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 Photog-}

raphy 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 in-
cluded in this issue: Carrie Mae Weems’ Portrait of a Fallen
Woman, right, and Ruth Berhane’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 Schrafangel 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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HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY

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Tender Instincts

A 1990 marked the one hundredth anniversary of Paul Strand's birth, the art world chooses 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 Whitney Museum. The recent release by Aperture Press, Paul Strand: Essays on His Life and Work, edited by Murray Forman, 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 photography 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 power, 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 strict photographic methods" (Strand 5-4). In an era when postmodernists have left statements such as those disbelieved, dismissed, and strenuously against the critical landscape—for interpenetration of opposites in the same habitat.

If there were any mention of economics in these passages, we might discern this exegesis "vulgar Marxism," but without some economic drive or machinery, we can call this description simply" 

Clockwise from top: Paul Strand's The White Fence, Port Kent, New York, 1898; Lissitzky Family, Lissitzky, Italy, 1953; and Colby's in Rhode Island, Providence, 1927.

5
TWINNING

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 context gap and other flaws.

Why would a photographer want to be more like a painter? What occurs when photographers start working in unconventional 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 Starn, photographers have much to gain, including representability, width, media hope, fame, and even more creative freedom. But as Rebecca Solnit remarked in her 1988 review of the Starn Twins’ exhibition at University 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 whole new ‘picture’ that is being addressed by considering themselves primarily with their craft: altering the image so that you forget about the work as art, and instead, you see the work in nature of the paper. It was taped together and best to hell, and working against the modernist concepts of framing and hanging” (Starr-Lafferty 12).

The problem with this approach seems to be that once again part of the work itself exhibits a sophistication and calculated quality that runs counter to the random approach they claim. The contradic- tions of “Mike and Doug Starn 1985-1990,” the Starns as creators, influence the search for meaning in the work, and establish around it an aura of mystery and mythology.

The twin work by laboriously sending many pieces of photo paper into a large single image. They bend, scratch, sponge, tear, and in other ways manipulate 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 vis- ual self-expression.

One thing does 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: hunches, heads, plant forms, the Louise 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 roman- ticism. The Starns claim they are not interested in the context of the image, only in its ability to excite, to be beautiful. “Some of the most meaningful moment to evoke emotion, some are symbolic, others are just a lure to get you excited about what’s going on. Often, the image is an abstraction of the aging process all the art elements—the frame, the paper, the process (Starr-Lafferty 10).

“ar perfectly in our desire to return to the art of an earlier time. But we are willing to age our work, to age and exploit that (Starr-Lafferty 15).”

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—some- how touching.


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 context gap and other flaws.

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Ceremonies, Elegies, Documentaries

of Salgado's photographs and moved their affiliation. To be sure, the photographs墨西哥, Japanese, and four men carry lumber along a ridge above the clouds, suggest crucifixion. It also speaks eloquently of endurance, courage, and the fleeting grace those qualities can attain. In another photograph, two harbingers 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 religious distinctions 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, I think this has to do with the fact that these presences in the work: Squelee calls Salgado's photos heavy-handed and formulate, seeking aura rather than specificity. It is in contrast, she writes, to most photographs, which lack 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 don't remember the exact year, but it was clearly the early 1960s: Photographs of various people in Mexico and in other countries, which may not be apparent at first glance, are also intriguing. The use of light, the use of composition, the way the light falls on the faces, the way the people are positioned, the way the backgrounds are used, all contribute to the overall effect of the photograph.

In Brazil, 1989, 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 crossed, their expressions weary and beautiful in their patience.

Ceremonies, Elegies, Documentaries

I think this has to do with the way that photography can be a window into a culture, a window to the way people live, to the way they think, to the way they feel. It is a way of understanding, a way of learning about the world.

I was very impressed by the way that the photographs were able to convey so much information in such a small space. The use of light, the use of composition, the way the light falls on the faces, the way the people are positioned, the way the backgrounds are used, all contribute to the overall effect of the photograph.

