

# SPOT

HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY • FALL 1991 \$5



Margo Reece

On Paul Strand, Sebastião Salgado, Margo Reece, the Starn Twins,  
Rick Hock, Graciela Iturbide, "The Queen of Fortune," "Tattoos,"  
and the shadow cast by monumental photographs



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EARLY last summer, the Houston Center for Photography presented "Sexuality: Image and Control," a show curated by Jim Dozier that originated in St. Paul, Minnesota, at Film in the Cities and that more Houstonians attended than any other in HCP's history. Two of the works from that show have been included in this issue: Carrie Mae Weems' *Portrait of a Fallen Woman*, right, and Ruth Bernhard's *In the Box, Horizontal*, 1962, page 22. Because of the peculiarly fluent exchange that can take place between photographs and poetry, SPOT solicited the work of poets Lynda Schrafnagel and Leslie Adrienne Miller, pages 10 and 22, as an editorial response—albeit an elliptical one—to the exhibition. Bill Shackelford's review of the film *Poison*, page 17, too, spins some relevant issues.



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James Houlihan's most recent book is a translation from the Portuguese of Jorge de Sena's poetry in a volume entitled *Metamorphoses*.

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Leslie Adrienne Miller's books of poems include *Staying Up for Love*, and *No River*. Her poetry has appeared in a number of magazines including *The Antioch Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and *American Poetry Review*.

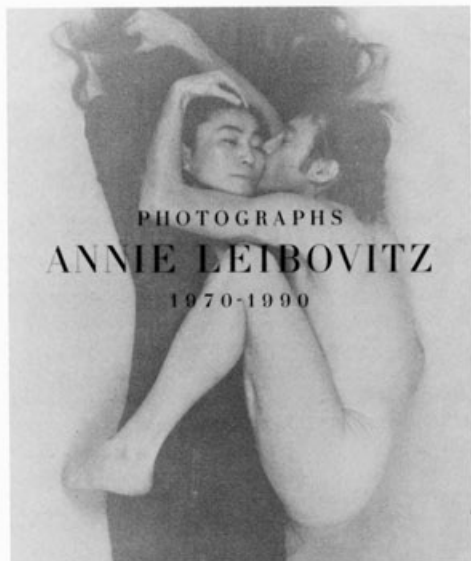
Maggie Olvey works at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and received a master of fine arts in photography from the University of Houston.

Lynda Schrafnagel died of cancer, at the age of forty, last January. Across the country, her former colleagues, professors, and friends, who were firmly in her corner, have been grieving her loss.

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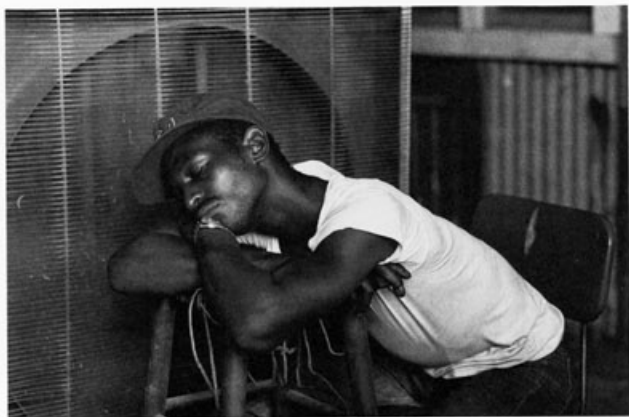
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# Tender Instincts

AS 1990 marked the one hundredth anniversary of Paul Strand's birth, the art world pauses to reflect on this twentieth-century photographer now firmly established in the canon. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, for instance, will host "Paul Strand"—an exhibition organized by the National Gallery of Art that contains one hundred fifty vintage prints—which opens on November 10, 1991, and runs through January 12, 1992. The accompanying catalogue *Paul Strand: An American Vision* is published by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in association with the Aperture Foundation. The recent release by Aperture Press, *Paul Strand: Essays on His Life and Work*, edited by Marcus Strunge, offers many useful essays; those on art and politics, however, are disappointing.

In 1976, near the end of his life, Strand referred to himself as "an explorer who has spent his life on a long voyage of discovery," and when these words were published, Strand had wandered, drifted, and lived in many countries, trying through photographs both to forge a solidarity with his subjects and make sense of their lives. Mexico in the Thirties; New England in the Forties; France, Italy, and the Hebrides in the Fifties; all helped spark Strand's artistic powers and challenged him to remain ever the aesthetic explorer.

Strand's early statements concern "pure" photography and the "absolute unqualified objectivity" as the essence of his art, "accomplished without tricks of process or manipulation through the use of straight photographic methods" (Strand 3-4). In an era when poststructuralists have left statements such as those disheveled, dismantled, and strewn about the critical landscape—for

zation confronted with the insidious forces of the "Machine," "Materialistic Empiricism," and "Science" (Trachtenberg 146). "The present critical condition of Western civilization," Strand insisted, was faced with the "alternatives of being quickly ground to pieces under the heel of the new God [the Machine] or with the tremendous task of controlling the heel." So when the question was technology, small was indeed beautiful for Strand; for paradoxically, the camera, in Strand's view, could transcend its machine nature by the purity and reality of the images created—images, moreover, that could instruct and change people's lives and serve political purposes.

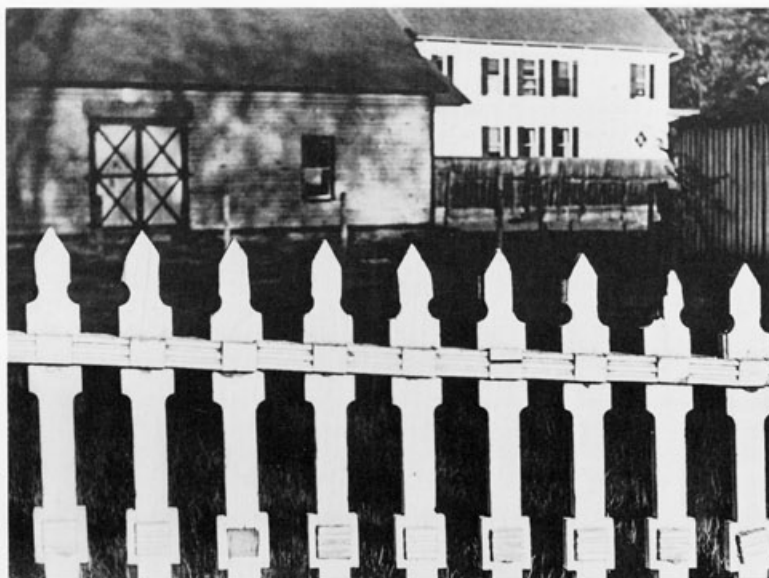
But Politics and Art? A couple married by shotgun, whose strident and horrifying arguments echo loudly through our century, as if out of the huge mouth in Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. Can politics and art ever form a necessary human connection, free from platitude and party uniform? Anyone attempting to make the connection between Paul Strand's art and his politics, as several writers in Strunge's collection have recently attempted, with mixed results, must confront a familiar dilemma, stated succinctly by Alan Trachtenberg: "Can art be true to itself, to its aesthetic character, and at the same time serve social justice?" (Strange 6).

Paul Strand thought that it could. And for those who want to establish a superficial connection between Strand's art and his personal politics, the task is not difficult, for Strand was a political person. From the mid-Thirties when a cycle of reform gripped the country and the reinvigorated American Communist Party took the lead in many popular struggles—from union organizing to tenants' rights to civil rights for black Americans—to the end of his life, Strand remained intellectually committed to Marxism, however vaguely sketched. He traveled to Moscow in 1935 and earlier had joined Harold Clurman's Group Theater project in New York. Moving away from photography for a time, Strand also joined the Nykino film group, a splinter organization formerly aligned with the radical New York Film and Photo League. In 1937 Strand worked with Leo Hurwitz, Ben Maddow, Lionel Berman, and others to form Frontier Films. Their manifesto proclaimed the

"enormous power [of film] to mold the mind of the nation . . . consistently on the side of progress"—an ominous phrase, this "molding" of minds, but perhaps a necessary strategy when confronted with the more powerful reality of Hollywood's molding of a different order. From 1937 to 1942, when Frontier Films closed up shop, Strand produced his most overtly political and propagandistic work. *Heart of Spain* (MFA, Houston, screening December 1), *China Strikes Back* (a film that featured the first footage from Maoist Yanan), *Return to Life*, and *People of the Cumberland* were typical agit-prop films of the Popular Front period, when communist parties worldwide, with explicit orders from the Comintern, abandoned their revolutionary strategy and agreed to work with liberals and other left groups in a united front against fascism. It was the good guys versus the bad guys; patriotic themes abounded and the American flag often was featured. Yet *Native Land* (MFA, Houston, screening November 29), the one truly innovative film of the lot, with borrowings from Brecht, Stanislavski, Vertov, and Eisenstein, was cen-

sored by the same American Communist Party that had paid for its production. When *Native Land* opened in 1942, the images of class conflict, exploited workers, and massive upheaval were no longer palatable to the party that had taken the position (at Soviet behest) that strikes

*Cobweb in Rain*, we are supposed to see "Strand's vitalist adaptation of Engel's general theory of dialectical materialism," complete with the poignant observation that the "buttercup leaf, less crushable than the rain-bejewelled cobweb, embodies the second law of dialectics. . . . the



and disruptions by American workers would hurt the war effort and weaken the fight against fascists.

So Paul Strand was political. He believed in the Soviet "experiment." "The most doctrinaire Marxist I had ever met," recalled the film director, Fred Zinnemann (Strange 199). And yet Paul Strand's photographs were too smart for his politics. His provincial American Marxism translated into an aesthetic that was more American pastoral than Marxist realism. He was more the son of Emerson than of Marx. His imagination was repulsed by the ersatz comforts of modernity, and he was never tempted into some fantastic technocratic place beyond the future.

Unfortunately, when we turn to the political essays in Strunge's collection, we find the most disappointing work. Some of the critics in the anthology want to make Strand's photographs and his political life fit cozily, dialectically, together. Mike Weaver, for example, manages to see "Marxist"

interpenetration of opposites in the same habitat." If there were any mention of economics in these passages, we might deservedly call this exegesis "vulgar Marxism," but without some economic *deus ex machina*, we can call the description simply vulgar.

Strand's *Time in New England*, a celebration of New England history and character, while seemingly patriotic in its content, contains a criticism of the Cold War, says John Rohrback, "hidden," of course, in a "format acceptable to conservatives" (Strange 162). For Rohrback, Strand's photographs provide "lessons" and not just "messages" but the "real message," i.e., "political connotations," demonstrating once again that if the critics as *apparatchiks* do their work with such heavy-handedness, the rest of us would be best advised not to make art or to be satisfied with slogans in the place of art.

Strand was radical in a concrete manner that leaves many of his contemporary critics boxed



many critics any "unqualified objectivity" is an unqualified *faux pas*—Strand's words, though not his works, seem fixed in the *ancien régime* of modernism. "Straight" photographic methods, an art without "tricks"—the very words cannot be uttered without tasting the dust of positivism, a desire for art, science, and technology to form a harmonious *troika*. The later Strand was less naive, but still not the sort to be drawn into the giddy vacuities of postmodernism.

But tricks were played by the history that Strand lived through: the decades of worldwide depression, the Spanish Civil War, fascism, and the Cold War. Before many of the cataclysmic events of this century, Strand had already turned a jaundiced eye on his own country. Borrowing an image from Jack London's dystopian novel, *The Iron Heel*, Strand sketched a sour view of contemporary civi-



categories everywhere in Strand's photography. The "*repoussoir* element" in Strand's *The White Fence*, for example, expresses the "paradox that the liberty to take a plot of land implies the exclusion of others from it" (Strange 197). Weaver pulls in the Hungarian Marxist Gyorgy Lukacs to add theoretical weight to what is otherwise a paltry examination of Strand's work; Strand's *Workers' Bicycles*, taken in Italy during the mid-Fifties, "may have suggested that the vehicles convey the people collectively in the dark woods not simply for rest and recreation but for meeting and planning." In

in the corner with their messages, their political reaching and agonizing. He held close to what one historian has called the "eloquent edge of protest," typical of many American anti-modernists sickened by corporate hierarchies, "scientific" managers, "expert" commissions, and the general trend toward uprooted, purposeless efficiency embedded in modern American culture. And eloquent he was. Who cannot see in Strand's *Women of Santa Ana—Michoacan*, or in the many portraits

continued on page 21

Clockwise from top: Paul Strand's *The White Fence*, Port Kent, New York, 1916; *Lusetti Family*, Luzzara, Italy, 1953; and *Cobweb in Rain*, Georgetown, Maine, 1927.

# TWINNING

THE much-written-about constructions of Doug and Mike Starn, who are thirty-year-old identical twins working out of New York City, are unavoidably provocative. The exhibition "Mike and Doug Starn (1985-1990)," which was organized by Sarah Rogers-Lafferty of the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, will be on display at Houston's Blaffer Gallery from November 2 through December 15. The exhibition installation will be designed by the Starns. A major book will accompany the show. Their pieces are large (some measure up to twenty feet), complex, beautiful. Critics describe them as a "study in cunning nonchalance . . . sophomoric . . . too concerned with surface appearance and posturing" (Littlefield 15), "erotic and fetishised" (Pincus Witten 72), "startling" (Frick 168), photography's "most disconcerting and seductive manifestation" (Pincus Witten 72), "visceral, conceptual and expressive" (Rogers-Lafferty 13), and "haunting" (Rogers-Lafferty 6).

It is difficult to disagree with the descriptions, whether negative or positive. The Starn Twins' work, and their words about it, are packed with paradoxes. The Starns claim to be uninterested in preciousness, yet their constructions display a careful attention to craft, albeit a particular sort of anti-craft craft. The Starns work collaboratively, yet due to their twinning, which is almost symbiotic in nature,

things curl. It will change, but the object will not go away" (Rogers-Lafferty 9-18). This thinking shifts radically from the prevalent attitudes in contemporary art that the art object must be preserved in its original state and that any change devalues the work. These attitudes are unrealistic; the Starns obviously know that and are exploiting the insistence of the aging process.

Because they are primarily concerned with surfaces, the Starns stress the importance of photo paper as material, with less emphasis on the image that is placed on the paper. This is their attempt to counter what they have observed in conventional photohistory. "When we got to art school we knew we wanted to start showing the physical nature of the photograph because we thought this was totally overlooked. . . . [M]ost often, we don't care about the image, we're just making a construction with paper" (Rogers-Lafferty 13-14).

The images that the Starns so cavalierly choose are from art history: Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, an obscure Picasso, the Madonna's tears, paintings of a dead Christ, a Rembrandt portrait. Other images are equally iconic and

The wonder of the Starns' work comes not from one particular aspect, nor from an inherent genius of talent. It comes from the entire complex package that allows the viewer to both question the limitations of photography and explore the possibilities of image-making. This ability to excite is important and has impact, although it goes hand in hand with what might be called a content gap and other flaws.

