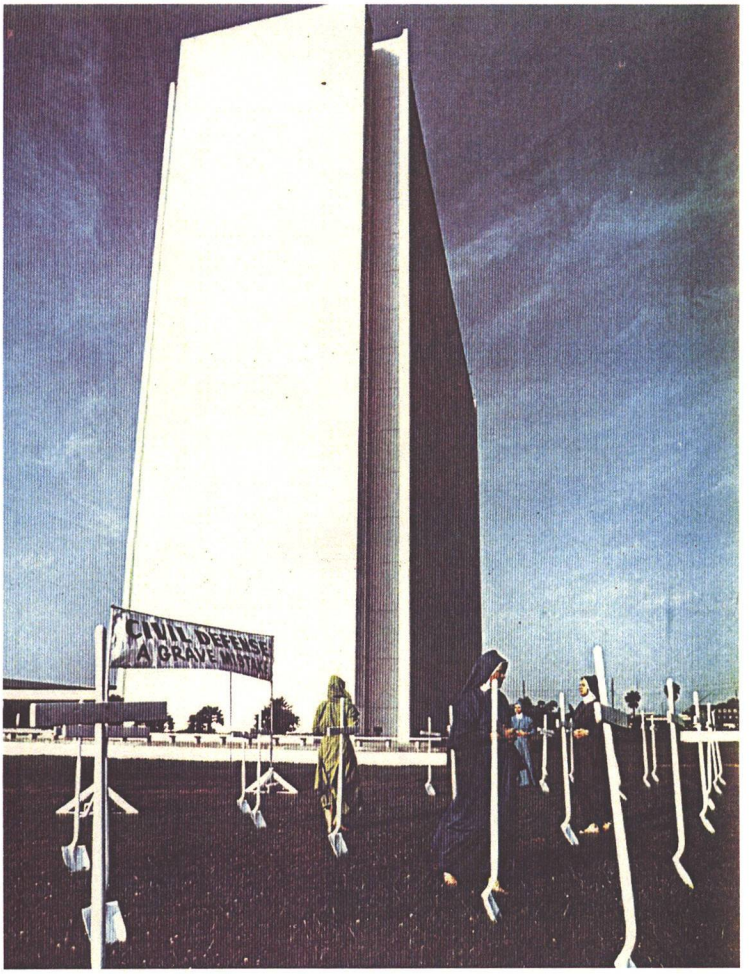


**Figure 3.** Sheila Pinkel *Thermonuclear Garden* (1985)

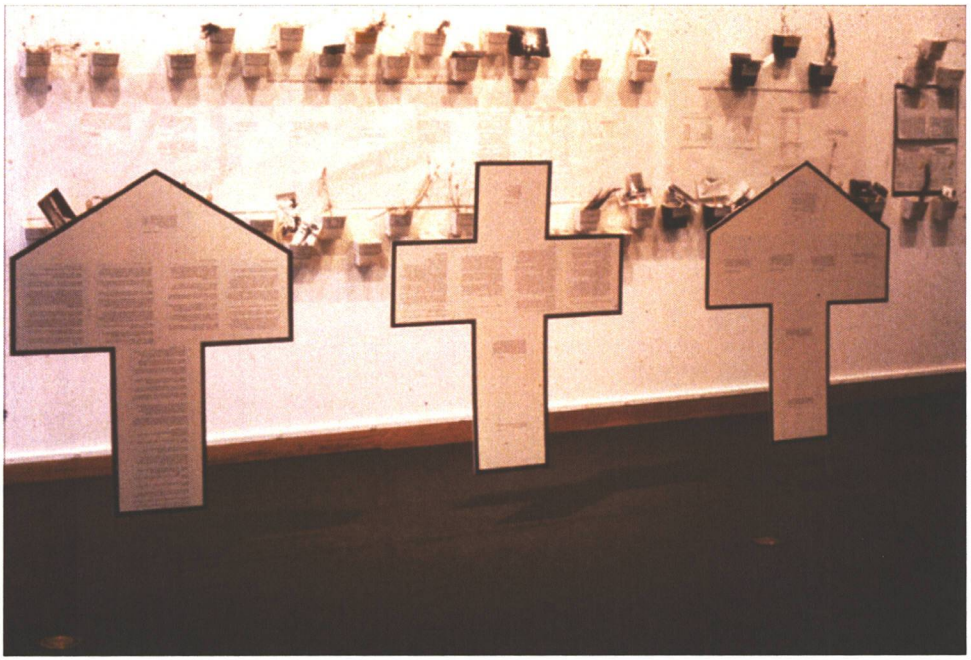


**Figure 4.** Mother Art Flyer for *L.A./Guernica* (1982)

Guernica, 1937, Pablo Picasso

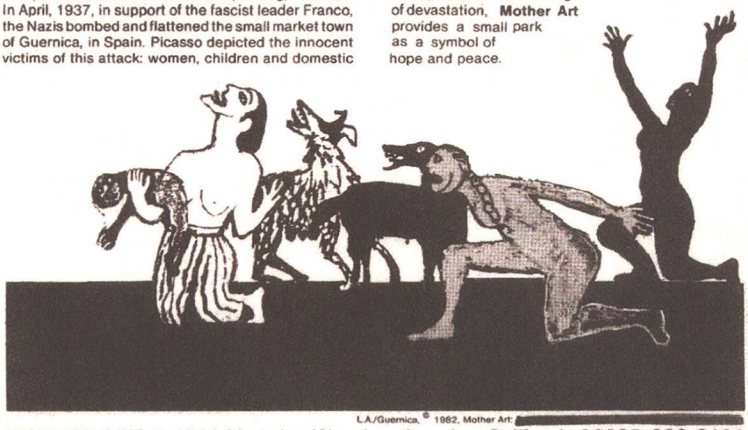
# L.A./GUERNICA

*An Installation By*
**MOTHER ART**

**Mother Art** is a collective of women artists who create performance and installation art. As mothers, we are concerned with the future of our children and of all children on this planet. The present day arms race increases the danger of nuclear war which threatens the survival of all of us.

In protest to this threat, **Mother Art** chose to re-interpret Picasso's famous anti-war painting, *Guernica*. In