I think that the use of light is particularly important in these photographs. The way that the light is used, the way that it falls on the faces, the way that it accentuates certain features, all contribute to the overall effect of the photograph. I think that the use of light is particularly important in these photographs. The way that the light is used, the way that it falls on the faces, the way that it accentuates certain features, all contribute to the overall effect of the photograph.
EACH of Rick Hock’s codices on display in the Houston Center for Photography’s Gallery X from September 12 through October 17 is a grid of twenty-eight or thirty-six images that at first seem unrelated and that can take the viewer on an endless number of paths in search of a unified meaning. Hock has appropriated his codex images, ranging from mundane to esoteric, from books and periodicals, photographed them with Polaroid materials, and transferred them to paper, then arranged them nonpreferentially, nonhierarchically, and nonsequentially. The very nature of an art object, its unity, manufacture, and signifying potential is thus deconstructed. Hock’s codex, in that it destroys traditional form without revealing any personal intentions as to meaning, also raises a disturbing debate about the artist’s responsibility for his own art—ultimately, perhaps, revealing the dangers of a dilute tance and a philistine thinker armed with the tools of deconstruction running around inside the sacred realm of mystery.

Utilizing personal and archetypical images laid out like a yoga’s tarot cards, a collis- sion of ancient, medieval, and modern images is enacted in each codex. Interspersed with archetypical images of god, woman, man, death, and spirit are pictures of famous people, headlines from the National Enquirer, and paintings by Duchamp and Botticelli, among others. Some images appear once, others are var- ied, repeated. Hock selects images that reflect some idea or quality with intellectual or emotional relevance to him. Utilizing a mystic’s way of “seeing,” the artist creates a riddle that contains many levels of meaning but which must be interpreted by its viewer. In (Glitch), there are images of Oliver North, Fidel Castro, Mao, Marx, and Poe Wee Herman. Also there are the Venus de Milo, Botticelli’s Venus, Marat from David’s painting Death of Marat, Jupiter from the classical Greeks, and numerous images of the crucifixion of Christ.

On first viewing, the number and variety of images provoke a desire for communica- tion, and the act of viewing becomes an act of making sense. The title (Glitch) connotes “grab, grab for power,” perhaps Castro, Mao, and Marx are twentieth-century revolutionaries. Broadly, then, there is a theme of power. Modern male political figures form a grouping of images. Playing off this group is Poe Wee Herman, perhaps a subtle revolutionary introducing a theme of gender into a con- sideration of power, and Marat, introduc- ing what Hock calls a theme of corruption. The particular meanings in this group are subjective and depend on the viewer to expand them. If we include more images—Jupiter, a figure of male authority from the past; a man strapped into an electric chair, an image of one extreme of political order; and Christ, an image of deliverance from political oppression—or any ordering system we impose once again must be expanded.

We are presented in this work with a comparison between an ancient and a modern formulation of value. The ancient fertility goddess is in the same field as an Enquirer headline exclaiming “My Baby Looks Like a Gorilla” (Monkey Business/ Trap). Having perceived comparisons, the viewer can assign specific meanings to images. In this way, reading the images becomes a linguistic constructing, with image groupings forming words and other components of “language,” thus building a “sentence.” One may read, for example, the image of “beauty” through time as pre- sented in this work and marvel at the continuity of an ideal, noting its many forms.

The tracing of modern antecedents to the ancient world is what Michel Foucault called the “archeology of knowledge.” Hock’s preference for images from eighteenth-century science—classification schemes, comparative diagrams—recalls Foucault’s view that abstract concepts have a concrete life. In these attempts to provide an archeology of images there is an added quality of philosophical reflec- tion; it is possible to assign good and bad values to certain images. If we recognize the preferences in the codex for ideals of “beauty,” as well as the negative images of abuses, corruptions, and inhumanity in the name of power, then the codex becomes a guide for the formation of values, if the viewer so chooses.