Why would a photographer want to be more like a painter? What occurs when photographers start working in untraditional ways that makes what they do "Art" instead of "art," and what could a photographer gain or lose by making this shift? According to the cheerleaders of Doug and Mike (Mike and Doug) Starn, photographers have much to gain, including respectability, wealth, media hype, fame, and even more creative freedom. But as Rebecca Solnit remarked in her 1988 review of the Starn Twins' exhibition at University Art Museum, Berkeley, "The real reason for the Starns' sudden ascent seems to be that they've made photography more like painting, and that is of questionable benefit—particularly since they are supposed to be spearheading a

do these twins, who profess to love photography and photographic images, seem so content to let photography continue to be demeaned by this prejudice?

The Starns are not the first photography-based artists to challenge the photographic convention of the single, straight print, executed through precise craft with an emphasis on archival preciousness. In the 152 years since the "birth" of photography, artists have transgressed many notions of what photography can do and be: artists such as Man Ray, Hannah Hoch, John Heartfield, Moholy-Nagy, and, more recently, Christian Boltanski, Adrian Piper, Barbara Kruger, and many other photography-based artists who are merging photography, painting, installation, and video media into a new form, one less dependent on categories.

So why does photography still suffer from the reputation of being less creatively free than painting? To some extent this continued misconception is the fault of the photographic artists themselves. Many seem to believe that being precious is the only way to hold onto some artistic legitimacy and market value. One wonderful aspect of the Starns' work is that they have, on a much grander scale, debunked the notions that photography is limited and that it must be precious to be valuable. The Starns: "To us [the] preciousness, [the] Minor White doctrine of allowing only lintless gloves to touch paper and things like that is absolutely insane. I understand the archival need, but to confuse that as an art aesthetic or a prerequisite to art is wrong. That's not art, that's craft. To fight this we had to abuse the paper. Some people started to understand this and a lot of photo people were pretty mad. But we loved the beauty it created and that is what got the most attention" (Rogers-Lafferty 10).

The Starns claim to be working against modernist ideals, yet without the coldness and cynicism of postmodernism. "In the first works in 1986 we were showing the physical nature of the paper. It was taped together and beat to hell, and working against the modernist concepts of framing and hanging" (Rogers-Lafferty 12).

The problem with this approach seems to be that once again only part of the whole "picture" is being addressed. By concerning themselves primarily with their craft: abusing the image surface, insisting that the work age naturally, and creating carefully installed spaces, the Starns are participating in the same kind of thinking that keeps conventional photographers locked into being interested only in the perfect, archival print. In each case, the value of the work to communicate meaning is demeaned in order to emphasize the form, the material. Each element is important, and if a part is ignored, it jeopardizes the whole work. The Starns, unfortunately, are more like the Minor Whites of the world than they or their fans would like to admit. ●

Cara De Busk



this seems less a collaboration of two minds than a division of one mind into two bodies. The Starns convey an attitude that is "naive," yet the work itself exhibits a sophistication and calculated quality that runs counter to the random approach they claim. The contradictions within the work and in relation to the Starns as creators, influence the search for meaning in the work, and establish around it an aura of mystery and mythology.

The twins work by intricately quilting many pieces of photo paper into a large single image. They bend, scratch, tone, tear, and in other ways mutilate the paper, adding pressure-sensitive tape, ribbon, wood, metal, and other elements to enhance the physical presence of each piece. To the Starns, the most important dimension of their work is its "body," its visceral existence.

One thing bodies do is age. The Starns are refreshingly aware of the reality of aging and are willing to allow age to evolve their work. "[The work] will age, the aging process will continue once it leaves the studio. The tape lifting in some areas is part of the work. It's allowed to come up and it's supposed to in some areas. It's going to change over time;

somehow outside the present: horses' heads, plant forms, the Louvre floor, self-portraits, and portraits of friends. Occasionally, they choose not to use an image at all but rather to construct an image from chemically stained photographic paper.

Their particular use of appropriated art-historical images has produced accusations of romanticism. The Starns claim they are not interested in the content of the image, only in its ability to excite, to be beautiful. "Some of our pieces are meant to evoke an emotion, some are symbolic, others are just a lure to get you excited about what's going on. Often, the image is an abstract element just like all the art elements—the frame, the paper, the process" (Rogers-Lafferty 10).

"We certainly have no desire to return to the art of an earlier time. But we are willing to admit to its beauty and exploit that" (Rogers-Lafferty 13).

This disregard for the meaning inherent in choosing certain images may be annoying. But the result is work that is exciting and—although limited in meaning—somehow touching.

The Starn Twins' *Double Mona Lisa*, 1988.

shift rather than broadening the parameters of photography. (The real value of photography becoming more like painting seems to be akin to the value of blacks becoming more like whites or women becoming more like men: in adopting the mannerisms one appropriates the privileges of the dominant group)" (Solnit 1).

What are the privileges of the dominant group—painters? The most obvious and tangible privilege is that if a painting sells, it will most likely sell for at least twice what an "equivalent" photographic work will sell for. This is no minor privilege. This is the heart of what most art professionals consider the true value of the work: do the major collectors buy it, and for what outrageous price? This factor was integral in establishing the Starns' hype, as important collector after collector purchased a Starn, only months following their "debut."

Proponents of the Starns' work seem to be effectively sighing: "Thank God, here are some photographers who are making *real* art, like a painter makes." As critic after critic praises the efforts of these young artists to transgress the boundaries of traditional photographic approaches, why does so much of the interest center on the work being painterly? And why

whole "picture" is being addressed. By concerning themselves primarily with their craft: abusing the image surface, insisting that the work age naturally, and creating carefully installed spaces, the Starns are participating in the same kind of thinking that keeps conventional photographers locked into being interested only in the perfect, archival print. In each case, the value of the work to communicate meaning is demeaned in order to emphasize the form, the material. Each element is important, and if a part is ignored, it jeopardizes the whole work. The Starns, unfortunately, are more like the Minor Whites of the world than they or their fans would like to admit. ●

Cara De Busk

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FRED Richtin, curator of "Contemporary Latin American Photographers," which was on display from August 3 through October 13 at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, describes the work of these twenty-six photographers in terms of "directness and warmth," "an overriding empathy," and "an ongoing dialogue between photographer and subject that is very different from the more critical and self-referential imagery that has been popular in the United States for some time."

He also speaks of his struggle to learn to read the Latin American work he saw for the first time in 1984. "The presumption that photography is merely an extension of sight, its language universal, is tenable only when one manages to exclude photog-

matter as love dwells with death.

In the introduction to his book *Other Americans*, where several photographs in the CAM show appear, Salgado says of Central and South America: "Here, dignity and poverty ride the same horse. The struggle for survival is very difficult, and man, a hard beast, faces it from birth till death. . . ."

In *Brazil, 1983*, hardship and dignity are etched into the faces of a family group gathered under a cactus to read or sing from a black book. The man standing to lead the group wears a ragged shirt, but his hands are clean. The woman might be the man's sister or his wife. Their long, lean jaws and high foreheads are similarly creased, their expressions weary and beautiful in their patience.

of Salgado's photographs and missed their affirmation. To be sure, the photograph *Mexico, 1980*, in which four men carry lumber along a ridge above the clouds, suggests crucifixion. It also speaks eloquently of endurance, courage, and the fleeting grace those qualities can attain. In another photograph, two barbers perform the ritual Market Day haircut and shave while their wives wait for them on the curb. It's an intensely quiet scene, evoking the peace to be found in the ceremonies of village life.

I do not think it is religious tradition or history or any of the

obvious cultural differences that might make it difficult for a North American to read these pictures. I think it is because they convey a level of spirituality and emotion that is not easily accepted in our culture; when we recognize their presence we are startled, almost embarrassed. In part, Ingrid Sischy's recently published objections to Salgado's work (*The New Yorker*, September 9, 1991) seems founded on her discomfort with these presences in the work; Sischy calls Salgado's photos heavy-handed and formulate, seeking aura rather than specificity. This is in contrast, she writes, to most photojournalism, which lacks an insistent style. Lyrical, romantic, symbolic are words she uses to describe Salgado's photographs, as opposed to the documentary work of W. Eugene Smith, in which the "facts are allowed to sing for themselves."

I found Mexican Graciela Iturbide's robust portraits of Oaxacan women presented a compelling contrast to Salgado's style. These photographs dramatize narrative moments whose context may be ambiguous, but whose emotional power is unmistakable. The deflowered bride awaiting her groom on a white bed strewn with red flowers embodies the dynamic between love and death, blood and renewal. With powerful compression, Iturbide shows us a Toulouse-Lautrec prostitute with twisted mouth and ancient eyes who sits before a mural depicting the grim progress of her life: an empty bed, a bed with a man and woman reclining, a tombstone.

One particularly beautiful photograph shows a woman, her back to the camera, carrying a large radio across a mountainous landscape. The woman, scarved in black, might be a Latin American siren broadcast-

ing in the desert. The photograph could be the peripety of a short story that the photographer knows and has selected to capture at its most resonant and powerful moment.

Iturbide identifies the Zapotecan Indian village at Juchitán, where many of her photographs were taken, as one of the few matriarchies in Mexico. Juchitán women in Iturbide's photographs like *Our Lady of the Iguanas* loom large, monumental, full of vitality and brio. "Much daily happiness," Iturbide says, "is to be found in small towns that is lost in Mexico City."

Iturbide believes that establishing a dialogue with the people she photographs is paramount. In an introductory essay to Iturbide's book *Juchitán de las Mujereslas Mujeres*, Elena Poniatowska describes how closely Juchitec society embraced the photographer.

"With the Zapotecs, Graciela has forged a blood tie. Tiny, fragile, she stands before the mole-mountain of lymph, water, and fat that is the Juchitec women, who take her in their arms and lead her by the hand to the river, to wash clothes and bathe."

The work of the twenty-six photographers is more various than I have suggested. And funnier. I kept returning to a marvelously macabre encounter that might have occurred somewhere in the work of Gabriel García Márquez. In a photo by Eduardo Bottario, an Argentine policeman and a middle-aged man dressed in a suit of peacock feathers glower at one another across a fence. In *Incoherence, 1982*, Cuba's Raul Corral poses a wedding couple



in front of two immaculately tiled toilets. I liked seeing these domesticated lovers in conjunction with the wildly sensuous *Breakfast, 1975* by Mexico's Pedro Meyer.

The most revolutionary work in the show, that of Peruvian Roberto Fantozi, is also the most abstract. In one group of five photographs, the subjects, all without heads, are posed against a concrete wall, suggesting a firing squad. Instead of human subjects, artifacts such as a piece of cloth and a prophylactic are arranged on the ground in front of the same wall. Another group of four sepia-toned photographs shows large pieces of cloth stretched over wooden scaffolding. These structures reminded me of temporary dwellings. They resonate with what we have read of war and dissolution in Latin America and elsewhere. Their sense of loss and fragility is powerfully conveyed without overt emotion.

For a closer look at photography on the cutting edge, we will have to wait for FotoFest 1992 which will present eight shows of the most contemporary Latin American photographers along with seven historical shows. Many of the photographers to be included in the contemporary shows have not been seen outside of their countries. All of these shows may be seen at the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston from March 7 to April 5. ● Olive Hershey

Clockwise from top:  
Raul Corral's *Incoherence, 1982*;  
Roberto Fantozi's untitled;  
and Sebastião Salgado's *Brazil*.

## Ceremonies, Elegies, Documentaries

raphy done by members of other, more distant cultures."

I was recalling Richtin's somewhat contradictory statements when I entered the CAM and stood before seven photographs by Sebastião Salgado. In the first, *Mexico, 1980*, a cemetery scene, a dog lies on top of a concrete crypt. Alert, head raised, he seems ready to leap from his post whenever summoned. But is the master he waits for alive or dead? There was a story here I wasn't hearing. Although no one had told me the setting or the names of characters, this was clearly an elegy.

Similarly, in *Brazil, 1983*, three boys sprawl on a brick floor where as many as fifty small animal bones are arranged in meticulous rows. The boys, barefoot, bare-chested, slender as willows, lie at ease. Among the bones, tiny white horses trot and gallop, the sun outside the open door illuminating the pieces. One boy stretches an arm to move one of the bones. What kind of game do these children play with death?

The more I think about these powerful photographs, the more evocative and mysterious they seem. For in Latin America people don't dodge the darker side of life. Orchids grow from decaying

Lois Zamora, Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Houston, reviewed *Other Americans* in the Fall 1989 issue of *SPOT*. Referring to Salgado's fascination with death, Zamora writes: "And when his subjects are not corpses, they seem nonetheless frozen in their misery and sadness. This is an elegiac record of a world pronounced dead by the photographer."

I think Zamora has seen only the dark side







ROBERT Wilson has often been called a visionary who connects all the arts, using the resources of painting, sculpture, and *mise en scène* to create dreamscapes for theater and opera, as in his famous collaboration with Philip Glass in *Einstein on the Beach*. His career of synthesizing the arts seems to achieve what the Romantics were seeking:

For all the inventive arts maintain, as it were, a sympathetic connexion between each other, being no more than various expressions of one internal power.

Thus spoke Percy Shelley. The Wilson retrospective at Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum, this past summer (on display from June 14 through August 18) wanted us to believe that Wilson does manage to express "one internal power," but I am not convinced that the vision was truly visionary. Indeed, I suspect that any artist who resists linear narrative, for whatever reason, is called, for lack of a better word, a "visionary" by the critics.

Before I go on, let me recall the "vision."

The upper gallery at the CAM had been sculpted into a long entryway—or birth canal—that led into three rooms. The progression was from a bright dawnlike light in the first room to the third room's darkness. The darkness was no doubt meant to conjure up images of spiritual or physical death and also interstellar space where humanity will either transform or destroy itself.

The birth canal was my favorite space—who wouldn't prefer it? On the right-hand wall, there hung a series of large photographs, the only ones in the show (from Wilson's *The Golden Window*, 1982). The images were all very similar: in each, a bust was centered in front of lush foliage. Since all the busts had the appearance of Roman statues, the wall resembled the entryway to a villa of an ancient Roman noble, where the busts of ancestors looked superciliously down upon the living, as guardian spirits and goads to further glory. Yet the busts in the photographs were impossible to identify. At first, I thought I saw Cicero or Augustus, but no, it was the German actress Maria Nicklisch. All the busts seemed to have been exposed to sky, summer heat, rain, not to mention innumerable generations of pigeons. And they all seemed to be merging back slowly into the green world they no longer dominated.

As with all symbolic births, the series was a meditation on finding and losing identities in the context of the cycles of seasons. When Shelley was meditating on the ruins of ancient Greece and the birth of what we miscall the Western tradition (for it can no longer be geographically placed), he said, "The wrecks and fragments of those subtle and profound minds [are] like the ruins of a fine statue." This, and the lines quoted above, come from a piece called "Essay on the Literature, the Arts, and the Manners of the Athenians" which, despite the authoritative title, is a fragment. As with Shelley, so with Wilson: the urge to unity, to place ourselves in tradition, produces only allusive fragments.

