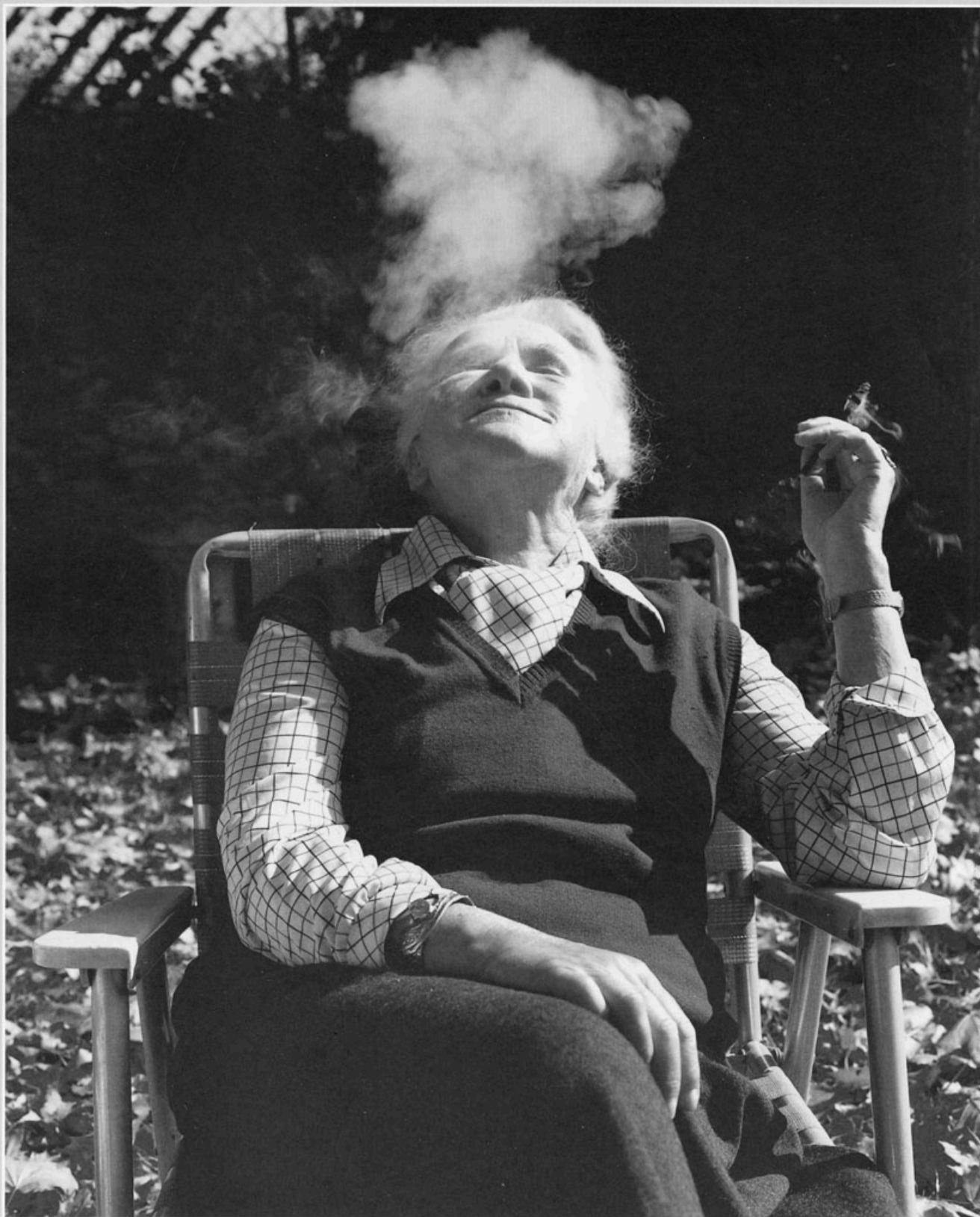


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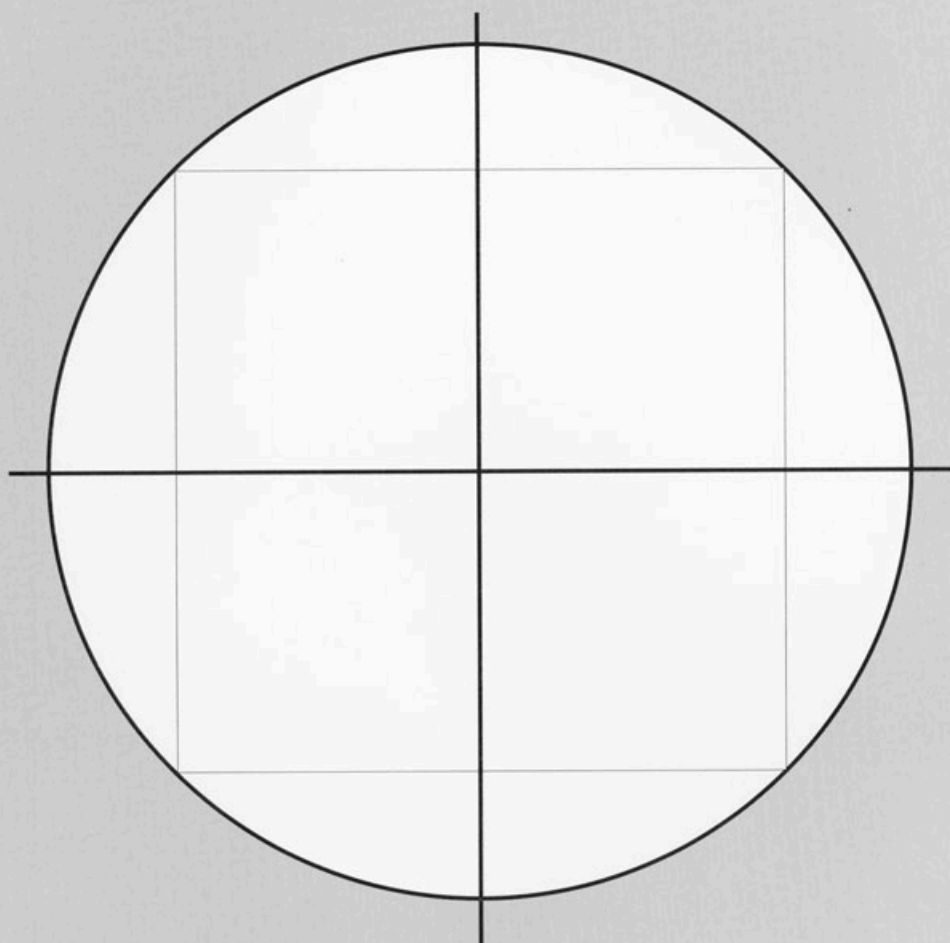
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SPOT is published
triannually; subscriptions
are \$15 per year in the
United States.

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HOUSTON CENTER
FOR PHOTOGRAPHY
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SPOT

is a publication of the
Houston Center for
Photography, a nonprofit
organization that serves the
photographic community
as a resource for educational
exchange through
exhibitions, publications,
lectures, workshops,
and fellowships.SPOT is sponsored in
part by grants from the
National Endowment for
the Arts, the Texas
Commission on the Arts,
and
the Cultural Arts Council
of Houston.HOUSTON CENTER
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FEATURES

6 Learning Experiences
An Interview with Gay Block

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Photography Curator Anne W. Tucker talks with Gay Block, a Houston native and nationally known photographer, about her experiences creating the book, video, and exhibition, "Rescuers of the Holocaust" on view at the MFAH. It's a rare look into the thoughts and feelings behind the creations.

A review of Block's book is also included, written by Lynn Herbert.

12 That Thing Called TV

THE TV FAMILY

When Dan Quayle blamed "the Murphy Brown mentality" for society's ills, he may have thought he was making a simple reference to elaborate a point, but the rest of the country saw it as anything but innocent and launched into a national debate. We asked: what is the definition of "traditional family?" What are "family values?" And how did we get to the point of using a sitcom character as an example in a presidential campaign? Michael G. DeVoll discusses what we watch every night on our television sets vs. what many of us call "reality."