April, 1937, in support of the fascist leader Franco, the Nazis bombed and flattened the small market town of Guernica, in Spain. Picasso depicted the innocent victims of this attack: women, children and domestic animals, in attitudes of anguish and horror. Nearly fifty years later, Picasso's vision is still relevant.

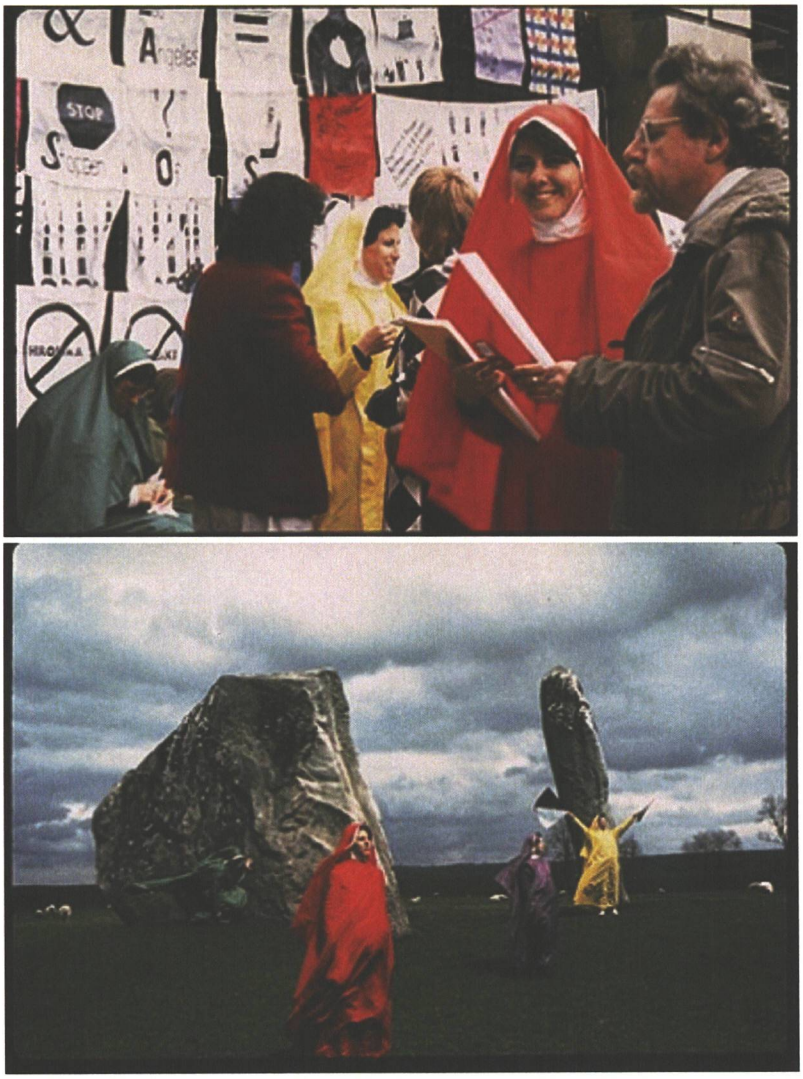
In our version, **Mother Art** has created a three dimensional installation using our own silhouettes as the basis for the figures, substituting dogs to represent the urban animals of Los Angeles, and replacing the bomb/light with an atomic mushroom cloud. Juxtaposed with this image of devastation, **Mother Art** provides a small park as a symbol of hope and peace.