Stepping into the first room, I realized at once why I should write about this show for a critical journal about photography, for the first room was itself a meditation on the birth of photography. The room was very brightly lit, and a giant lightbulb, made of glass, metal, and neon, hung in the center of the room. The giant light bulb was not the source of light but was made to appear so by the actual lighting. Various objects were scattered about the room and each was lit so that beautiful shadows were cast across the floor and walls. The double bands of wire that formed a chair made a spectacularly intricate play of darkness on light.

Wilson is, as I have said, an artist of light, and it was only in this first room, unlike the next two, that I felt the presence of something intellectually interesting and emotionally gripping. Photography is, of course, the process of recording images of light on a photosensitive surface. And standing in this room was like being at the birth of a photograph as the

# WILSON

## ON THE BEACH

play of light and darkness becomes fixed. This room also addresses one of the mysteries about the history of photography, namely why, though the chemical processes were available, it took about one hundred years for anybody to realize that the images in a camera obscura could be mechanically reproduced. The answer is the brain, where, by a process that is still mysterious, images are turned into ideas. Photography is born in vision.

The last two rooms were disappointing to me, and the progression from light to dark, predictable. I have little to say of the second room: it was, perhaps, earthen like the middle years of a life. The last room was the most ambitious in the show and attempted to be spiritual: the dark night of the soul as well interstellar space. The space of science fiction has been used by many as a metaphorical place of personal transformation, for instance, Kubrick in *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Philip Glass and Doris Lessing in their *Making of the Representative of Planet 8*, which premiered at the Houston Grand Opera. But in the finale to the Wilson show, the joining of cosmic and spiritual was utterly facile, with nothing of the mysterious power of the last act of the *Glass-Lessing* opera.

In contrast to the first room, darkness brooded over everything, and, again, scattered objects were lit in spots. These separate things, I suppose, suggested our attachments to the earth: our materiality (boots), our sexuality (beds), our illusions (the empty aquarium where we follow the wake of non-existent fish). The far wall replicated the set for *Einstein on the Beach*, but it was such an ersatz staging of a famous work, so wrenched from its performance context, that the secondary meaning foisted upon the original vision was not convincing. There it was—a huge rectangular panel, divided lengthwise down the middle into

twelve squares, six on top and six below. The squares contained lights flashing sequentially in the most elementary geometric forms: circles and lines. Some of the lines formed angles, or, one could say, if one wanted to be generous, vectors for the possibilities of physics to save us. Or maybe to destroy us—it all depends on whether we leave or take with us our earthly attachments. Here the show was simply vague. I cannot fault this finale for being too simplistic; it was, if anything, too empty.

In this room, I felt I was at the rehearsal for a show, not at the real thing, and it is an odd feeling to be at the rehearsal for a vision. In fact, it was more like being at the circus when the stage comes down and the magic disappears. Every few minutes, a pathetic toy spaceship, like the bird in a cuckoo clock, struggled across the room. I watched it with that weariness that we feel watching a child with his Christmas toy, trying to force himself to find more pleasure but only finding himself more overwrought.

As a whole, this retrospective asked us to see Wilson simply as an artist. But the word "artist" in this phrase means something foreign to Wilson. The ease with which we assume that his work can be seen as if it were meant for the museum reveals a basic contradiction at the core of contemporary art.

The artist since the Sixties—here I am leaning on Suzi Gablik's *Has Modernism Failed?*—is no longer the marginal repository of values that the modern world has forsaken, but is, more or less, an entrepreneur of signs, seeking corporate and government promoters and knowing that success is a long dossier of installations in prestigious museums and high prices at galleries.

The artistic crucible for Wilson's work is the moment, sometime in the Seventies, when some artists realized that there was no longer any-

thing, no matter how outrageous—a heap of bricks—that could be not be bought and sold, that is, co-opted into the consumerism of late capitalism. Now capitalism is probably more amenable to real democracy than other economic systems. But when artists find valid injustices within a capitalist society, and yet produce art with no other values than individualism, self-promotion, and financial prosperity, then art is open to the criticism of being in bad faith. Some artists, aware of this contradiction, have attempted to create works that cannot be possessed, works like Robert Smithson's site sculpture, e.g., his *Spiral Jetty*, a reclamation of land in the Great Salt Lake. The advantages of using earth, rocks, and light are obvious: they remind us of our ties to the planet, our endangered and degraded mother. In this context, Wilson can be seen as an important artist of light.

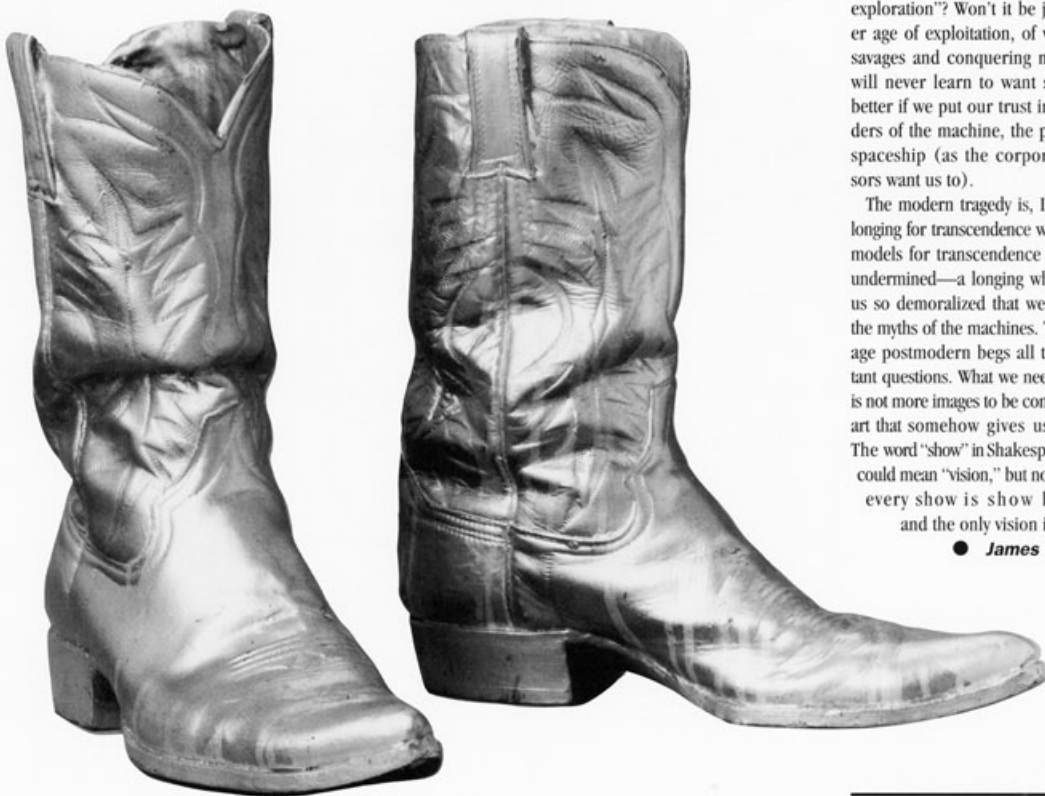
Art is now a billion-dollar industry, and there seem to be only two options for artists: to produce images to be sent through the flow chart from studio to gallery to museum, generating capital at every stage (e.g., Julian Schnabel), or to produce art that no one will see. The work of Wilson, like that of John Cage and Merce Cunningham, started out as a response to this situation.

Wilson will design the sets for the Houston Grand Opera's *Parsifal*, and this may turn out to be a great work, for the material is right. Wilson himself started out as a naive seeker, looking for revelation not in the Grail, but in the modern version of a holy fool: a brain-damaged young man whose writings Wilson brought to the stage in his first success, *Deafman Glance*, 1970. The famous quip that Wagner's music is better than it sounds might be proved true, for Wilson has the ability to sculpt light into vision, but it will no doubt be an expensive vision if you want to sit in the front rows at the opera house.

In other words, what disturbed me most about the last room is the loss of any sense of danger in becoming a corporate-sponsored media star. (The show was sponsored by AT&T and organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and curated by Trevor Fairbrother.) The great delusion with which the modern world beclouds itself is that technology will not only correct the problems it has itself caused but will also free us from boring and sweaty labor. The exploration of space will be the last frontier, and we will all have intellectually exciting work. Our present "age of information" is already the beginning of this newest new world. So the myth runs. But what will prevent the exploration of space from being different from all previous "ages of exploration"? Won't it be just another age of exploitation, of wiping out savages and conquering nature? We will never learn to want something better if we put our trust in the wonders of the machine, the panels of a spaceship (as the corporate sponsors want us to).

The modern tragedy is, I think, the longing for transcendence when all the models for transcendence have been undermined—a longing which leaves us so demoralized that we give in to the myths of the machines. To call our age postmodern begs all the important questions. What we need from art is not more images to be consumed but art that somehow gives us a vision. The word "show" in Shakespeare's day could mean "vision," but now it seems every show is show business and the only vision is revision.

● James Houlihan



Robert Wilson's *Cowboy Boots*, 1973.

# A SUPER WAR

**W**AR: Controlling the Image," which was on display from May 17 through June 23 at the Houston Center for Photography's Gallery X, was a small but by no means insignificant exhibition, and it was clearly conceived as a reaction to Operation Desert Storm. The artists in it presented perceptive views about war itself and information manipulation. The show's subheading, "Controlling the Image" (coined by Clint Willour, former president of HCP, as a play on words on the show in the main gallery, "Sexuality: Image and Control"), stated the most important theme examined in this show.

Josh Gosfield's photographic collages on canvas, arguably the most personally stylized work in the show, originally illustrated a Desert Storm article by Philip Caputo for *The New York Times Magazine* in February. One of the images had caricatures of the main participants—Saddam Hussein (pictured as a devil with a mustache), George Bush, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, and Norman Schwarzkopf—surrounding a drawing of a soldier in a helmet with banners reading "War Torn" above him and "Patriot" below. Photographs of soldiers in Vietnam and men wearing gas masks were either imbedded or attached to the main artwork. There was also, notably, a

drawing of a person watching a television broadcast about war with background text reading "it's great to be an American," "remember Pearl Harbor," and "God Bless America." Another of Gosfield's images consisted of a television visual of a bemedaled general surrounded by missiles and text reading, "Live from Riyadh" and "go U.S.A." The final image in this series contained references to past wars through text reading "Two Jima 1945," "Gettysburg 1863," "Dak To 1967" and "Kuwait 1991." Photos of soldiers in uniform carrying a flag-draped coffin and vignettes of anonymous soldiers appeared in the background, but the image was dominated by a drawing of a large skull and a smaller drawing of a sailor with "our son" written over it. This last image was a clear reminder of the price of war: the death of a soldier is the death of a family member. The repetition of the coffin-bearing soldiers lent an air of futility, a reflection of the soldiers' fate in the cycles of revenge perpetuated by their leaders.

Dawn Dedeaux's piece, *Super Convergence*, was the predominant and most striking piece in this show. All of the images were taken from television during a three-hour period of Gulf War and Super Bowl coverage in

January. A large grid of television images of Schwarzkopf, Kuwait, Hussein, football scenes, and ads suspended on the wall were juxtaposed against an aerial image of the Orange Bowl in Miami (where the Buffalo Bills played the New York Jets) on the floor directly in front. The viewer was encouraged to stand on this image while viewing the wall piece. As the artist remarked in a May 25 lecture given at the Houston Center for Photography, "Pulled together for this three-hour televised event are the largest worldwide, simultaneous viewing audience (the media spectacle of real time), the world's most popular entertainment event, and the most expensive television commercials of the year. Add to these statistics the interspersed live coverage of a Super War between civilization's oldest and youngest cultures, and you will have the components of a media-age super convergence." (An extensive transcript of this lecture was published in the Summer 1991 issue of *SPOT*.)

In one of her pieces, *The War Game*, Helen Hoffelt used a grid arrangement similar in many ways to Dedeaux's piece. The entire image was composed of chessboard squares with a composite black-and-white image of a skeleton in the center. The king position was filled on one end by Bush,

with Hussein on the other; images from the Iraqi side were poised against those of the United States, like black-and-white chess pieces. Most of the images within the squares were derived from television coverage of the Gulf War, and the board echoed the square format of the television set. Hoffelt suggested not only the idea of a war game played by politicians and military men but also a more subtle television and media war game played on the viewing public. The skeleton in the middle of the piece had, in this regard, more significance than a horrible product of war; it symbolized the result of the media war game, the death of a sense of morality and caring for fellow human beings. On a similar Desert Storm theme was one of Esther Parada's works, *Oppositions*, a computer-manipulated collage that included photographs taken at a Vietnam veterans' parade in Chicago and at a veterans' fast at the Capitol in Washington D.C. A line of text on the bottom read: "Between August 8, 1990 and January 3, 1991 only 29 out of 2,855 minutes of evening network television dealt with popular opposition to the U.S. military buildup in the Gulf."

*Avengers*, a clever mixed-media installation by MANUAL (Ed Hill and Suzanne Bloom), combined a computer-manipulated Hollywood movie still of two Roman soldiers engaged in battle with quotations from Voltaire, Maeterlink, and Mao Tse-Tung. A small bookshelf on one side held three books—Maeterlink's *The Life of the Ant*, Waldron's *Platoon Training*, and Mao Tse-Tung's *Quotations*—and a plaque offered this Voltaire statement: "What becomes of and what do I care about humanity, benevolence, modesty, temperance, tenderness, wisdom, piety, when a half a pound of lead shot from six hundred paces shatters my body, and I die at the age of twenty in agony beyond words, in the midst of five or six thousand dying men." Three bodies of text in different type styles (indicating different authors) were placed above the black-and-white manipulated photo. One described in technical terms the best way to kill a man with a bayonet; the second similarly explained how modern equipment of warfare is an extension of the primitive sword and shield; but the last was perhaps the most pointed. It read: "Every kind of warfare known to ourselves will be found in the world of ants; open warfare, overwhelming assaults, levies *en masse*, wars of ambush and surprise and surreptitious infiltration, implacable wars of extermination, incoherent and nerveless campaigns, sieges and investments as wisely ordered as our own, magnificent defenses, furious assaults, desperate sorties, bewildered retreats, strategic withdrawals, and sometimes brawls between allies." The installation was an ironic comment on the heroic idea of war and killing.

