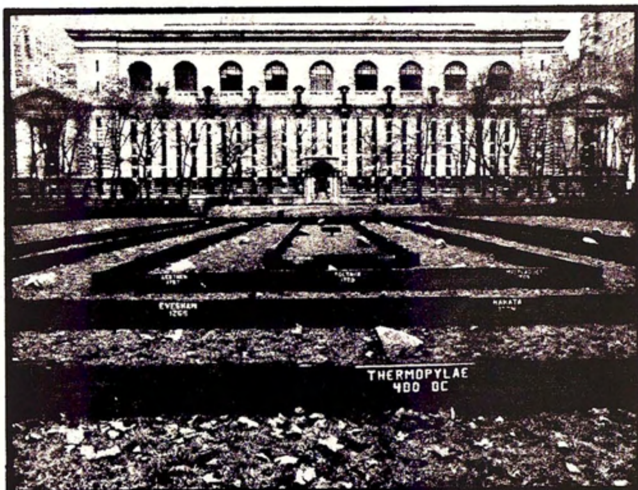
ARTFORUM
MAY 1984



Tom Faulkner, *People Who Live. . . .*, 1984, installation view.

THOMAS FAULKNER

An art installation in Bryant Park must coexist with an urban space in metamorphosis which offers many identities yet seeks just one. Stretching behind Carrère & Hastings' New York Public Library, the park is surrounded by graceful architectural texture to the south and east and lumbering banal giants to the west and north. This half-block zone absorbs influences and impulses from Times Square street culture and Fifth Avenue commerce, and there is no clear trend in the struggle for territory. Recent antidotes of white garden furniture, book stalls, and kiosks are awkward amenities transplanted to seduce businesspeople to challenge street people for possession of the park. Once again, art and design are in the service of politics and public relations.

Thomas Faulkner created something quite compelling in Bryant Park. Sponsored by the Public Art Fund, he built an ambitious yet modest environment, *People Who Live. . .*, whose alignment and configuration echoed the formal Beaux-Arts symmetry of the park plan but whose materials were vividly and aggressively in contrast with it. Using stockade timbers and technology, Faulkner constructed a decipherable maze of low rectangular cribs with no point of entry or outlet. On the 12-by-12-inch timbers were plaques engraved with the locations and dates of major conflicts in the history of human warfare. The time-line condensation of major events and turning points invited projections for the future we may or may not share. Flanking this central artifice, beyond the park's low, straggly hedges, were parallel rows of window frames and poised catapults. Throughout the site haphazard piles of cannonball-sized boulders were gathered, presumably as evidence of capability and preparedness; elsewhere, single boulders seemed to have been heaved sloppily in a spasm of fear.

Faulkner's antinuclear message was clear, and his art was heavy-handed in the service of its mission. But while the installation was not formally inventive, it possessed a genuine resonance. The desolate landscape suggested the stillness of a "day after" and the catastrophic consequences of unwisely directed power. Yet the real force of Faulkner's project lay in its implication of political process and the myth of progress. Pleas for peace are always exorcised in wars to end all wars. Each of the last century's sinister innovations in weaponry—the machine gun, the submarine, the A-bomb—was once promoted as an engine of devastation so terrifying that war would no longer be imagined or initiated. The goal of annihilating warfare has instead been a process of escalation. The timeless stillness of *People Who Live. . .* emphatically communicated that technological sophistication should never be mistaken for progress; the image of the poised catapult tied our present to the past.

Faulkner's installation illustrated the power of successful symbiosis of site and object in public art. Whether his intentions were strongly site specific or the consequence of a more fortuitous combination of idea and location, the barrenness of his moment in the heart of urbanity enhanced the work's ironical power and suggestiveness. It is still wise to remember that people who live in glass houses should not throw stones.

—PATRICIA PHILLIPS