There is yet another level of meaning here, that of wisdom and a kind of mystery tradition in Western civilization that is per- haps least familiar to the viewer in its specific meanings but that nonetheless brings an evocative quality to the works. Esoteric symbols such as that of an archetypal wom- an/goddess, various devils, angels, and oth- er references, such as the Tower of Babel, while not systematically used, point toward a theosophical view. In (St. Sebastian), there is this cartoon dialogue between John on his deathbed and a friend:

“What did you do, John?”

“I signed a contract with the devil... he gets my soul.”

“It doesn’t work that way, John.”

This dialogue does not make sense according to the normative Christian dog- ma. John holds the fear of fulfillment of a Faustian bargain, but his friend rebukes him, implying a higher understanding. To say “it doesn’t work that way” in this context is either to refer to an existential or an atheistic philo- sophoy, or, as is more likely given the num- ber of religious images, a reference to reincarnation and the law of karma, which are Eastern mystical ideas integrat- ed in Western Christianity under the label theosophy. The ultimate goal of theosophy is a unification of all religious con- cepts into a universal Christian system. Whether the artist intends the theism implied by these symbols or not, their presence gives the codex an iconographic feature. In this way, the codex touches on the highest meanings of Western civilization. Therein lies the question of the codex.

The codex is a Rossharch test for the viewer, if the artist is to be believed. The claim that a work of art can be open to highly subjective readings is understand- able in the context of abstract art. In this case, where the artist employs images almost exclusively as symbols, then the artist has extended the range of possible readings but has also determined, albeit at a distance, how the work is intended to be read. The use of symbols implies an inten- tional meaning. So how is the codex intended to be read and ultimately what does it mean?

In its form, the codex is merely a struc- ture for the presentation of visual data. The icon has been smashed, deconstructed. However, in the choice of images by the artist and in the way they are read by the viewer a priori state of unity and a potential reconstruction is reflected. There is a peculiar contradiction between the form, which tends to an increasing reduction, a potentially endless number of grids, and the tendency of the images to fall into an order, a potentially unified one, if they continued on page 21
WILSON
ON THE BEACH

photograph 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, earnestly like the middle years of a life. The last room was most ambitious in the stage 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, Kauffman in 1941: A Space Odyssey and Philip Glass and Dosset in Making of the Representational of Planet 9, 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 Glass-Lening opera.

In contrast to the first room, darkness brooded over, and, again, scattered objects were lit in spots. These separate things, I suppose, suggested our attachment to the earth: our materiality (bnoon), our absurdity (beads), our illusions (the empty aquarium where we follow the wake of non-existent fish). The far sail replicated the set for Einstein on the Beach, but it was such an eerie staging of a famous work, so rendered from its performance context, that the secondary meaning foisted upon the original vision was not convincting. There it was—a huge rectangular panel, divided longwise 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 may be 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 exhausted. 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 the Wilson. The case 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 mean the following on Sun Galihi's Flas Modernity Festival—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 artist discernible for Wilson's work is the moment, sometime in the Seventies, when some modern artists realized that there was no longer anything, no matter how outrageous—a heap of bricks—that could be bought and sold, and that, is co-opted into the commodity of late capitalism. Now capitalism is probably more amenable to real dreams of the artist in other economic systems. But when artists find固体 injustices within a capitalist society, and yet produce art with no other values than individualism, self-promotion, and financial property, 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 Wilson's The Golden Windsor, a reclama of land in the Great Salt Lake. The advantages of using earth, rocks, and light are obvious: they remind us of the ties to the planet, the 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 seen through the flow chart from studio to gallery to museum, generating capital at every stage (e.g., Julian Schnabel), or to produce art that one will use. 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 seer, looking for revelation not in the Grill, but in the modernization of a holy fool: a brain-damaged young man whose writings brought him to the stage in his first success, Desenpam Glomar, the 1970. The famous quip that Wagner's music is a better sound than it might be a proof true, for Wilson has the ability to sculpt light into vision, but it will not doubly 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 SBFK and organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and curated by Trevor Fairbrother.) The great deletion with which the modern world belittles itself—this technology will not only correct the problems it has caused itself but will also free us from boring and swelter 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 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 stoning out images and conquering nature? We will never learn to want something better if we put our trust in the wonders of the machine; the powers of a spaceship (as the corporate sponsors want us to).

