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Dissertation

**VISUALIZING THE IRRADIATED BODY AND RADIOACTIVE LANDSCAPE  
IN AMERICAN ART, 1945–1976**

by

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**ABSTRACT**

Looking beyond mushroom-cloud imagery, this dissertation investigates the greater effect that radiation science had on intellectually and imaginatively stimulating the visual artists László Moholy-Nagy, Ralston Crawford, Ben Shahn, and Bruce Conner, who sought knowledge of the long-range consequences of nuclear testing. Primarily concerned with the specter of the tests' aftermath rather than the spectacle of the explosions themselves, these artists explored the toxicity of radiation and ultimately discovered, I argue, that they lived in perpetual and uneasy co-existence with their subject. This study chronologically follows the course of scientific inquiry into radiological effects, from the Second World War to the height of the Cold War, beginning in the first chapter with a discussion of the role of nuclear medicine in the work of Moholy-Nagy. In postwar Chicago, he developed his earlier engagement with x-ray photographs into a deeper knowledge of atomic processes, which culminated in two paintings that suggest the healing and hazardous effects of nuclear energy. The second chapter considers Crawford's commission by *Fortune* magazine in 1946 to illustrate an atom-bomb test in the Pacific, for which he

made several renderings based on post-blast meteorological and radiological data. The critical response to these works exposed not only the public's lack of understanding about the invisible phenomena of the bomb, but also Crawford's own loose grasp of the pertinent science. Continuing the focus on newsworthy nuclear events, the third chapter examines Shahn's portraits of J. Robert Oppenheimer, following the latter's official censure by the Atomic Energy Commission in 1954, and Shahn's paintings and drawings about a contemporaneous fallout disaster leading to the death of a Japanese fisherman. Both series link the heedless actions of scientists and their government employers to the rise of universal radiation sickness, precipitated by what Shahn perceived as mass dehumanization. The fourth and final chapter addresses Conner's long-held view that San Francisco, the city in which he lived, was radioactively contaminated and a potential target of nuclear attack. Through the representation of self-destruction in his assemblages and films, Conner mimed a cultural malaise that struck him as particularly rampant in the local environment of nuclear experimentation.