Despite some quite diverse artistic approaches, this show produced a consistent feeling of deep anxiety about human tendencies toward problem solving through death. The problem of war seems to be exacerbated by deep cultural schisms and the blind arrogance of claims of cultural superiority by one group over another. The aspects of "Controlling the Image" of war through media channels seem inextricably linked to these claims. By freezing the "controlled images" through still photography, the machinations of this control are uncovered. Many a comparison, it seems, can be drawn between a camera and a shovel. ●

Hans Staartjes

## Tattoos

After she baited me, about straight girls who liked to flirt,  
a line delivered in *Sappho's* while, over and over,  
the strobe lights stunned us and the music  
pumped on, high and tinny like a carnival tune,  
I was thirteen all over again and suddenly punched  
by a girlfriend guessing my crush, a blow turning, it seemed  
the carrousel we'd been riding on—all the reined-in ponies,  
lions and bears—riderless and empty, only the carny  
pulling me up with his tattooed arms that, earlier,  
he had flexed for us: the holy dragon, he called it,  
unfurling its tongue, the daggered heart, the lonely mermaid  
singing of love, "Forever Yours," inscribed in the banner  
above the rippling waves, the blue-black letters of longing.

—Lynda Schrafnagel





## A World in Negative

**Y**ELLOW placards warning "Slippery When Salgado" should be placed inside the Houston Center for Photography. For all the fiery havoc that Saddam Hussein wreaked upon the Kuwaiti oil fields, Sebastião Salgado's thirty black-and-white photographs (borrowed from the International Center of Photography, New York) of the same come off slick, both literally and figuratively. Trying to catch an emotional hold onto any of the approximately one hundred photographs comprising the exhibition "The Scorched Earth: Oil Well Fires in Kuwait" is nigh impossible. (Also represented in the show were works by Bruno Barbey, Roberto Borea, Stéphane Compoint, Steven Lehman, James Lukoski, Steve McCurry, Tomas Muscionico, Sylvia Plachy, and Alan Tannenbaum.) Only a couple of exceptions interrupt the complacent beauty of perfect compositions, beatific lighting, and regular colloidal suspensions.

Smacking of propaganda, the exhibition begins on a commercial note. The list of sponsors painted in the entrance of HCP reads like a who's who among well-fire containment and service companies. With the adjacent *New York Times* article of June 9, 1991, that describes the material and financial loss from the fires, one suspects the exhibit is an illustrated annual report for the firefighting industry. For many Houstonians the company names are meaningless, and the statistics, while answering bottom-line questions, do not speak to the heart.

The distant tone of the exhibit continues in aerial photographs of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Persian Gulf taken during Shuttle missions thirty-seven and thirty-nine. As Samuel Johnson once wrote, "Distance has the same effect on the mind as on the eye." Without the orientations of a horizon line that invariably symbolizes hope and the future, the remote images look as though they

are the viewpoint of a dispassionate God/Goddess who injected the body of Earth with a black substance. This black substance clouds portions of land and dots the veinous delta of the Tigris River, but concern for the environment lessens, because we are reminded by these photographs that the planet is huge.

Salgado's photographs depart from the Shuttle photographs in that they are taken from close range and lack color, but neither difference shrinks the emotional gap. And what else do we ask of Art with a capital A than to move us or invite us to reinterpretation?

Looking at the photograph of a shiny, slickened, firefighter wearing a metal helmet, one might recall the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*, but whereas a viewer might engage with that silly, fictional face, no parallel occurs when viewing this man or various other men in Salgado's photographs. How does one relate, for example, to men walking through steam? A row of men dragging what looks like a giant sports-field tarpaulin across the sand? A firefighter lying on his back near the flame-spewing Magwa Well #116? A man wiping perspiration and oil from the side of his face? Men hammering a kill spool? A firefighter fallen backwards into oily muck?

These are merely well-composed pictures of well-rehearsed men doing dirty, hard work. The aspects and stages of this work are spelled out in accompanying tags: "Canadian firefighter from Safety Boss sprays chemicals over the flames. A bulldozer is first used to push piles of sand over the biggest fires, then water is sprayed to cool the ground." "Dean Cabell of OGE inspects a burning well behind the protective tin sheath attached to the bulldozer. A protecting cabin protects the bulldozer operator." "A group of men from the Safety Boss team struggling to remove the bolts of what is left of an oil well-head. Working with metal tools produces sparks

which can reset the fire at any time. Workers may be severely burned; their lives are always in danger. Working conditions are extremely painful; there is oil coming out at very high pressure with the deafening sound of a turbine and oil produces toxic gases. Workers have to leave the area of the wells to wash

legs splayed uselessly and a tortured smile twisting his face, he looks like a sotted mime. Seeing the wet neckline of his tee shirt stretched and sagging below one shoulder like a woman's dress, one realizes this world presented by Salgado's camera is mad. Why else would the



their oil-covered faces and take a breath of less-polluted air." Salgado's photographs so perfectly communicate the work in the oil fields, our work as viewers is done for us. Without having to interpret, our eyes slide from one image to the next as we learn well-fire containment, not feel it.

Two of Salgado's photographs, however, distinguish themselves from the rest. About half-way in his exhibition of works hangs a photograph of a man wiping the face of another man. With this one photograph, the machismo world of firefighting turns inside out. But Salgado's photographs, as well as some by the nine other exhibiting photographers who recorded events in Kuwait in February, March, and April of 1991, reflect in many ways mirror images. For instance, in Steve McCurry's image (lower left) a world seen in negative appears on 11-by-17-inch paper: the tire tracks across the black sands of the desert are white. In other images, the normally blinding sun is shrouded by dense smoke; men appear wet in an arid environ; the deserted desert teems; once brilliantly clear skies roil with toxic gases; some of the men, pushed to the brink of endurance in this topsy-turvy world, act like nurturing women: What caring man would not wipe the beleaguered face of another?

One more image by Salgado breaks the slick veneer of perfection to engage the viewer. A firefighter, slumped in utter exhaustion after a day's work, leans against the tire of a truck. His bloated face is white, a contrast to this dark, oil-soaked shirt and suspended rubber pants. A faint line around his face suggests that he might have worn a mask or that he is wearing zinc oxide for protection against the heat. With his

firefighter touch his fingertips together as if for no other reason than to reassure himself that he exists and is whole? This one photograph could easily symbolize the abused state of the earth. Attractive and repellent at the same time, the image provokes participation and action.

In general, Salgado's Kuwaiti photographs fail to kindle the imagination and spirit. Given that Salgado, a member of Magnum Photos, Inc., was on assignment for *The New York Times* magazine, perhaps his intention was to gather facts. But what is the relationship between Salgado's complacent beauty and the facts? Whose facts? Even if his direct observation of phenomena satisfies science, science does not require transcendent meaning. Photography as art does. ●

**Diane Berna-Heath**



*Clockwise from top:*

Sylvia Plachy; Sebastião Salgado; Tomas Muscionico; and Steve McCurry.

THE 1990 Fellowship Exhibition at the Houston Center for Photography from June 28 to July 28, 1991, was an unusually strong show. The three artists, all women, addressed issues of minority and female representation in diverse ways that reflected a wide range of material and expressive options. Each artist's work acquired new resonance in juxtaposition to the distinct choices of the others.

In Sonia Yi's series of portraits, *Mr. Justice Unemployed*, a surly young white man was posed and shot with minimal props—hat, cigarette, and a blindfold that coded him as the new embodiment of Justice. Not only is this Mr. Justice blind, he is sneering and arrogant, a white supremacist hiding behind his shades, a redneck with chin stubble and a cigarette dangling from his mouth. The vaporousness evoked by Yi's manipulated, solarized prints suggests that Mr. Justice's power is ephemeral, only an image that may, like the cloud of smoke enveloping him in one photo, shudder and disappear at any moment.

In some of the portraits Yi manifests a certain sympathy. Mr. Justice is, after all, unemployed and so himself is a victim who looks out with bleary eyes and appears helplessly bound. In a particularly strong vertical triptych Yi depicts him as modern martyr. Portions of his head, torso, legs, and feet comprise a near life-sized image in which Mr. Justice's feet float against a drapery backdrop, like those of martyred saints in Renaissance frescoes. Photographically manipulated splotches bleed across his body like stigmata.

Playing with positive/negative, surface/ground, and anger/sympathy, Yi creates strange dislocations of spatial and emotional perception that mirror her view of the blurred vision of American justice. Her statement, which hints at personal experiences of racism in the operation of the law, cites the increasing inability of the criminal justice system to protect victims and its simultaneous oppression of the people who constitute the new diversity of our country's population. Yi works from anger and with the aim of creating a new, changed perception. Both desires are realized in the expressive treatment of her photographic prints. Despite showing evidence of a desire to destroy and distort, they remain strangely beautiful, evanescent, and evocative.

Scottie Stapleton's series, titled *Ten Stereotypes of Black Women*, grew out of her desire to deconstruct stereotypes of black women in contemporary society. Like Cindy Sherman, Stapleton posed herself in a variety of roles to enact various stereotypes, in which she demonstrated some of Sherman's chameleon-like ability to transform herself as a whole, using hairstyle, pose, and clothing. The viewer is at first startled and then transported into thinking about the easy assumptions involved in a first reading of these photographs.

In Stapleton's photographs, the backgrounds that establish the context of the stereotype (a Gospel church, a motel, a kitchen) are shot in black and white, while the self-portrait, made separately and inserted in perfect scale into the setting, is in color. This duality highlights the artifice of each image and dramatizes the issue of our vision of "color" itself. All of the images have a brief title, some ironic. In one, a church marquee announces "Pray for Peace," but the image asks, "Does it help to pray?" Sometimes, however, the irony gets a bit heavy-handed, for example, in a portrait of a bag lady that asks, "Whose mother?"

I was struck by an aspect of Stapleton's work that is hard to pin down but could perhaps be described as politeness; this is workmanlike, polished, "cool" art that (like some of Adrian Piper's) makes its points about racist stereotyping in an intellectual, ironic, and restrained manner. It runs the risk—often cited in connection with Cindy Sherman's work—of failing to construct new, viable images of the self, instead simply reinforcing the stereotypes targeted for criticism. I wonder if this work might have had more power to provoke if it had included some of



## PHARMAKOPIA

the anger that was evident in Stapleton's description of her experiences in her gallery talk. Some rather similar work by Carrie Mae Weems, for example, exhibited during FotoFest at the Women's Caucus for Art several years ago, also involved self-portraits of stereotyped images of black women but seemed to have a more aggressive, critical edge—a more wicked sense of humor, particularly works like her *Angela Davis Radical with Afro*. Some of this loss of power has to do, I suspect, with the relatively small size of Stapleton's photographs. I found myself wishing Stapleton would undertake a larger, messier, meaner vision.

Margo Reece's work, *The Function of Memory*, was shown separately in HCP's Gallery X. Reece's ambitious and massive installation works focus on matriarchy and the links between generations of women. They also touch upon the history of medicine, illness, and healing, and in the end they are

about the healing powers of art. Photography appears in a variety of modes, including negative prints, photo screenprints, rephotographed nineteenth-century portraits and medical text pages, and photo etchings on glass. Allusions to photography are also rife, as the pieces repeatedly call attention to framing, looking, lenses, cameras, and the history of photography.

Reece's installation involved four major, complex components. *Prescription/Polypharmacie Monstreuse* is built into a charred, arched window frame salvaged from a burned house. It incorporates split-toned photographic images, convex lenses, antique medicine bottles, and photo screenprints, as a whole conjuring up the sort of arcane assemblage Victor Frankenstein might have used in his lab. The large central photographic image focuses upon the back of a young woman sitting in an old-fashioned tub. This image alludes to the time-honored idea of the water cure, but the

patient looks desolate and abandoned. In *Mother Send Sugar*, installed in an old-fashioned pie safe, the central photographic image again positions the viewer looking down over a young woman's shoulder, this time onto an empty institutional metal tray. This is a negative print onto which the message "Mother send sugar" has been scratched (Reece came upon the message in an old psychiatric textbook among the case notes of a female patient). The photograph is bordered first by a hand-drawn copy of antique gift wrap with cherubs, then again with a frame of old broken Christmas lights and rat carcasses. Like *Prescription . . .* this work speaks of isolation and of the torture imposed by archaic, inhumane methods of "cure." The pie safe ensconcing the image hints by contrast at the "safety," nurturing, and fragrant warmth of Grandmother's house. It includes kitchen items such as antique coffee cans and measuring spoons, their miniature sizes evoking





girlhood play.

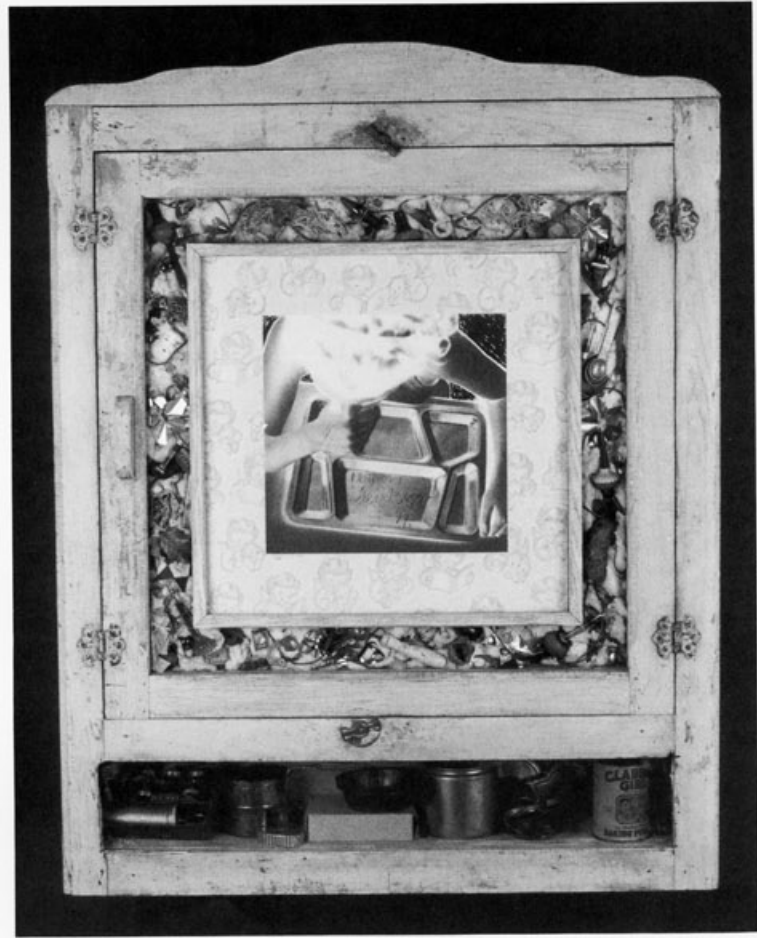
A third component of the exhibit was *Injuries of Time* (for Flannery O'Connor). This piece includes a gigantic view camera (constructed from window frames) in which a lens and a series of internal glass plates are all inscribed with photo etchings of the same scene, a wheelchair in a park. Through the "camera," one sees an actual antique wooden wheelchair swathed in tendrils of dead kudzu vines. This disturbing picture of debilitation and decay is made even more jarring by the inclusion on the front of the camera of a small found photograph of a cherubic toddler.