The modern tragedy is, I think, the hopeless longing of the mind 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 machine. 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 artist its revision.

James Houlahan

A SUPER WAR

WAR: Controlling the Image," which was on display from May 17 through June 25 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 artist 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 RCA, 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 Goshfield's photographic collages on canvas, arguably the most personally sifted 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 Terror" 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 Goshfield's images consisted of a television visual of a bemelled 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," "Grennburg 1863," "Tuk 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 futurity, a reflection of the soldiers' fate in the cycles of revenge perpetrated by their leaders.

Dane Dedacht'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 APOT.

In one of her pieces, The War Game, Helen Boffet used a grid arrangement similar in many ways to Dedacht'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 posed against those of the United States, like black-and-white chess pieces. The images within the squares were derived from television coverage of the Gulf War, and the board echoed the square format of the television screens. 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 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, Ozymandias, 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 the popular opposition to the Gulf War and the fate of the U.S. military buildup in the Gulf.

Avengers, a clever mixed-media installation by Manuel (Ed Hill and Suzanne Bloom), combined a computer-manipulated Hollywood movie still of two Russian soldiers engaged in battle with quotations from Volsya, Masterlink, and Mso Tswung. A small booklet on one side held three books—Masterlink's The Life of the Ant, Waldron's Plateau Training, and Mso Tswung'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 sieges, bewildered retreats, strategic withdrawals, and sometimes brawls between allies." The installation was an ironic comment on the war's 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.
A World in Negative

YELLOW placards warning "Slippery When Wet" should be placed inside the Houston Center for Photography. For all the fury 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 Sacred Earth: Oil Well Fires in Kuwait" is nigh impossible. (Also represented in the show were works by Bruno Barbey, Roberto Borea, Stephane Compo, Steven Lehrman, James Lakoski, Steve McCurry, Tomas Mucionis, Sylvia Plachy, and Alan Tannerheim.) Only a couple of exceptions interrupt the compliant beauty of perfect compositions, breathless lighting, and regular collodi couched suspensions.

Smacking of propaganda, the exhibition begins on a commercial note. The list of sponsors printed in the entrance to HCP reads like a who's who among well-fuited 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 manySANIZATIONS the company names are meaningless, and the statistics, while answering bottom-line questions, do not speak in the heart.

The distant tone of the exhibit continues in aerial photographs of Kuwaiti Arba, 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/ Goodness who injected the body of Earth with a black substance. This black substance clouds points of land and does the serious 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 shades 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 shanty, slouched, firefighter wearing a metal helmet, one might recall the Tin Man in The Wizard of Oz, but whereas a viewer might contend with that silly, fictional face, no parallel occurs when viewing this man or various other men in Salgado's photographs. How does one relax, for example, to men walking through steam? A row of men dragging what looks like a giant sports-field tartanquilt across the sand? A firefighter long on his back near the flame-spouting Magwa Well #1A3A man wiping perspiration and oil from the side of his face? Men hammering a drill spool? A firefighter fallen backwards into oily mud? These are merely well-composed pictures of well-rehearsed men doing dirty, hard work. The aspects and stages of this work are splashed out in accompanying tags: "Canadian firefighter from Safety B 01B 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 Cull of OKE inspects a burning well behind the protective tin sheet attached to the bulldozer. A protecting cabin protects the bulldozer operator." "A group of men from the Safety Team learn strag- gling to remove the bolts of what is left of an oil wellhead. Working with metal tools producers sparks their oil-covered faces and take a breath of less-pol- lutated 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 the containment, not feel it.

Two of Salgado's photographs, however, distin- guish themselves from the rest. About halfway 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 time 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 man seen in negative appears on 11th-17-inch paper: the tiny tracks across the black sands of the desert are white. In other images, the normally blinding sand is rendered by dense smoke; men appear wet in an arid environment; the deserted desert seems once brilliantly clear skies sul with toxic gases; some of the men, pushed in the brink of endurance in this tiny-tiny world, act like nurtur- ing women: "What caring man would not wipe the befuddled face of another?"