L.A./Guernica, © 1982, Mother Art

**MOTHER ART** ● 4563 Marmion Way, Los Angeles, California 90065, 223-6133

**Figure 5A and B** Sisters Of Survival *End of the Rainbow* (1982-1984)



## NOTES

1. Linda Frye Burnham, 'High Performance,' Performance Art, and Me' *The Drama Review: TDR*, 30, No. 1. 1986. p.43.
2. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), p.5.
3. Banham. Op. Cit. P.225.
4. Mark Vallen. *Nuclear War?! There Goes My Career!* < http://www.art-for-a-change.com/blog/2005/08/nuclear-war-there-goes-my-career.html>
5. David S. Meyer, *A Winter of Discontent: The Nuclear Freeze and American Politics*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1990).
6. Officially titled United Spanish War Veterans monument, it was created by Roger Noble Burnhamin in 1950. The original marble crumbed in the 1971 earthquake and was recreated in plaster and concrete by sculptor David Wilkens in 1973.
7. All S.O.S. members were part of the Woman's Building, the centre of the L.A. feminist art scene. Collaborative performance roots ran strong in the group. Cheri Gaulke and Nancy Angelo participated in the Feminist Art Workers, while Anne Gauldin and Jerri Allyn, were members of The Waitresses, and Sue Maberry was a longtime friend of the other women.
8. Interview with Cheri Gaulke 6 August, 1992, Los Angeles, California.
9. Robert Scheer, 'U.S. Could Survive War in Administration's View' *Los Angeles Times*. 16 January, 1982, A1.
10. Marguerite Elliot and Cheri Gaulke, 'Anti-nuclear Artists Protest Civil Defense' (press release), 3 May, 1982, possession of the author.
11. Sheila Pinkel. ' 'Thermonuclear Gardens': Information Artworks about the U.S. Military-Industrial Complex' *Leonardo*, 34, No. 4. 2001. pp. 319-326.
12. Pinkel, ''Thermonuclear Gardens': Information Artworks about the U.S. Military-Industrial Complex.' p.321.
13. Membership in Mother Art varied over the years. Suzanne Siegal, Laura Silagi, and Deborah Krall created this piece. Mother Art shared a history of involvement with the Woman's Building, the centre of the L.A. feminist art scene with members of S.O.S. and Marguerite Eliot. The group also collaborated with Sheila Pinkel in 1978 on a protest against Proposition 13, a property tax reform initiative that curtailed funds for the arts.
14. Paul Boyer, 'From Activism to Apathy: The American People and Nuclear Weapons, 1963-1980 '*Journal of American History*. 70, No 4. 1984. pp.821-844, and David S. Meyer, 'Peace Protest and Policy: Explaining the Rise and Decline of Antinuclear Movements in Postwar America' *Policy Studies Journal.* 21, No 1. 2005. pp. 35-51.
15. Meyer Op. Cit. p. xiv.
16. Banham, *Los Angeles: Architecture of Four Ecologies*. p. 5.
17. *The Art of Survival*. Videorecording. Produced by Beth Block (1986) and Citizen Artist: Lee Waisler videorecording. Director Michael Herzmark. (1984).
18. Laura Silagi and Suzanne Siegel two of the members of Mother Art created *Gloria* (1984) which explored the lives of Central American refugee women in Los Angeles. Pinkel worked extensively with the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. Vallen created numerous posters satirizing Reagan's foreign policies in Central America.