

question of redemption in a time of plague. Members of Congress threatened to curtail the Smithsonian's federal funding, and the film was removed from the exhibition, an act that angered members of the arts community who thought the museum bowed to political pressure and did not adequately defend the artist's use of the imagery.

### ***SUBJECT MATTER AND VISUAL ANALYSIS***

The photograph *Untitled (Falling Buffalos)* shows a herd of buffaloes as they are charging off a cliff and falling to their deaths. What is not explicit from the picture is that this is not a depiction of actual buffaloes. Instead, it is a photograph of a diorama from the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History that depicted an early Native American hunting technique. A historian described such buffalo jumps as follows:



*The artist David Wojnarowicz.*

*The 'buffalo runners' were sent out to locate the herd and begin driving the bison toward the jump. Disguising themselves in buffalo hides and wolf robes, the runners passed near the herds, mostly females, cautiously luring the game toward the cliffs. One specially trained buffalo runner tried to entice the herd to follow him by imitating the bleating of a lost calf. Several days might be required to position the animals for the kill.<sup>21</sup>*

In photographing the diorama, the artist transforms it into a haunting metaphor, linking the hopeless fate of the buffalo and the mass slaughter of the animal during the nineteenth century to the negligent public health policies of the 1980s and 1990s, which led to the deaths of thousands of people from AIDS and HIV-related illnesses. Just as Albert Bierstadt's 1888 painting [The Last of the Buffalo](#) uses an aesthetic fiction (Bierstadt's composite landscape is not painted from life) to draw attention to the buffalo's near extinction from massive over-hunting, Wojnarowicz uses a dramatic, yet artificial tableau to comment on a very real crisis within his community. The powerful metaphor of a marginalized group being driven to the edge of extinction is rendered with subtle beauty in the photograph. The artist crops the diorama image in such a way as to create a majestic, elegiac image. As the result of a shallow depth of field, the buffalo remain in sharp focus, creating a slow-moving diagonal across the image, while the near foreground and background are in soft focus. The result is desperate and tragic and surprisingly moving.

### ***CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS***

This photograph is a gelatin silver print made with a print process that has been in wide use since the late 1880s and produces a smooth, even image surface. The process is prized for its ability to produce a rich and subtle tonal range. In 1992 the band U2 used Wojnarowicz's photograph as [cover art](#) for its single titled "One." This single and the subsequent album became multi-platinum over the next few years, and the band donated a large portion of its earnings to AIDS charities and paid off the artist's medical expenses.<sup>22</sup> The artist also selected this photograph as the cover of his autobiography, suggesting that it was a work of singular personal importance to him.