A SLICE OF FICTION

"Television turns personalities and fictional characters into idols of both the young and the old," said the curators of the recent Houston Center for Photography exhibition "Icons and Idols: TV Images," and the six featured artists clearly showed their views of its impact.

Reviewed by Peter Harvey.

STRIKE A POSE

MTV is one of the more recent phenomenon to emerge out of the television age. It impacts what we see, what we hear, and how we act—especially the young. Lisa A. Lewis' book *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference* focuses on the influence of MTV on young women and girls.

Reviewed by Nels P. Highberg.

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Cover:

From *Rescuers* by Gay Block, see page 6. Zofia Baniecka (Poland): "I had always been independent and patriotic, and this was certainly my attitude during the war. It was unthinkable to be anything else. We hid guns and ammunition in our apartment, as well as people. The apartment was divided by curtains, and behind each one there was a different Jewish family. When our house was full, I found hiding places for the Jews with other families because it was too dangerous for them to be where the guns were."

EDITORS' NOTE

To underestimate the power of the videotronic press today, or the printed page for that matter, would certainly be the act of a fool or at least a cloistered nonparticipant. From television we receive lessons in family and other values—both fictive and news-engendered. The problem is that contrivance enters into each, stimulating latent doubts in the thinking public as to veracity, believability, and/or applicability. Photography and those who practice it are not immune to this influence; some recognize it for what it is and turn it into the *raison d'être* for their work. In this issue of *SPOT*, we examine these influences of the television age and the work of those who challenge them.

Houston hosted the Republican party this summer, so it seems only fitting that we take Vice President Quayle's now infamous Murphy Brown comment as a launching point for our feature on society and that monolithic thing called television—an examination of the impact on the American family by Michael DeVoll. An accompanying exhibition review, "Icons and Idols: TV Images," and a review of the book *Gender Politics and MTV*, address similar influences, biases, and stereotypes perpetuated by television today. Responses to TV's influence are as varied as they are plentiful: in the "Nancy Burson: Faces" exhibition and in Patrick Nagatani's book *Nuclear Enchantment*. Sadly, the currency of Gay Block's exhibition "Rescuers of the Holocaust" could be attributed to recent revisionist press purporting the non-existence of the Holocaust.

Truth, whatever that is presumed to be, is in the process of becoming a very individualistic concept. Given the extent of visual and philosophical manipulation, we must now decide for ourselves how and why the information/entertainment/artwork is altered instead of judging it merely based on whether it is fact or fiction. This splintering of belief has its own pitfalls, and what must coexist in this environment is a consensus of ethic—a basic value system. The artists and writers appearing in this issue of *SPOT* are to be commended for decoding the contrivances of the message and for attempting to define some tenets of the ethic. But also, a salute must go to all who took to the streets of Houston this August to show the Republican party that the truth is in our art, not in their fiction.

Marlee Miller and Maggie Olvey

WILLIAM A. GRAHAM, 1939–1992

The Houston Center for Photography lost a good friend and neighbor with the death of Bill Graham on September 9, 1992, from complications due to AIDS.

Bill had established the W. A. Graham Gallery in Houston in 1981 after his association with galleries in New York and Paris. In 1984, he moved the gallery to a building adjacent to the Houston Center for Photography. He served on the advisory board of the center from 1986–1990.

An advocate for and champion of Texas art and artists, Bill gave freely of his time and energy to serve as juror, critic, lecturer, and panelist. He was an active member of the Houston Art Dealers Association.

At the time of its closing, just ten days prior to Bill's death, the Graham Gallery represented the work of photographers Gay Block and Alain Clement. The gallery had previously exhibited the work of Linda Connor, Sharon Stewart, and a number of other photographers.

Memorial services were held at the Rothko Chapel in Houston on Saturday, September 12, 1992.