One more image by Salgado breaks the slick veneer of perfection to engage the viewer. A fire- fighter, slumped in utter exhaustion after a day's work, leans against the rim of a truck. His blun- ed 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

PLACHY FROM TOP

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

Diane Berry-Heath
PHARMAKOPIA

Margo Reece's work, *The Function of Memory*, was shown separately in HCP's Gallery S. 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/Polypharmacy/ fences* is built into a chamber, arched window frame salvaged from a burned house. It incorporates split-tined 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 encompassing 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
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顽强 of the same scene, a wheelchair in a park. Through the "camera," one sees an actual antique wooden wheelchair swathed in tendrils of dead datura vines. This disturbing picture of delirium 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 Violets*, a large piece comprising three parts. The *Real Care* features an iron bed on a pedestal, its frame covered with dark-red satin fabric and dozens of dried long-stemmed red roses. The *Dreaming Room* is a series of small photographs that elaborate frames set on easels on the floor. A *Cage 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 they 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-worked/busy women workers 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 distinctly 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 stare off mortality while sustaining a creative vision.

Cynthia Freeland

HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY
A n exhibition of photographs by inner-city young-
ters, "Houston's New Visions," which accompa-
nied "The New Vision: Photography Between the
World Wars," was one of the most exuberant and rele-
vant shows mounted of late by the Museum of Fine Arts.
To create the works in the show, 14 children between
the ages of eleven and eighteen at six Houston communi-
ty centers learned photographic technique from Ben
DeSoto and Carlos Rios and toured "The New Vision"
show at the MFA. The participants then took pho-
tographs 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 memento of one panel. Bari
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 Orai 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 exhibi-
tion 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.
G. Smith Elementary and Middle School; Fifth Ward
Multi-Service Center; Community Artists' Collective;
Ripley House; and Stemker Library. Call (713) 639-
7586 for more information.

Tim Bookover

Clockwise from top left:
African/African American National Educational Service Center;
Twelve Po, ILAEC National Educational Service Center;
Mexicanowith Cameras, Andrew Jackson Middle School;
The DPC Photographers, Community Artists' Collective;
I Shot a Person Last Night, Cliff Tuttle Branch Library;
Fresh Photographers, Fifth Ward Enrichment Program.
Photography of the collages by Paul Hester
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 both his look, in its worst, can be brittle, but there is no doubt that he knows how to make the people look great. In his frequent work for family Faye, Ritts creates similar illusions.

Not long ago, I sought for a magazine here that often displayed Texas-born television or movie stars on its cover. We decided to ask Farrar Faber to pose and sit for an interview, and I fell to me to negotiate with her publicist in Hollywood, who curtly informed me that Ms. Faber 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 Faber taken by someone other than Ritts, but I spared no work to the publicist until it was apparent that no amount of persuasion would help me negotiate another photographer. This does personalities control their image through the modern media.

(To the way, for an illustration of the way two photographers address the same subject and for a lesson in why personalities try to flee the burnt shots of Bob Paris and Rod Jackson from Ritts's Duo reproduced in the October Advocate and frontispiece, with the choo-choo, bra-flicking pose of the same pair, by Art Zeiler, on the cover of the December Stuck Pig International.)

The more famous half of the most notorious star-photographer matchup is Madonna, who has been working with Steven Meisel. Madonna is the queen of control, and Meisel, a truly gifted magazine photographer, is her ideal portraitist, whether posing her as a blonde siren on the cover of the April Vanity Fair (and as Marilyn Monroe inside) or as a brunette, leather-chick, full-of-the-Wooster-Beatty sex kitten in a gender-bending photo shoot for Rolling Stone. Their photos together are almost the only way of pretending and, naturally, of sex. Madonna's newest person is that of Serious, Lovely Actress, and who knows if Meisel will continue to be her house photographer. The success 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 Lingard 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