Placed on the back wall of Gallery X was *Victorian Voodoo*, a large piece comprising three parts. *The Rest Cure* features an iron bed on a pedestal, its frame covered with dark-red satiny fabric and dozens of dried long-stemmed red roses. *The Drawing Room* is a series of small photographs in elaborate frames set on easels on the floor. *A Case History for Anna O.* is a triptych wall-hanging incorporating photo screenprints, found objects, and oval portraits. ("Anna O." was the pseudonym given by Freud and his colleague Breuer to the patient he credited with prompting the discovery of psychoanalysis as the "talking cure." This woman, Bertha Pappenheim, later became an advocate for social reform and in particular women's suffrage.) At the top of the assemblage is an architectural detail with two small oval frames. These display, respectively, the image of an ear and a medical portrait of a tongue. Listening and speaking are heralded as the overall themes of the piece. The side panels of the triptych are painted gold and encrusted with beads and bits of jewelry. Numerous small oval openings primarily showcase nineteenth-century portraits of women from psychiatric texts, but a few hold objects like locks of hair, teeth, bones, or dolls, and one features an antique oval mirror. The center panel is composed of four photo screenprints, the top and bottom halves each made up of doubled imagery suggestive of the Rorschach test. In the larger bottom section, a woman stands, reaching out; her hands in the two reflected images touch in a tentative gesture of self-discovery.

Reece's work could be described as aggressively feminine: in installing the exhibit she and her assistant Nicole Frugé created a dark, smelly, claustrophobic environment. All of the pieces are exquisitely detailed and hand-worked to the point of obsessiveness, alluding to the hand work/busy work women did in earlier eras. They also reference women's possessions and the home environment. The work is beautiful, yet just when it threatens to become cloying it incorporates elements of the macabre. Reece explains that she is rebelling against her graduate-school training in cool, analytical postmodernism and seeking a distinctively feminine subjectivity more in tune with what she acknowledges as her own streak of Southern decadent romanticism.

But this is not mere southern Gothic. A critical posture is still very much in evidence, as Reece dissects the representations of women and illness built into structures of disciplinary power like medicine and psychiatry. Photography is also critically examined here as part and parcel of these disciplinary powers. But then again, photography functions "magically," as Reece capitalizes on the photograph's power to evoke emotions and fix memories. This is especially clear in *The Injuries of Time* (for Flannery O'Connor), which presages the camera's duality; it compresses time to speed up the aging process and to juxtapose infancy with old age, but it can also arrest time, helping to heal what Roland Barthes described as the "wound" of time, death. Like Flannery O'Connor, who created her work throughout years of serious illness and pain, the photographer can use mordant wit to stave off mortality while sustaining a creative vision. ●

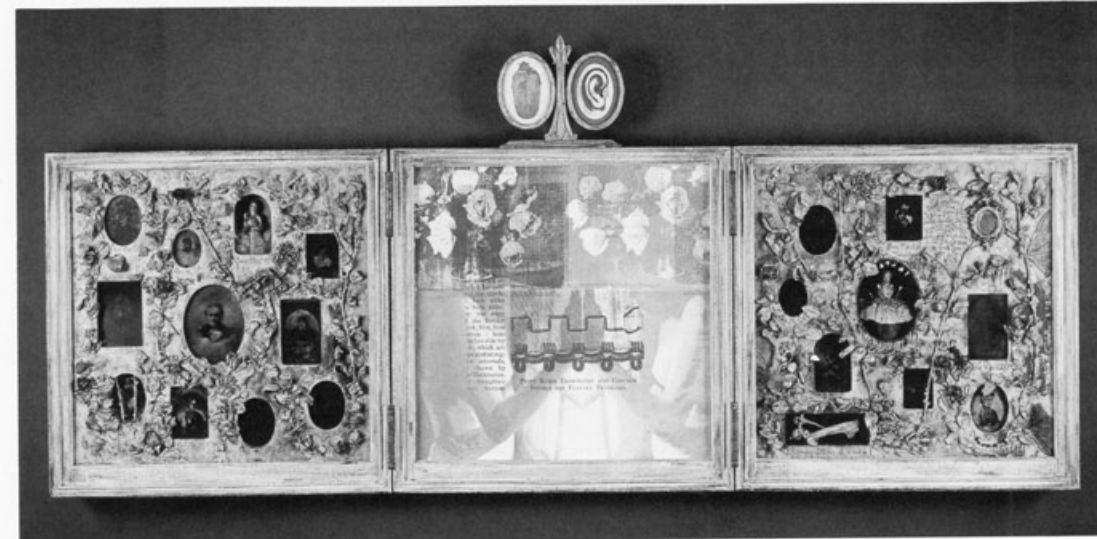
Cynthia Freeland



Opposite page  
top: Sonia Yi, 1990;  
bottom: Scottie Stapleton, 1990.

This page; all photographs by  
Margo Reece, 1990.

The work of the 1990 HCP Fellowship recipients—Margo Reece, Scottie Stapleton, and Sonia Yi—was exhibited at HCP from June 28 to July 28, 1991. HCP has received a National Endowment for the Arts Museums/Special Exhibitions grant to travel Margo Reece's photosculptures to other venues.





## Cameras With Attitudes

**A**N exhibition of photographs by inner-city youngsters, "Houston's New Visions," which accompanied "The New Vision: Photography Between the World Wars," was one of the most exuberant and relevant shows mounted of late by the Museum of Fine Arts. To create the works in the show, 144 children between the ages of eleven and eighteen at six Houston community centers learned photographic technique from Ben DeSoto and Carlos Rios and toured "The New Vision" show at the MFA. The participants then took photographs interpreting their urban surroundings and edited their work with their teachers, creating a panel for each of the six community centers.

Most of the six groups (each took a street moniker—Third Ward Posse, Mexicans With Cameras, Fresh Photographers) produced collages from their photos, although there were striking individual images, including a still, memento-laden mantelpiece. Collage was a sensible choice given the varying quality of the photographs, but at the same time the abundance of pictures helped convey the considerable imagination and joy behind each panel. Bart Simpson made an appearance in more than one collage, but the automobile was the more recurrent image. Street violence also factored in this work; one group even staged the grisly aftermath of gunplay. The same panel pictured a magazine rack displaying titles like *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Adult Action*, and the partially obscured *Oral and Ladies!* Nor did the artists attempt to romanticize poverty or spare the viewer from its realities. Simple, lively narratives supplemented some of the work;

one, an environmental allegory, expressed one of the artists' concerns: the fate of the planet. But in looking at the beautiful faces of the boys and girls who labored over "Houston's New Vision," I despaired over the fate of such talent and ingenuity in a country that only professes to care about its children.

A fine legacy of the show is an ongoing tour of the work to the community centers that worked with the MFA on the project. Through November 7, the exhibition can be seen at Flores Branch Library, 110 North Milby. Subsequent locations are the Cliff Tuttle Branch Library; St. Joseph's Multi-Ethnic Cultural Arts, Inc.; E. O. Smith Elementary and Middle School; Fifth Ward Multi-Service Center; Community Artists' Collective; Ripley House; and Stenaker Library. Call (713) 639-7586 for more information. ●

**Tim Brookover**

**Clockwise from top left:**

**Aphrodisiac Vision, LULAC National Educational Service Center; Twelve Ps, LULAC National Educational Service Center; Cameras With Attitudes, 5th Ward Enrichment Program; Third Ward Posse, Community Artists' Collective; Mexicans with Cameras, Andrew Jackson Middle School; The DFC Photographers, Community Artists' Collective; I Shot a Person Last Night, Cliff Tuttle Branch Library; Fresh Photographers, 5th Ward Enrichment Program.**

**Photography of the collages by Paul Hester**





A PHOTOGRAPHER friend of mine, a man of strongly held opinions, sneered last summer at "The New Vision: Photography Between the World Wars" (which was on display at the Museum of Fine Arts from June 9 through August 4), deriding it as "photography's greatest hits." And it was true that the show, curated from John Waddell's previously private collection by Maria Morris Hambourg (from what is now called the Ford Motor Company Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art), did have an unavoidable college-art-history-text slant, in part because so many of the images are now part of the public imagination. A number of the works in the exhibition have even been reproduced on greeting cards and in advertisements, including Margaret Bourke-White's *Fort Peck Dam, Montana* (1936), Lewis Hine's *Steamfitter* (1921), Brassai's *Introductions at Suzy's* (1932-33), and Charles Hoff's *Explosion of the Hindenburg, Lakehurst, N.J., May 6, 1937*. Still, at least one generation of museum-goers had not been able to see the original art, including the startling work of the Surrealists and that of seminal Americans like Walker Evans, Paul Strand, and Alfred Stieglitz. My friend's jibe was also a bit unfair to the MFA: Given the innovative nature of much of the photography department's work ("Czech Modernism," for example), a didactic show once in a while doesn't seem out of line. There is the related argument that generally conservative corporate dollars may hinder curatorial freedom, but that is a fight better left for another article (and indeed, the collection that ultimately produced "The New Vision" was assembled before Ford weighed in).

While recently revisiting the splendid catalogue (by Hambourg and Christopher Phillips, from Harry N. Abrams), I was taken once again by the exquisite images from the interlocking worlds of fashion and show business—images that retain their relevance, it seems to me, because they are echoed in the myriad contemporary glamour shots that confront us every day, starting out from magazine covers, billboards, television: Jessica Lange; Barbra Streisand; Michelle Pfeiffer; Sean Penn; Prince; Jodie Foster; the cast of "Beverly Hills 90210"; Linda Evangelista; Jeff Bridges; the Baldwin brothers; Madonna, Madonna, Madonna.

The spectre of celebrity representation has also been brought up this month with the publication of new books by photographer and music-video *auteur* Herb Ritts and photographer and filmmaker Bruce Weber. Ritts's picture book, *Duo* (Twin Palms), contains more of his sleek,



## The New Vision and Celebrity Representation

heroic nudes, this time of bodybuilder Bob Paris and his spouse, fashion model Rod Jackson. Weber's self-titled book (Treville) serves up more of his distinctively polished-to-a-fault portraits: Naomi Campbell and a pre-indictment Mike Tyson, Robert Mitchum, Siegfried and Roy, Don King, and others. Annie Liebovitz, whose brightly lit, animated photos helped make *Rolling Stone* and *Vanity Fair* famous, is also promoting her book, *Annie Liebovitz Photographs 1970-1990*, published by Harper Collins in conjunction with an exhibition of her often imitated work at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.

Do the myriad images that confront us at the newsstand measure up to the classic portraits in "The New Vision"? For the most part, I think not—primarily because time and curators have not winnowed out the best examples and discarded the minor work. In the catalogue, Hambourg and Phillips pose a central question: "Whereas earlier epochs came to know their cast of characters through ballads, legends, and serialized novels, the early modern age was the first to know itself from photomechanical reproductions of photographic portraits. Late in the century, the power of that first impression still reverberates—but is this because the photographers instinctively know they

were creating lasting archetypes or because the sitters really inhabited their roles?" This question, which is probably unanswerable, is particularly applicable in the case of James Doolittle's circa-1931 portrait of Marlene Dietrich, which helped define elegance in Depression-era America. Though not as familiar, other images from the portraiture segment of "The New Vision" carry a similar monumental weight. In George Hoyningen-Huene's 1936 portrait of an atypically languorous Gary Cooper, Cooper reclines in what could easily be coital afterglow. August Sander's *Student, Cologne, 1926*, seems to be a prototype for one of Bruce Weber's Polo boys. Baron Adolph de Meyer's remarkable 1923 portrait of Josephine Baker is one of the most pleasurable in the exhibition, thanks to the subject's enormous eyes and her serpentine pose.

Of course, each one of these works represents a collaboration between an exacting photographer and a celebrity who was eminently aware of and protective of an image.

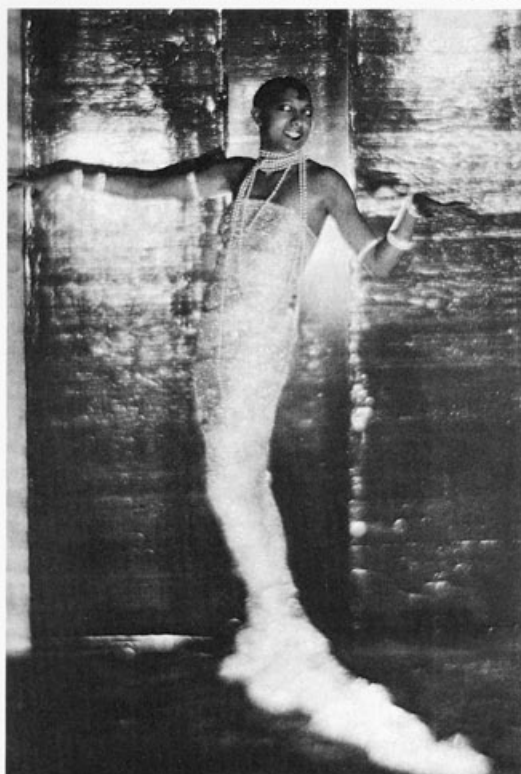
The best magazine photographers working today understand this artist-model relationship and exploit the artifice inherent in the celebrity portrait. Matthew Rolston frankly goes for the glamour in his work, making his subjects appear much younger and whiter of tooth; his look, at its worst, can be trite, but there is no doubt that he knows how to make people look great. In his frequent work for *Vanity Fair*, Ritts creates similar illusions.

Not long ago, I worked for a magazine here that often displayed Texas-born television or movie stars on its cover. We decided to ask Farrah Fawcett to pose and sit for an interview, and it fell to me to negotiate with her publicist in Hollywood, who tartly informed me that Ms. Fawcett was only photographed by Herb Ritts. Well, fine. Ritts's people in London responded with word that the photographer was interested but unavailable because he was shooting an ad campaign. I had recently seen magazine photos of Fawcett taken by someone other than Ritts, but I sparred gamely with the publicist until it was apparent that no amount of schmoozing would help me negotiate another photographer. Thus do personalities control their image through the modern media.

(By the way, for an illustration of the way two photographers address the same subject and for a lesson in why personalities try to demand control, contrast the burnished shots of Bob Paris and Rod Jackson from Ritts's *Duo* reproduced in the October *Advocate* and *Interview* with the cheesy, brawn-flexing pose of the same pair, by Art Zeller, on the cover of the December *Musclemag International*.)