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Taking A Stand

It was a natural reaction. The Grand Old Party members came to Houston this August to hold their national convention to nominate their candidate for president of the United States. The outcome of the event was never in doubt: George Herbert Walker Bush would once again be their chosen candidate. But what the Republicans weren't quite prepared for were the unified demonstrations throughout the city that expressed the increasing dissatisfaction with current administration policies. For a

in the flyer announcing the GAG rally. "Government regulation of art-making comes in like a lamb and turns into a wolf. It replaces the visions of our artists with the visions of our politicians."

Formed in June of 1992, GAG "encourages citizens to participate in the democratic process by alerting Congress, protesting the current administration, and taking legal action in order to assure the vibrancy and freedom of our uniquely American cultural resources," according to its literature. Moreover, GAG is focusing on "depoliticization of the NEA by restoring the original function of the Endowment as described in its 1965 charter."

Before the GAG rally began, performance artist Tim Miller gave a workshop at the Houston Center for Photography on "Artists as Political and Cultural Activists." The event was sponsored by the Cultural Arts Council of Houston. Miller activated the audience with a performance stressing the role artists have or should have in their communities, and the problems, solutions, actions and specific strategies for Houston artists. He is an active member of ACT UP/L.A., which is the Aids Coalition to Unleash Power/Los Angeles. Describing himself as "a queer

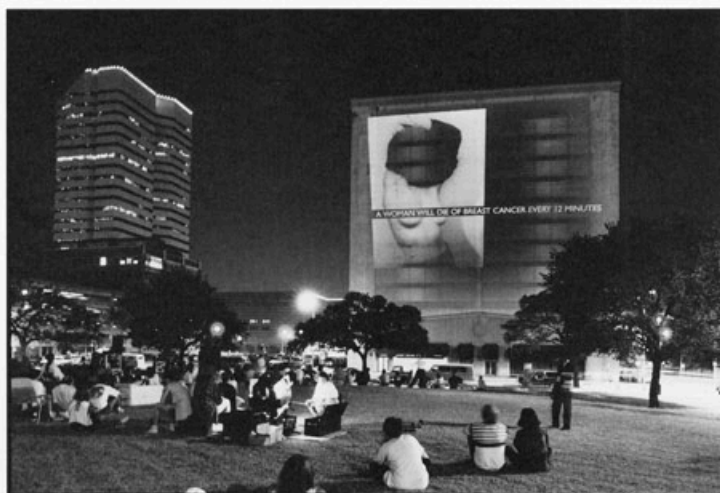
point of light," Miller entertained and enlightened the crowd at the Menil rally later that day with a description of how he, as a "loud, obnoxiously queer performance artist," came to be.

In the evening after the rally, the Houston Women's Caucus for Art presented "Taking a Stand: What Have We Got to Lose . . ." in the Firehouse Gallery, which was filled with a group exhibition of the same title. It was a panel discussion addressing an array of

issues of concern to women and men today and those threatened by current administration policies: choice, human rights, health care, AIDS, housing, and more. These issues crossed all special interest boundaries and could be seen as a rallying point for the organizers of the earlier Unity March on August 16, which included gays, artists, reproductive rights

activists, environmentalists, atheists and others. They paraded from the Fourth Ward of Houston, one of the city's most impoverished areas, to River Oaks, the city's most exclusive neighborhood. Many of the activists who participated in the parade, participated in their own organizations' events and the events of others; the faces were familiar, the support was mutual.

The choice issue and clinic defenses dominated the news when the media decided to cover the protests, however. The



For three nights during the GOP Convention, WAC presented a multi-media action at Market Square in downtown Houston. Photo by Paul Hester.

women's organization that made its presence known at the Unity March, the Menil rally, the clinic defenses, and its own actions, was the Women's Action Coalition. Formed in January, WAC is based in New York but has chapters in thirteen other cities around the country, including a newly formed chapter in Houston. Performance artist Laurie Anderson is a member of the New York chapter and says, "Whenever I need a jolt of inspiration, I go to a WAC meeting." WAC's drum corps was the hit of the convention demonstrations. With chants to a syncopated beat, such as "Get this George Bush: Can't rule my body, can't rule my mind, can't run my life, 'cause I run it fine; can't touch this," the drum corps could be seen and heard all around town.