The New Vision

and Celebrity Representation

This page contains a photograph of a celebrity and a photographer's portrait of the same subject. The text discusses the art of celebrity photography and the relationship between artists and their subject matter. It highlights the work of photographers like Matthew Rolston and Herb Ritts, and notes the influence of personalities controlling their image through modern media. The text also references a famous celebrity-photographer matchup, Madonna and Steven Meisel, and the importance of the photographer's control over the image. The page includes a quote from John Lingard about Gary Cooper's photography session. The image at the bottom is a photograph of James Dooblin’s Marlene Dietrich, ca. 1931, Baron Adolph de Meyer’s Josephine Baker, ca. 1922, and August Sand’s Student, Cologne, 1926.
VIDEOTICS

Inform 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. 64). It seems that Rosler'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 "Mud," Rosler deconstructs Nam June Paik in a most informative and amusing manner. What I found to be worth the price of the book. Following the book's spirit of multiplicity, John Hancock, in his contribution to the "Histories" section, writes that the work of Paik created "paraglyphs 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. In "The most "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 judgment of the individual authors. For example, Hardward 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, Rosler 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" answer, 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 words, 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 Lakat 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 Ferguson contributes an informative piece on the video work of television pioneer Ernie Kovacs. Borns, with his masterful 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 Filer 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
The 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, reconf-
figured 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
sweat and poison, and he locates the com-
plexity of this poison in the surreptitious labeling by homophobes.

Because of this covert messaging of
identity and homophobia, critical assess-
mant of 
Poison requires an addi-
tional intertextual reading of structural
form, which compounds meaning
through systems of encoded messages
but, significantly, locates its worth within
second generation appropriation strat-
tegies. While the complexity of
Poison's text results from the develop-
mental usage of a culture-specific vo-
cabulary, its formal structure adheres to
the contingent tenets of recent
appropriationist practitioners.

To distinguish between these inter-
genational usages of appropriation,
strategies concentrated on either an
anachronistic adaptation of syllables
or on commentary of appropriation-
sthat usage itself, as in the dialectics of
authorship, but always within the
limning of an art-world discourse. In
contrast, later appropriationists have
shifted this grounding to one of a radi-
cal within activist politics, continuing to
resurface these issues of originality by claiming an ethical irrelevance and redirect an audi-
ence away from a fine-arts context and towards
an external civil disobedience through identity
validation. This theoretical shift in appropriation-
ism-grounding is established by Douglas
Grimp in "The Boys in My Bedroom," Art In

The exigency of Poison's specific political agenda allows for this pirating of any available
information, whether methodological, connec-
tively referential, or image-specific, that cre-
ates 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 exigency of the image also is the
result of associated ACT-UP affinities and
anti-homophobia collectives, such as Gran Fury and DIVA TV, which excite the assimilation of a
product, and ideological consciousness.
This complete survey of these practitioners, their working
methods, and their reliance on social change, see Grimp and Bolon, Absolu-
dude of queer politics. By inverting protagonist
identity, a disruption of perceptual reenforces the leprous burden of risk; the film considers
the adolescent a valid construct of sexuality, and unfurls the Cartesian lines of brutality and
marginality. These image signs collectively form a vocabulary that disrupts the compla-
cency of gay identity and assimilation while also redirecting its reading of homophobia.

Extension of referential intent is an es-
tential tool of activist appropriation, and its
use in 
Poison compounds the already unre-
mitting assault of image bites. The film's adaptations of Genet's 
Souris and 
Béjart equally embrace the anti-fas-
cist 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 post-
modernist images (such as Cindy Sherman's 
Unentitled Film Stills (A)21)
reinforces the need for political affili-
ity with other marginalized power
structures, while the use of stock
photography of modern architecture
locates the stereotype of our ack-
nowledged taste as homosexuals. The
use of syphilis in 
Poison, such as the
infectious curb of bathus, or the signi-
fying 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
discourse on both itself and homopho-
bia. The impetus of this vocabulary is most
evidenced by the film's detractors and the mir-
or of homophobia represented. 
Poison questions the identity of homosexuality and redefines the image as both 
radical and the passive aggression of indifference, which includes the offense of its own community. The discomfort of 
Poison's message-aesthetic
conflicts the gay community with a poten-
tial 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 in the case of the conservative right, or the displacement of identity as viewed by the assimilationist left, but rather the image's impossibility that permits
death as a valid response to homophobia: "The kind of misery the whole sinking world is made of." The radicality of 
Poison's message according to its establishment of this homophobic identity and its invocation to response, its incitement to riot. It is to enrage you. ■