The more famous half of the most notorious star-photographer matchup is Madonna, who has of late been working with Steven Meisel. Madonna is the queen of control, and Meisel, a truly gifted magazine photographer, is her ideal

portraitist, whether presenting her as a blonde siren on the cover of the April *Vanity Fair* (and as Marilyn Monroe inside) or as a brunette, leather-clad, fall-of-the-Weimar-Republic sex kitten in a gender-bending photo shoot for *Rolling Stone*. Their photos together are about the joy of pretending and, naturally, of sex. Madonna's newest persona is that of Serious, Lonely Actress, and who knows if Meisel will continue to be her Boswell. The mistake lies in thinking these photographers act independently of their subjects, whether that is Marlene Dietrich or the latest international young thing. For as the celebrity photographer John Engstead is quoted in the catalogue about Gary Cooper: "The way [he] handled his face and his six-foot-three frame led me to surmise that he must have done considerable homework." ● **Tim Brookover**



Clockwise from top:  
James Doolittle's Marlene Dietrich, ca. 1931;  
Baron Adolph de Meyer's Josephine Baker, ca. 1923;  
August Sander's Student, Cologne, 1926.



## VIDEOTICS

**ILLUMINATING** *Video, An Essential Guide to Video Art* (Aperture in association with the Bay Area Video Coalition, 1991), compiled by Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, is an informative arrangement of essays on the history of video as an art form and its relationship to television. As a video artist, my initial reaction to the idea of a history of video was negative; I saw this book as a threat to the freedom that video artists have enjoyed. No longer would we be able to create our own history, picking and choosing that history which seemed most germane to the immediate project. Meddling scholars, curators, critics, and other artist wanna-bees encroaching on the last frontier of non-historicized art turf would ruin everything. One of the most precious aspects of video art has been the fact that there is no written history, no rule book. It has always been enough to say that Nam June Paik had done this or that before, and everyone would nod, trusting that someone had seen a similar piece somewhere but knowing that since there was no slide show, no bluebook essay question to answer, that it didn't really matter who had done it first. This attitude has been a positive force, keeping video as an art form free of all the old platitudes citing historical precedents that either make a piece more important or render it redundant. As the rebellious child of broadcast television, video's redundancy is a given.

However, upon further reflection, I realized that it was precisely this lack of a recognized history that was partly to blame for the fact that, when I tell people I make video art, they often respond first with a quizzical look, as if I hadn't finished my sentence. When a moment has passed, they might say, "You mean you make videos of art?" Perhaps, I have decided, this is a subject in need of some illumination after all.

Hall and Fifer have made it their goal to create an informed audience: "The book can be used as a map or conceptual core sample of the field; its intended purpose is to construct a base from which we can address the issues that are raised by video" (p. 27). This map is created by a comprehensive compilation of essays, divided into five sections, authored by artists, critics,

and scholars. The first section is entitled "Histories." The editors have aptly chosen the plural here as there is more than one way to skin a cathode-ray tube. The multifaceted approach toward issues is one of the book's greatest strengths—this will not be a medium whose history is written and dictated by one person for its first fifty years. On the contrary, the editors present us with "histories" that are obviously opinions held by the individual authors rather than didactic manna emerging from a preordained curatorial conduit.

It is worth noting that the editors imply that a hierarchy of objectivity exists within the critical corpus of video in which the scholar/critic is the most objective and the artist is the least: "What differentiates most of [the artists' essays] is that they represent personal and often idiosyncratic points of view (the voice of the artist), and establish a valuable counterpoint to the more scholarly writings" (p. 13). It seems that the editors consider artists to be less than scholarly and/or that critics and scholars do not hold idiosyncratic points of view. However, I may find this, it is one of the points within the text that illustrates the importance of having a varied group of writers. One can compare the above-cited statement with another in the book's foreword by David Ross: "The artist's word has been the clearest and most powerful component of video's critical corpus" (p. 11). The two seemingly antithetical statements reveal a strength of this collection of essays and, indeed, of the medium of video: diversity. The editors make no attempt to homogenize viewpoints into one chorus; instead, the soloists are allowed to shine on their own and create harmony or discord, which is of paramount importance to any pluralistic treatise.

In the first essay of the "Histories" section, Martha Rossler

informs us that "video histories are not now produced by or for scholars but for potential funders, for the museum-going public, and for others professionally involved in the field, as well as to form the basis for collections and shows" (p. 44). It seems that Rossler's intention here is to point out a negative aspect of such histories, but there is a positive side to her statement, i.e., histories by scholars for other scholars would not be as interesting as the broad scope of the essays found in *Illuminating Video*. Later, in her essay in a section entitled "Myth," Rossler decanonizes Nam June Paik in a most informative and amusing homily that I found to be worth the price of the book. Following the book's spirit of multiplicity, John

Hanhardt, in his contribution to the "Histories" section, writes that the work of Paik created "genealogies for the later practices and thinking of video artists" (p. 71).

Again, the editors must be given credit for their efforts to include such opposing viewpoints. It is quite refreshing to read an art history text compiled by editors who recognize the importance of diversity. These opposing viewpoints transcend their immediate arguments; the reader learns that what Paik did is a matter of record. The medium is young enough so that photographs, reviews, and witnesses of various video works can be found. As in most art "histories," what varies is the importance assigned to a given work or artist, but in *Illuminating Video* it is clear that any such assignment is based on the value judgement of the individual authors. For example, Hanhardt would have me believe that it is now genetically impossible to have a thought about video that is independent of Nam June Paik. In contrast, Rossler suggests that Paik's preeminence is merely a continuation of the modernist cliché of the artist as super-human hero. In the end, neither essay provides the "perfect" ans-

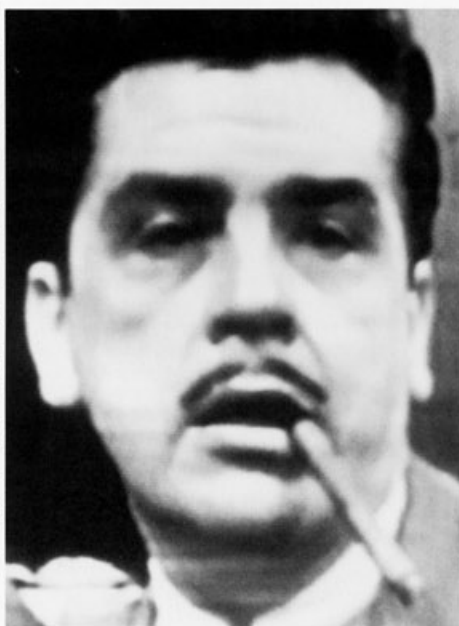
wer, but the combination of the two makes for some excellent questions.

This anthology covers a broad scope of issues relating to video, making it more than a simple history of the medium. Many of these pieces explore video concepts from angles less conventional than the essay format. These works, written by artists, add a dimension of immediacy to the collection. The anthology is not only about art, it contains art as well. Some of the writing, like the Howard Fried and Peter D'Agostino's contributions, are descriptive examples of video works. Others, such as the Gary Hill and Tony Labat pieces, were obviously formulated for this book's pages. Some of the essays even deal with humor, another topic which is rarely found in most art-history texts but one that plays a major role in video art. In the book's third section, "Syntax and Genre," Bruce Fergusson contributes an informative piece on the work of video pioneer Ernie Kovacs. Kovacs, with his vaudevillian use of the new medium of television, embodied a zest for invention that is a crucial part of video art. These varied inputs should help foster ingenious new videos as well as informed scholarly debate.

*Illuminating Video* is a useful start towards a history of video art. Happily, this "history" does not threaten the creative anarchy that is at the heart of the video-art phenomenon.

Instead, the multiplicity of voices (forty-two to be exact) act to reinforce the notions that there are still no rules per se, but that there has been significant activity, which merits attention and acknowledgement. By advocating different points of view on identical issues, Hall and Fifer preserve the right of the artist and viewer to create meaning unbridled by a strict formal history. By the same token, the anthology serves as a resource for interested parties to investigate the medium and to generate the cogent discussions necessary to expand the audience for this important medium. As the light of video art burns brighter through familiarity with its history, I'll look forward to the day when upon describing myself as a video artist the response will be "Oh, I love video art." ●

Peter Harvey



Video stills by Michael G. DeVoll from  
"Ernie Kovacs: TV's Original Genius" (Vestron).

Martha  
Rossler



**A**N ambiguity of meaning, found in the narrative content of Todd Haynes' self-reflexive film, *Poison*, may best summarize a parallel confusion of both identity and language in gay culture, reconfirmed over the previous decade of the now full-blown AIDS crisis. Haynes' cinematic gesture, with its self-conscious postmodernism, toward body fluid establishes a duality painfully acknowledged by gay men of the paradoxical relationship between semen and poison, and he locates the complexity of this poison in the surreptitious labeling by homophobes.

Because of this covert messaging of identity and homophobia, critical assessment of *Poison* requires an additional intertextual reading of structural form, which compounds meaning through systems of encoded messages but, significantly, locates its text within second generationist appropriational strategies. While the complexity of *Poison's* text results from the developmental usage of a culture-specific vocabulary, its formal structure adheres to the conflationary tenets of recent appropriationist practitioners.

To distinguish between these intergenerational usages of appropriation, initial strategies concentrated on either an anachronistic adaptation of stylistics or on the commentary of appropriational usage itself, as in the dialectics of authorship, but always within the grounding of an art-world discourse. In contrast, later appropriationists have shifted this grounding to one of a radicality within activist politics, continuing to rework these issues of originality by claiming an ethical irrelevance and redirecting an audience away from a fine-arts context and towards an external civil disobedience through identity awareness. (This theoretical shift in appropriationist grounding is established by Douglas Crimp in "The Boys in my Bedroom," *Art in America*, 78, Feb. 1990.)

The exigency of *Poison's* specific political agenda allows for this pirating of any available information, whether methodological, contextually referential, or image-specific, that creates an effective marketing tool of ideology for queer politics. While the political usage of appropriation was initiated by feminists, whose strategies have frequently been co-opted in gay politics, the extension of these definitions are the result of associative ACT-UP affinities and anti-homophobia collectives, such as Gran Fury and DIVA TV, which eschew the assimilation of a previous generation's invisibility. (For a complete survey of these practitioners, their working methodologies, and their relevance to social change, see Crimp and Rolston, *Aids-*

# HOMO-PHOBIA-POISON



DemoGraphics, Bay Press, 1990.)

Visible cultural identity and the development of this vocabulary of representation are pivotal issues in queer politics, providing an affirmation of self-awareness through cultural validation. The history of gay representation limits the resourcing of this identity in literature, art, and film but distinguishes those sources of clear representation as crucial to this affirmation. (For a historical survey of gay representation, including erotica and the use of physiognomy in surveillance, see Doug Ischar, "Endangered Alibis," *Afterimage*, 17:10, May 1990.) Gay sensibility, which aestheticizes cultural information for referential identity, has additionally questioned authorship of heterosexual texts for underlying meaning and has traditionally adopted aspects of taste and cultural iconography as relevant to gay culture. While the particularity of this construction of identity is essentialist, its usage assists in the development of a vocabulary of identity and provides the cultural visibility necessary for activism.

The activism of *Poison* strategizes these sources for meaning, consistently accessing information that reinforces its political intention, and consolidates its textuality through significations respondent to or sympathetic with this gay sensibility. While an intracultural encoding of preference provides a vocabulary of this identity, the syntactical messaging in *Poison* accesses the marginalized politics of a broader cultural constituency. As postmodernist artists of gender, race, and class have additionally identified themselves through their oppression, *Poison* also locates significant aspects of gay identity through homophobia. By appropriating the previously encoded messages of these marginalized groups, a political affinity is created that identifies the similarities of oppression.

To define this identity of homophobia and to point to its multiplicities, *Poison* deconstructs cultural assumptions about sexuality and focuses instead on a construction of contingency as a means of re-encoding the agen-

da of queer politics. By inverting protagonist identity, a disruption of apriorism reschedules the leprous burden of risk; the film considers the adolescent a valid construct of sexuality, and it adopts the Genetian texts of brutality and marginality. These image signs collectively form a vocabulary that disrupts the complacency of gay identity and assimilation while also redirecting its reading of homophobia.

Extension of referential intent is an essential tool of activist appropriation, and its use in *Poison* compounds the already unremitting assault of image bites. The film's adaptations of Genet's *Fresnes* and *Baton* equally embrace the anti-fascist vocabulary of Rainer Fassbinder and the adolescent sexual construct of Bernard Faucon, each extending the referential frame of gay culture's language. The appropriation of postmodernist images (such as Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #21*) reinforces the need for political affinity with other marginalized power structures, while the use of stock photography of modern architecture locates the stereotype of our acknowledged taste as homosexuals. The use of stylistics in *Poison*, such as the inherent camp of bathos, or the signifying manipulation of film stock, forms a culture-specific grammar, validated by gay culture's previous reliance on social signifiers as a means of encoded communication.

The success of *Poison's* messages lies in this development and reconstruction of a vocabulary that provides gay culture a discourse on both itself and homophobia. The impetus of this vocabulary is most evidenced by the film's detractors and the mirror of homophobia represented. *Poison* questions the identity of homosexuality and redirects the placement of homophobia to the passive aggression of indifference, which includes the offense of its own community. The discomfort of *Poison's* message-aesthetic confronts the gay community with a postular vocabulary of memory, desire, and fear in a community that is now assimilating disease as a result of this homophobia.

The offending matter of *Poison* is not the sexuality denoted by its subject, as insisted by the conservative right, or the displacement of identity as viewed by the assimilationist left, but rather the societal disease that permits death as a valid response to homophobia: "The kind of misery the whole stinking world is made of." The radicality of *Poison's* message-aesthetic is both its establishment of this homophobic identity and its provocation to response, its incitement to riot. It is to enrage you. ●

Bill Shackelford

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# THREE SIXTY

**D**URING his forty-year career Kenneth Snelson has been variously described as an atomist, a sculptor, a theorist, and a photographer. The photographs reproduced in the pages of his newest publication, *Full Circle* (Aperture, 1990), confirm that these descriptions apply, but what is most acutely revealed by the 360° panoramas is that Snelson's keen analytic eye is tempered by a curious dose of nostalgia linking his photographic activity to events and people in his personal past. In the Sixties, Snelson proposed a model for atomic structure and secured patents for it, and his sculpture since the late-Forties has dealt with what Buckminster Fuller termed *tensegrity* (tension + integrity)—an approach to sculpture that counters the effects of gravity by using an internally applied system of tension and counter-tension. Without a doubt, the analysis of structure and its relationship to enveloping space has been central to Snelson's thinking for some time, and his panoramic photographs expand on those ideas. In these full-circle views, he explores how the structures depicted in the photographs related to and were defined by the cultures that built them and how these structures influence the present-day viewer, physically and psychologically.