For three nights of the convention, WAC presented a multi-media action addressing "women's issues" in downtown Houston at Market Square Plaza. The organization projected images onto the

side of a building, had the drum corps in action, and provided an open microphone for women to speak their minds. WAC also held a benefit at Lawndale Art & Performance Center on the first day of the convention. The center held a group exhibition titled "Politics as Visual" throughout the summer.

The results of the actions during the convention are still being felt. The ties and organizations strengthened during August are still growing. WAC has had its first organizational meeting in Houston. GAG has gained supporters, and the gay community is pursuing its charges of police brutality experienced during the protests. A political convention in our hometown brings with it an international spotlight, and thus a visible opportunity to take a stand. No matter what happens in November, Houston activists didn't take it lying down.

Marlee Miller



The WAC drum corps provided vocal support to the clinic defenders. Photo by Ben DeSoto

party whose members continue to be divisive, the Republicans created unity among the varied groups that took a stand against them.

GAG—its slogan "Don't GAG the Arts"—organized many of the convention protest events in support of freedom of expression. GAG's main event was a rally "to support a non-political National Endowment for the Arts" held on August 18 at the park owned by The Menil



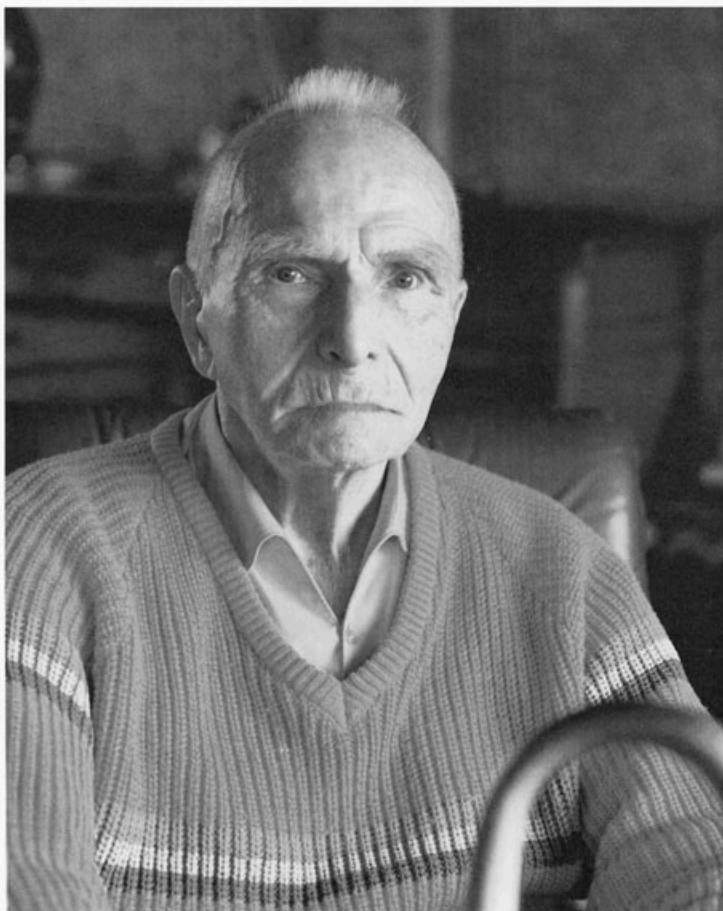
The GAG rally at The Menil Collection attracted hundreds of supporters of freedom of expression. Photo by Ben DeSoto

Collection. Nearly 1,500 participants heard the speeches, chanting, and drumming that provided an unending array of creative protests. At the same time, supporters of President Bush were hosting a major donor dinner next door in the museum, which the president attended.