Bill Shackelford

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HOMOPHOBIA-Poison

The activism of 
Poison's strategies these sources for meaning, consistently accessing
information that reinforces its political intention, and consolidates its textuality
through significations respondent to or syn-
pathetic with this gay sensibility. While an
intracultural encoding of preference pro-
vides a vocabulary of this identity, the syn-
tactical 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 oppres-
sion, 
Poison also locates significant aspects
of gay identity through homophobia. By
appropriating the previously encoded mes-
sages of these marginalized groups, a political
affinity is created that identifies the similari-
ties 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 contin-
geracy as a means of re-encoding the agen-

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THREE SIXTY

During 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 560° 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 1970s, Snelson proposed a model for atomic structure and secured patents for it, and his sculpture since the late-1970s has dealt with what Buckminster Fuller termed tensesity (tension + integrity)—an approach to sculpture that counteracts the effects of gravity by using an internally applied system of tension and counter-tension. Whether a duodecim, 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 relate to and are 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 Carl V. 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 Lawrence Wieder states in his introduction to _Full Circle_,

"what [Snelson's] camera records impinges 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 "impinges on..." 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 seer... an engineer" and his camera, like a picture, "has the promise of his latest trespass. Our curious need is to cultivate 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 Kjøbenhavn. What those images have in common is Snelson's interest in manmade structures—buildings, gardens, or canals—and their architectural structure.

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 winders of Venice and Kyoto's "manmade" gardens are even less orthodoxally ordered than Haussman'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 circumspect with four distinct corridors. Such reacquaintance is not forthcoming in Snelson's panoramas of these Eastern Hemisphere cities. Corridors are missing or in the "wrong" place; straight lines become curved, curvilinear lines; 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 key and perspective (and secure in the fort that his or her back is protected), finds these panoramas disorienting and fascinating, if not disquieting. How should the reader respond? The photograph can be assessed incrementally, much as the original source would have been taken in, by focusing attention on discrete features of the site—forward-back, right-left, front-behind. Taking the photographs as they are and marvelling at the ebb and flow of the buildings, the color and the atmosphere of the spaces certainly helps to convince wanderlust or to satisfy the armchair traveler. Alternatively, trying to solve the visual puzzle the panoramas present to us by reconstructing the space literally on paper or entering into the space with our imaginings in a rewarding exercise for the truly devoted. Or we may, like Lawrence Wieder, read them in terms of musical constructs and poetic metaphors, seeing them as a mnemonic for times and places gone by.

At times, Wieder's introduction seems to be mistranslated to Snelson's photographs. Throughout his essay the poet and critic procedes metaphorical descriptions of individual images, reconstructing 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 calling 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 conjures a simpler, 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 milieu of a European cityscape—but 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 relatively twentieth-century perspective. The photographs are at once simple and complex enough to allow for multiple interpretations. Although Wieder's informative and idiographic analysis provides one possible pathway to understanding that provides a counterbalance to the dispassionate and analytic photographs, this reader unfortunately yet lost along Wieder's way more than once. It is much more pleasant to lose yourself in the rhythm of Snelson's making and find your own way out.●

Kenneth Snelson's _Paint Nudes with le de la Cité_, 1985.

Maggie Olvey
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 regular feature in SPOT. Thank you.

HIC, 1411 West Alabama, Houston, Texas 77006-4178. Please include a phone number.