However, the reader should not be misled into thinking that this book contains magnificent wilderness vistas such as those produced by the nineteenth-century photographer Carleton Watkins or scenic views of cities photographed from atop some monument: Snelson's images are emphatically distinct from their panorama and travel photography ancestry and, moreover, are firmly rooted in late twentieth-century thinking both visually and conceptually. Challenging viewer perceptions is integral to late-twentieth-century artistic methodology, and nearly all published material relating to Snelson's panoramic photographs deals with this aspect of his work. "The visual distortions in these panoramic pictures demonstrate that the conventional, 'objective' appearance of reality is of little consequence, while the structure of that reality is paramount," as Laurance Wieder states in his introduction to *Full Circle*, adding: "what [Snelson's] camera records impeaches the authority of both the eye and the still photograph as reliable witnesses to the nature and structure of space. . . . Panoramas [both *in situ* and photographic] cannot be read in a glance. This raises questions not only about camera vantage, but also the reader's point of view." However, contrary to Wieder's suggestion, it is not simply the camera that "impeaches." Snelson challenges preconceptions by his particular choice of sites and his (and the camera's) position within those spaces. He carefully does not provide clues as to how he wants us to read the images: his statement at the end of the book refers only to the cameras he has used and how he came to be a photographer of panoramic views. He describes himself (the photographer) as "a voyeur lurking to intrude for a moment with his lens, then flee[ing] like a pirate with the prize of his latest trespass. Our curious need is to capture a piece of the world and sneak it back home." The views in the book are taken in a variety of European cities and in a garden designed for meditation outside Kyoto. What these images have in common is Snelson's interest in manmade constructs—buildings, gardens, or canals—and their accoutrements.

In Paris, Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, the mid-nineteenth-century landscape architect, continued to redefine Paris in terms of radiating axial orientations but did not impose the type of grid system common to younger American cities upon the then 1,500-year-old city. The canal wanderings of Venice and Kyoto's "manmade" gardens are even less orthogonally ordered than Haussmann's Paris, but likewise are defined by and define the spaces they inhabit. Therefore, the American viewer, used to the "logical" intersections of two thoroughfares, might expect to find in a full-circle view a cityscape with four distinct corridors. Such reassurance is not forthcoming in Snelson's panoramas of these Eastern Hemisphere cities. Corridors are missing or in the "wrong" place; straight lines become curved, curved lines straight; nearby structures thrust forward aggressively, more distant monuments become no more than incidental details. Since the rotation of the full-circle camera captures more than a single moment, time is required both in the making and the reading of a panoramic photograph. In addition, the unchanging photograph (or its reproduction) resolutely affirms that the viewer is not actually there at the site but is looking at a mechanical, albeit humanly-directed, translation of the scene. Thus the viewer, used to the comfort of reading a photograph as if it were a window onto the world with a certain expected logic and perspective (and secure in the fact that his or her back is protected), finds these panoramas disorientating and fascinating, if not disquieting. How should the reader respond? The photograph can be assessed incrementally, much as the original scene would have been taken in, by focusing attention on discrete fractions of the site—forward-back, right-left, front-behind. Taking the photographs as they are and marveling at the ebb and flow of the buildings, the color and the atmosphere of the spaces certainly helps to assuage wanderlust or to satisfy the armchair traveler. Alternatively, trying to solve the visual puzzles the panoramas present to us by reconstructing the place literally on paper or entering into the space with our imaginations is a rewarding exercise for the truly devoted. Or we may, like Laurance Wieder, read them in terms of musical constructs and poetic metaphors, seeing them as mnemonics for times and places gone by.

At times, Wieder's introduction seems to be mismatched to Snelson's photographs. Throughout his essay the poet and critic provides metaphorical descriptions of individual images, deconstructing the panoramas in poetic and musical terms, translating them for us as if they were Japanese scrolls—an apt comparison for the approximately 9- by 40-inch original photographs. Wieder relates the imagery to musical compositions more or less faithfully throughout his essay while he discusses the making and composition of the photographs chronologically, following Snelson's move from Paris to Italy to Japan. By titling his piece "Music Box," he sets up an analogy between Snelson's panoramic camera equipment and the nostalgic little box which when opened plays a repetitious melody by mechanical means. Although evocative of a certain type of imagery to which Snelson's work may be compared, the music box analogy is problematic: it denies authorship, it suggests oversimplification, and it takes us back too far in photographic time. Snelson's panoramas and artist's statement are straightforward and unembellished, but not as uncomplicated as a music box melody. His placement of the camera nearly always results in a visually challenging composition—not an easy accomplishment in the middle of a European city street—that never resorts to formula. However the panoramas may serve as a personal link to Snelson's past, and perhaps provide a link to lost pasts in readers' lives, and even though produced by a type of camera first introduced a century ago, these pictures provide a way to see and to come to terms with manmade structures and the spaces they occupy from a resolutely twentieth-century perspective. The photographs are at once simple and complex enough to allow for multiple interpretations. Although Wieder's informative and idiosyncratic analysis provides one possible pathway to understanding that provides a counterbalance to the dispassionate and analytic photographs, this reader unfortunately got lost along Wieder's way more than once. It is much more pleasant to lose yourself in the pathways of Snelson's making and find your own way out. ●

Maggie Olvey

Kenneth Snelson's Pont Neuf with Ile de la Cité, 1985.





# LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The editors of SPOT were pleased to receive a letter even before this issue came out. We hope that the letters section becomes a forum. Send letters to SPOT, Attention M.E., HCP, 1441 West Alabama, Houston, Texas 77006-4103; please include a phone number. Letters may be edited for space.

## LATIN AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHERS: A CERTAIN UNGRACIOUSNESS

Although the opportunity to see Latin American photography has become less infrequent, it is still the case that, proportionately, Latin American photography is vastly under-represented in Houston. So when a show such as "Latin American Photographers" (LAP) comes along, we welcome it. But this most natural reaction does not preclude us from raising objections if they are due—and they are. LAP was organized by the Aperture Foundation and curated by Fred Ritchin, a frequent writer for *Aperture* magazine. Since 1987 the show has been seen in different cities of the United States. Understanding that curating is often an art of what is feasible and not of what is desirable, I nevertheless believe that Aperture Foundation has the resources to make what is desirable feasible. The problems of LAP are not about resources but of curatorship. Neither is this criticism aimed at the Contemporary Art Museum whose receptiveness to Latin America can only be commended.

By and large American art institutions can be credited with confronting curatorial tasks with scholarly thoroughness. And yet, when it comes to dealing with anything which may be found in their files as "Hispanic," their curators often show a provincialism dangerously close to ignorance. This is particularly reproachable given that nowadays specialized libraries in this country are endowed with better information about Latin America than any Latin American country. Nevertheless, when it comes to Latin American matters what is often common knowledge in the academic world is slow to reach the art world. LAP seems to have been put together with the minimum of research and an abundance of good intentions and nescience.

Although LAP includes the work of photographers whose talent is above suspicion—Iтурбиде, Meyer, Salgado, Haya, Eleta and others—it includes a few whose claim to excellence is rather weak. Indeed, the show could be reduced 40 percent with marked improvement in its appearance. Furthermore, the curatorial selection from Meyer's work is motley and that of Salgado's is less than impressive. More importantly, outstanding photographers are not represented, and it is obvious that the reason for this omission is that nobody bothered to find out who's who. Had someone bothered, the cozy generalizations explicitly stated by Mr. Ritchin in his presentation of the show may have never occurred.

While in Peru in 1954, Robert Frank reflected upon the end of exoticism. Today, echoing that thought, one ought to be concerned about two issues arising from the perception of Latin American photography outside the cultural borders from which it was generated. The first one is that the paradigm of Latin American photography—incarnated in the work of Graciela Iturbide or Sebastião Salgado—has come to be classified by American critics as "documentary" without much ado. To be sure there are cases of photographs whose main function is clearly and merely to document. But upon hearing the term one always ought to ask "documentary as opposed to what?" Moreover, how important is the distinction for societies with slightly different social relations, specifically with a different history and sociology of art?

The second issue is that—because of the strength of the above paradigm—it often happens that nothing differing from it is recognized as Latin American photography. In particular, photographic art showing features such as self-referentiality, allusions to the act of photography itself, to representation, to art history, or other such issues typically found

in contemporary art is considered to be un-Latin American simply because it falls outside the paradigm. Many fine photographers from Latin America have been excluded from shows as the present one because they failed to conform to the paradigm. And yet, the history of avant-garde art in Latin America strongly supports a tradition of a contemporary art with the features described above.

Mr. Ritchin, the curator of LAP, is patently biased in favor of the paradigm. Indeed, his presentation suggests that his selection was heavily influenced by what he saw in La Habana at the *Coloquio Latinoamericano de Fotografía*. Although that fact may have already been a selection factor, it is instructive to read his statement presenting the show in order to understand the error of his ways: "Attending the Third Colloquium of Latin American Photography in Havana in 1984, I was both delighted and bewildered by the hundreds of images that I saw by photographers from throughout the region. I was attracted by the imagery, intrigued to see a whole body of work that I had not known existed and that, for the most part, seemed so different from the photography that I was accustomed to. It was also somewhat shocking for me that, after years of working as a picture editor in this country, I was not sure I could read the photographs sufficiently to know what they meant. I felt that I needed to spend much more time with the photographs because they did not appear to have been written in the same photographic language that I knew."

To his curatorial woes, Mr. Ritchin adds conceptual maladies. He holds the absurd notion that the images of these Latin American photographers are coded in a different language which he claims is difficult for him to interpret. Dyslexias aside, it is certainly not the case that looking at these pictures is like hearing *machigüengas* converse in their language; or even that they are incomprehensible to him because his perceptual mechanisms are not of the appropriate sort. Indeed, there are hundreds of photographers in the U.S. today whose work is more opaque than are the images in this show. If he would not have been led astray by the naively natural albeit unfortunate analogy with language barriers, he may have come to the conclusion that what really is at stake here is values.

It is a moot point whether the American art world has tended to value less and less art which documents; but this tendency is certainly not as deeply entrenched in Latin America. Indeed, many scholars would claim that even the Latin American avant garde stubbornly persisted in its more or less direct reference to actual life or history. Moreover, the rejection of art which documents is not the rule in the history of art but the exception. People like Iturbide, Meyer, or Salgado believe they are doing art when they document as much as Goya believed he was when he produced the *Ejecución de los insurgentes* or his *Caprichos*. There is a sense in which the art of Goya in Latin America is still a living paradigm. It is confusing and misleading that images such as Meyer's *Annunciation of Graciela* (whose iconographic lineage differs substantially from that of political violence in Argentina or Nicaragua) appear next to other images in a different vein of the same photographer. In the context of LAP and curated with the aforementioned bias, the image is bound to be interpreted in such a way that its surreal character almost vanishes. The connection of Iturbide's or Meyer's work with twentieth-century Mexican art and the particular concerns of its avant garde is thereby camouflaged or lost.

One of the comical stereotypes of the Latin American mind is that it relates to the world largely in an emotional way and not in an intellectual fashion. There are plenty of counter-examples; but Mr. Ritchin, who seems to honestly believe he is complimenting somebody, does nothing to dispel that stereotype. He says: "The photographs that I saw in Havana had about them, for the most part, a directness and warmth, an overriding empathy, an ongoing dialogue between photographer and subject that is very different from the more critical and self-referential imagery that has been popular in the United

States for some time."

Now, it may indeed be the case that Latin Americans have a tendency to acknowledge their emotions more than Nordic peoples, but it does not follow that, in the process, we lose our intellectual faculties, our rational capacity, our ability to reflect upon ourselves and the products of our culture. Yet when Mr. Ritchin denies that photography such as Meyer's or Iturbide's is critical and self-referential and describes it instead as "direct" and "warm" he is thereby promoting the above-mentioned stereotype and failing to understand just how critical and self-referential the process of understanding one's own culture through artistic production has been for those artists.

Let us spell it out plainly for future reference: Latin Americans are the inheritors of avant-garde art that subverts traditional representation and aesthetic values just as much as anybody else who is. Modernization and social revolution played a role in forging the Latin American avant garde as much as it did in Europe. There are notable differences, of course: (i) Latin American nationalism transformed the avant-garde awe of primitive art into the quest for autochthonous values which *indigenismo* amounted to; (ii) modernization in Latin America came about a bit later and at a slower pace than in Europe; (iii) modern life in Europe was often perceived by artists as alienating whereas in Latin America it was often yearned for; (iv) whereas World War I begot pessimism in Europe, it brought prosperity to many Latin American countries; (v) the 1917 Bolshevik revolution suggested the need to revolutionize art and so did the 1910 Mexican revolution and the movements for reform in Latin American universities; and (vi) unlike its European counterparts, schools and universities played a major role in propitiating the avant-garde movements in Latin America.

Researching photography in Latin America is always exciting. But you cannot do it from an armchair like the Cuban writer, Mr. Edmundo Desnoes, did in the 1987 Winter issue of *Aperture* largely based on LAP. I mention it, because it has often been quoted in critiques about LAP. The so-called Six Stations of the Latin American Via Crucis are a concoction of Mr. Desnoes. If, as Mr. Desnoes claims, Latin American photography, is to be classified in the themes of Revolution, Love, Religion, U.S. penetration, Nature and Childhood, what are we to do with the more interesting work of Chambi, Paillet, Obando, and the thousands of photographs of urban landscapes? Moreover, where are we going to come up with important work about nature? Quite frankly, there is so much in the way of sociological, historical, conceptual, critical and archival work to be done for photography in Latin America that Mr. Desnoes' brand of improvisation is unforgivable.

An additional motivation of this critique is the following consideration: Institutions which have hosted LAP are thereby less likely to show another exhibit from Latin America in the near future, even if it is a better one. So even if LAP opened some doors, it closed many others. Curatorship involves that kind of responsibility; its predictable consequences ought to enter into the curatorial decisions. This is why we are so unsympathetic to this halfhearted attempt to do a show representative of Latin American photography. Mr. Ritchin says that some of the photographers of LAP speak of their work as "magical realism." Did he try to understand what that means? Is that also coded in a different language? If he had fully understood just that one phrase, he would have done a better show. One of the great tragedies of the political history of Latin America is that we have often been denied the right to make our own mistakes. To avoid being ungrateful and ungracious we ought to thank Mr. Ritchin for his well-intended errors; he has the right to make them. Hopefully, somebody will find the moral of this essay—coded in a neutral language close to the hearts of the avant garde—exotic enough to interpret it. "*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.*"

Fernando Castro  
Houston, Texas



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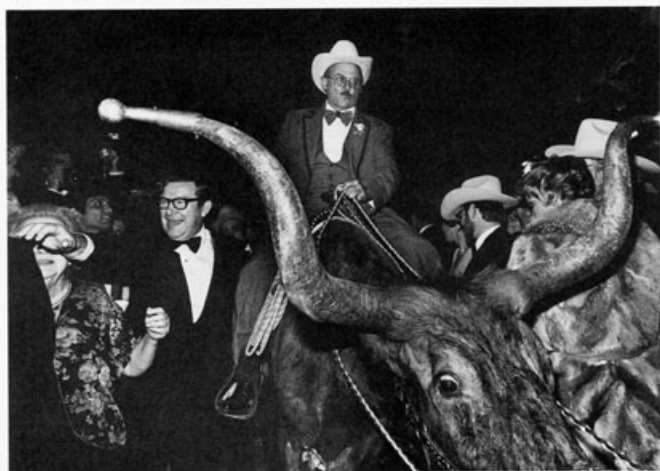
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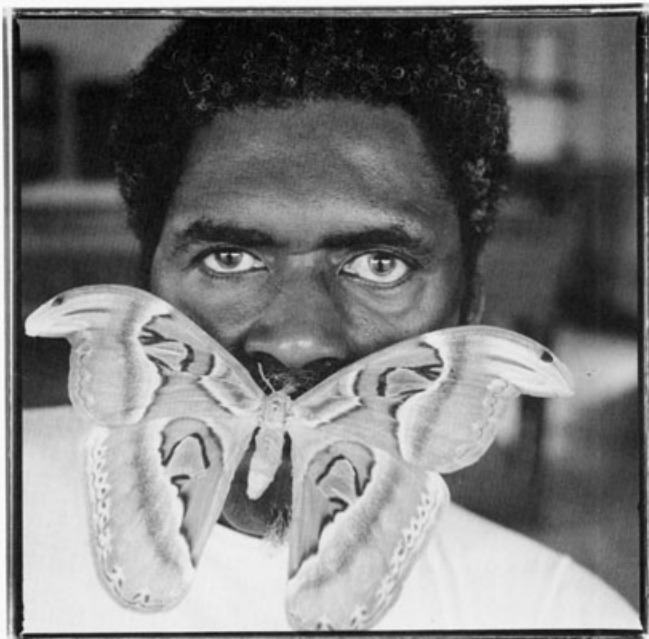
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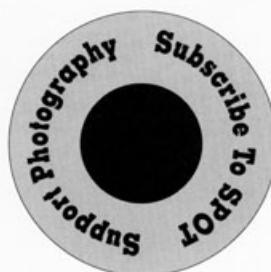
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## Tender Instincts

Continued from page 5 and landscapes—*Archie MacDonald, 1954; Lusetti Family, Italy, 1953; Mr. Bennett, Vermont, 1944; Open Sea, Cape Split, Maine, 1946*—people making not grand historical gestures by sneaking off into the woods to plan insurrection, but people making life, ordinary life in mostly pre-modern, pastoral settings. Strand appeals to the image of the Jeffersonian garden in the wilderness where free, independent, and frugal men and women recreate a Virgilian golden age, one of the most powerful American ideals and myths. This explains why there is so little turbulence in Strand's photographs, so little strife, unless it be of a subtle, existential kind, as in the faces of the *Women of Santa Ana*, who are pensive but not yet ready to act against those who persecute them. Mental agitation precedes any political agitation.

In his search for an authentic culture of unalienated men and women who live eye-to-eye in coherent communities, Strand replicated Emerson's search for "the Central Man," self-sufficient, an agent of fraternity, democratic, and "ready to build therefore [his] own world" (quoted in Howe 21-22). Strand gave a visual testimony to Paul Valéry's statement that "the inhabitant of the great urban centers reverts to a state of savagery—that is, of isolation" (quoted in Howe 25). A photographic art made from such a perspective is not the stuff of proletarian self-consciousness, battling it out with studied enemies in the hothouse of finance capitalism. Strand's conception of community is utopian, idyllic, a protest against, in the words of E. P. Thompson, the suffering of "those who live and die in unredeemed time" (Thompson 1978, 296).

One should see in Strand's photographs the utopian urge to practice consciously what the nineteenth-century utopian socialist William Morris suggested is the obligation of human-kind: the education of desire, to "teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way" (Thompson 1976, 49). With a more subtle eye than some of the "Marxists" possess who have heretofore been attracted to his work, the world created by Strand's photographs is a place where people desire more, desire better, desire in a different way. It is a world tender in its instincts and therefore both transcends and subverts the less than tender social reality that we have made. ●

Kerry Candaele

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Paul Strand's *Archie MacDonald, 1954*.

## Shattered

Continued from page 8 are to mean anything. In providing a structure that would seem to be relentlessly unordered, the artist is providing the viewer with a hellish experience of relentless fracture.

Since, in a work of art, the artist subjectively chooses both the form and the content, Hock would seem to be creating an order that describes futility, in which the form endlessly denies any system the viewer might attempt to impose on the work as a whole. If we accept the premise that a schizophrenic reading is not Hock's goal (if it is, it is horrific), then we are forced to ask on what level can the given complexity have any shared quality.

The only unity we can resort to that would explain all the images taken together is essentially mystical. If the mind that created the work is not schizophrenic and is not simply playing around with endless variation of images that are only about variability (both of which would make the work repulsive), then the works must contain an organizing principle. This knowing yet unrevealed organizing principle in Hock's work bears more on what may be his particular spiritual insight than on issues of art or language as such.

Standing behind these works is an individual with profound and disturbing views of the contemporary world, who looks backward to find images of integrity. The underlying desire for a symbol of spiritual wholeness, likewise, is backward looking and does not find fulfillment in a contemporary image. For example, where Hock has used the image of Christ, the image is always a part of a picture we may be familiar with—a crucifixion. The closest Hock comes to a contemporary parallel to these fragments of Christ is his use of portraits of twentieth-century artists or writers.

Though it is possible to see the religious images as essentially a fond remembrance of things past or as a simple parallel with contemporary figures and conditions, one senses that the artist is making a moral point. The use of Christian iconic imagery can be seen as the expression of a desire for a religious idea in contemporaneity (or lament of its lack). Yet we are presented with a schema, a grid, which is never altered and that always stifles the search for a desirable completion through its unwavering separations.

Each codex would seem to contain images from a past in which a unified idea existed, but these images are ordered in the present by a schema that relentlessly separates them. In (*Things are Symbols of Themselves*) we are presented a codex that carries a nonsensical title. In a telephone interview, Hock explained that in this codex the image of the ghost issuing forth from the dying man (first frame) is analogous to the process by which the bar code (fifth frame) robs an object of its life. This is a codex in which an objective system of classification (the bar code) denies differences, and renders dead all manufactured objects or things containing subjective qualities. If we liken the bar code to the grid scheme in which living images are placed into the codex, then the structure of the codex robs its individual images of their life.

In similar ways, each codex contains a level of contradiction, a negation of itself, which can be resolved only by application of a higher meaning in that apparent contradictions or arbitrarily related images seem unified through something like Zen. Again, in (*Things*), six images lead up to a pair of diagrams: "Fig. 60. Double Interpretation: Is this a rabbit or a duck?" and "Fig. 61. The illusionary cubes: How many cubes are there?" The image of interlinked cubes is deceptive and indicates the ability of an image (or more specifically, its form) to convey falsity. This

seems to suggest that the viewer must not only passively read the images but must then negate the form of the work if any meaning other than separation—fracture itself—is to be realized. The codex is self-contradicting until an act of conscious choice is enacted in the mind of the viewer.

Effectively, the title and the images describe a pun, a word or phrase that contains both a mundane and an extraordinary meaning, the sense intended being revealed upon examination of context. And the title itself, (*Things are Symbols of Themselves*), provokes in the viewer the realization that things cannot be symbols if the work is to be seriously considered. This negation is the same one that takes place when the work is considered as a whole. Though we are presented with a schema that presents moral values as random and lacking hierarchy, we must realize that this is not a valid scheme to escape the Sisyphean task of endlessly searching inside the work for coherence amid continual negation.

I cannot believe that the artist's goal is to express a latently sadistic desire that the viewer become endlessly frustrated by fragments and equivocations. In the presence of art equivoiced between potential unity and relentless fracture, we as viewers are forced to choose one orientation or the other. Since the content implies a religious ordering if we reconstruct it, surely the artist could not have intended a religion of fracture. The equivoice between a heaven and hell teleology is shocking enough. That the artist may not care which way the viewer goes is evil. If the codex is indeed a formal negation of meaning at the level of theology, it raises the spectre of an art, an icon no less, predicated on negative value—the artist enacting an entrapment of the viewer in the material, not for enlightenment but simply to entrap.

If it is possible to view the work in a positive light, then ultimately, one hopes, the codex is intended to be read the way the artist produced it, as the outward form of the spiritual vision of an inward-looking moralist. (The separation between images may simply be a barrier, rather than a negation.) In effect, each codex asks the viewer to make such an inward-looking journey in order to reconstruct the artist's vision. The images that the artist and viewer share are the common language of their souls. Once the journey through the work is completed, some positive meaning arrived at, we return to gaze at the crisis of non-order, and we must lament the prison in which each fragment of our whole conception is rigidly contained.

In the context of a redeeming reading, the authorship of each image is not central, because the emphasis is on divine inspiration and universality. The question of appropriation of images from other artists or from popular media is rendered moot by the enormous number of such images available to us. The particular image of any one compartment can be seen as an interpretation, an analog, one among many of an ideal that each artist tried to express or that each figure attempted to live for.

If acting constructively, Hock assumes the role of philosopher-scientist, mining the artifact images of human life over time. He presents a deconstructed vision, composed of the externalized imaginings of inward-looking moralists through the ages. His codices reflect a world trapped in a wealth of partial signs, half meanings, yearning for yet unable to connect the pieces of its own spiritual puzzle. In the horror of this fragmentation, we can glimpse the terrible task of reconstructing God. ●

Louis Dobay

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—compiled by Scottie Kersta-Wilson



Ruth Bernhard *In The Box, Horizontal*, 1962 (courtesy of John Cleary Photographs).

## The Queen of Fortune

... no man can ever be secure until he has once been forsaken by Fortune.

Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*

We must have liked her somewhat  
the first time around or we wouldn't  
have accorded her so much power.  
Once a week she wore bell bottoms  
and abused her short husband  
on prime time television.  
We couldn't resist the way she went  
after him, poking, goading, she  
holding her burden of black hair  
as if it weighed so much she couldn't turn  
to look at him, he looking shifty  
and deserving of her toxic remarks.  
We liked the way she always won,  
and then trotted out the kid,  
blessedly blonde, and coached her  
in the methods of meanness till she said  
yes to some nasty dig at her father,  
sweetly resurrecting our laughter  
and relief. Now the tabloids say  
Chastity's a lesbian, and are not kind  
to lesbians. The husband, father,  
we all know, is now ex and hasn't  
aged well since the Lady left  
hauling her gilt-edged wheel  
with its mysterious medieval markings.

No one remembers what it was she carried  
when she was still a pagan, but there are  
old pictures, occasionally dug up to prove  
how much cosmetic work she's had done  
when we weren't looking. You might find

she appeared first as a Roman with a cornucopia,  
a cascade of fruit we thought was good for us,  
and sometimes, a ship's rudder to show  
how much control she had over the direction  
of the journey we were all going to take.

Boethius decided she was good  
for all the blame he couldn't put  
on God. Then the Christians got ahold of her,  
and Chaucer too, found her useful  
as a scapegoat, a place to put  
the black knight's anger at the death  
of his wife. And worse, we put her to work  
doing commercials for a local health club,  
ranging among brawny men who grunt  
their approval as she strolls amid  
the technology of fitness, flinging  
cynical remarks about how we don't  
have to live with bodies God gave us.

But look into her celebrated face.  
It is a gorgeous work of iconography.  
The eyes are still alluring and accusing,  
perfectly returning all human guilt  
and failure to their rightful owners,  
which is why we want them so exquisitely  
embodied and printed in magazines. They ask,  
*what have I taken from you that belonged  
to you?* They say, I will not be responsible  
for your failure to be good,  
happy, beautiful or kind.

—Leslie Adrienne Miller



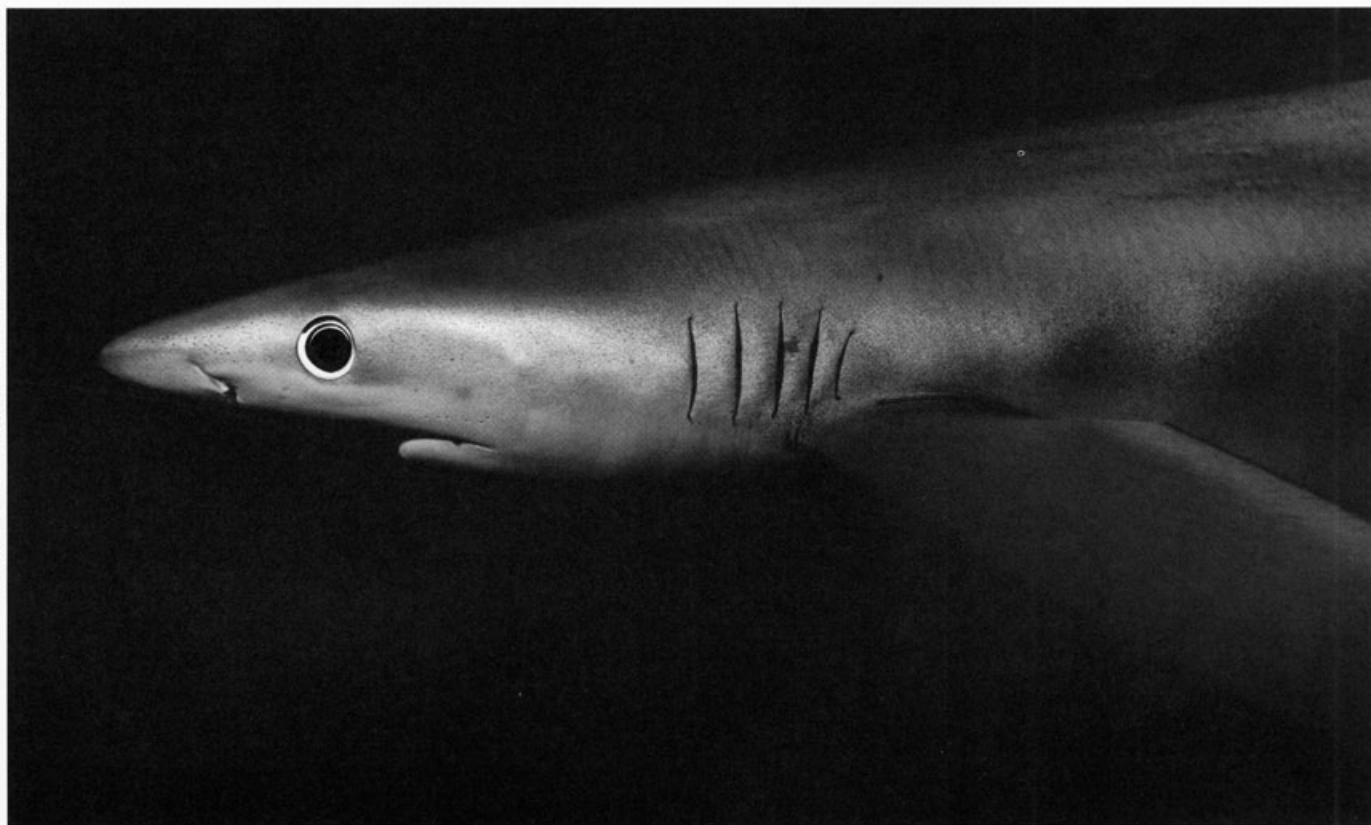


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