LAP.jpeg

LATIN AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHERS: ANGLOPHILES UNGRADUATED

Although the opportunity to see Latin American photography has become less infrequent, it is still the case that, proportionately, Latin American photography is vastly underrepresented in Houston. So when the "Latin American Photographers" (LAP) comes along, we welcome it. But this most recent run of LAP has not yet met with the same success as it did in Europe. Indeed, one of the most obvious objections if they are one—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, we nevertheless believe that Aperture Foundation has a significant role in the promotion of art that is not currently feasible. The problems of LAP are not about resources but of curatorship. Neither is this criticism aimed at the Contemporary Art Museum, whose receivables to Latin America can only be commended.

By and large, American art institutions can be criticized with equal impunity. To be blunt, they too are institutions that are not notably common knowledge in the academic world, and this is a problem. If we are to continue to develop a system of art that has been put together with the minimum of research and an abundance of good intentions and naivete. Although LAP includes the work of photographers whose talent is above suspicion—Bryde, Meyer, Salgado, Haya, Dreta and others—it includes a few whose claims 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 stodgy and that of Salgado is less than the best of his. Although both are significant photographers, the work of both has not been properly made or presented. It is obvious that the reason for this overrepresentation is that both photographers' work has been more or less directly relevant to the history of art or to the history of photography. People like Poujade, Meyer, or Salgado believe they are doing art when they are only creating something that is not only uninteresting but actually alien to what we believe he was when he produced the Ejercito de los Inmigrantes or los Carpinteros. 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 "Towards Machagoni" or the Scoring of Grecilea (whose geographic 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 Turrent or Meyer's work with twentieth-century Latin American art and the particular concerns of its avant-garde is therefore camouflaged or lost. One of the principal semantic stereotypes of the Latin American mind is that it relates to the world largely in an emotional way and not in an intellectual way. There are many counter-examples; but Mr. Ritchin, who seems to honestly believe he is complementing a project, does nothing to dispel that stereotype. He says: "The photographs that I saw in Havana had about them, for the most part, a darkness and warmth, an overwhelming, an unrelenting dialogue between photographer and subject that is very different from the more critical and self-reflective 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 because of this, we readily accept our intellectual faculties, our rational capacity, our ability to reflect upon ourselves and the products of our culture. Yet Mr. Ritchin denies that photography such as Meyer's or Turrent's is critical and self-reflective and describes it instead as "smiling" and "warm" he is thereby promoting the above-mentioned stereotype and failing to understand just how much Latin America has contributed to the understanding of one's own culture through artistic production has been for those decades.

Let us spell it out plainly for future reference. Latin Americans are the inheritors of an avant-garde art tradition that is unique. Surely it has a representational and aesthetic value 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: (1) Latin American nationalism transforms the avant-garde art practice of primitive art into the quest for autochthonous values which indigenismo amounted to, (2) modes of debate about the Latin America came about a bit later and at a slower pace than in Europe; (3) modern life in Europe was often identified as a critique of the arts as alienating whereas in Latin America it was often yearned for; (4) whereas World War I begot pessimism in Europe, it was rather a form of self-confidence in Latin America; (5) the 1917 Bolshevik revolution suggested the need to revolts in the arts the 1910 Mexican revolution and the movements for reform in Latin American universities; and (6) unlike its European counterparts, schools and universities in Latin America are the creative centers in propitiation 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. Eduardo Denisov, does. Mr. Denisov's approach is deceptive. One of the dangers of the LAP is that it is a class in the themes of Revolution, Love, Religion, U.S. penetration, Nature and Childhood. It is not a class in the interesting work of Chamb, Paillet, Obando, and the thousands of photographs of urban landscapes. Moreover, LAP will open up new horizons for those interested in understanding the art of Mexico, Mexico's brand of implosion is unfeasible.

An additional motive for the critique is the following consideration: Institutions which have housed 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. Curators and institutions that have housed LAP are institutions that have worked against the best interests of Latin American photography. It is in the interest of Latin American photographers to do more together to open up important work about photography. Quite frankly, there is so much in the way of sociological, historical, conceptual, critical and aesthetic work to be done in Latin America that Mr. Denisov's brand of implosion is unfeasible.

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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 gift-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 Chance 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
If a picture is worth 1,000 words—then here are 10,000 reasons for you to call us.
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