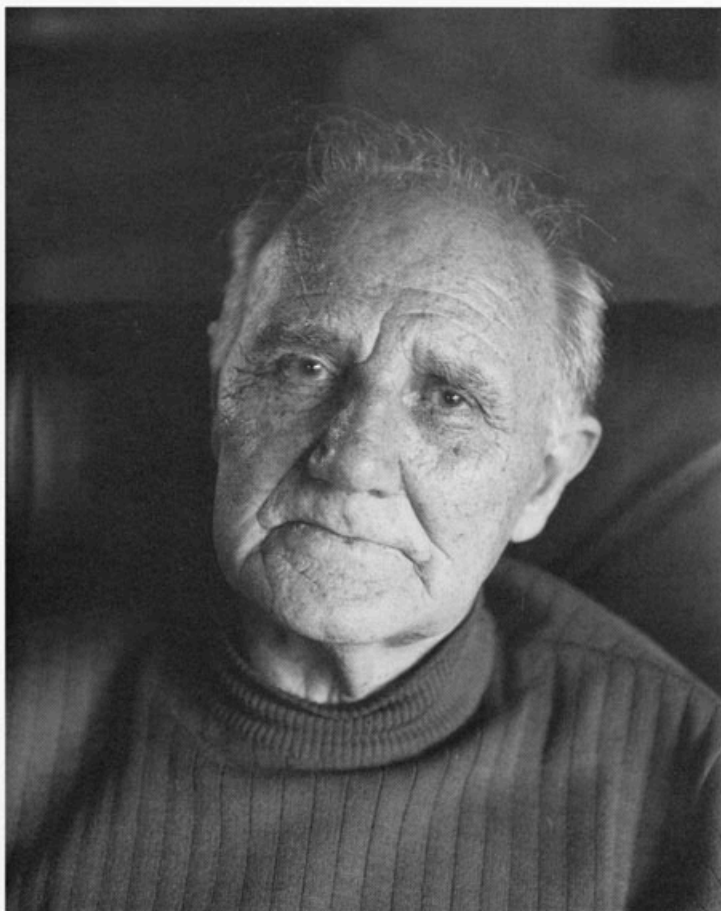
"Many Congressmen cannot pick ties to match their suits, yet they claim sufficient expertise to judge late twentieth-century art," wrote University of Houston Art Education Chair Dennis Fehr, Ed.D.,

The protests' slogans and signs during the Republican Convention were both creative and pointed. Photo by Jodi Nelson/Kenneth A. Axelson





From "Rescuers," Arnold Douwes, The Netherlands, 1988 © Gay Block



From "Rescuers," Seine Otten, The Netherlands, 1988 © Gay Block

LEARNING EXPERIENCES

An Interview with Gay Block

Photographer Gay Block, a native Houstonian now living in Los Angeles and Santa Fe, was in town at the end of July to oversee the installation of her exhibition "Rescuers of the Holocaust" on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, August 7 through November 1, 1992. The editors of SPOT took that opportunity to arrange a discussion between Block and an old acquaintance, MFAH Curator of Photography Anne W. Tucker. Tucker first encountered Block's work when she picked it for a juried show in New York City in 1975. They didn't actually meet until a year later when Tucker moved to Houston. The following is an excerpt from Block's recent visit.

Anne W. Tucker: The first of your images that I remember seeing were the portraits of the Jewish community here in Houston, and then later, in other cities, where you primarily photographed people in their homes. And so, I've always thought of you as a portraitist. Are you comfortable with being thought of as a portraitist?

Gay Block: Yes. Definitely, because those images of people were what was important to me. They always have been what has made a statement of some sort.

I've never exhibited my 35mm work—except for that first show that you juried. Then I started studying my own community because I needed to find out things about how I grew up. And so, that's what I thought was important to exhibit. And it is only now that Temple Beth Israel is going to show some work that I took in '78, '79, and '80 of campgrounds, all 35mm pictures. And I thought: "I really have always liked these pictures. I have never made exhibition prints of them. I think I'd like to make exhibition prints of them." It was not until I finished making them—we

are talking a month or two ago—that I realized, "I like what these pictures look like." Well, maybe that's statement enough. Then, I realized, "That kind of feeling of transcendence—if you go somewhere else because you are looking at a picture, you go somewhere else in your head, or you feel something—that is enough." So, you don't always have to be making a statement that is very attached to what you think is important in life. Because this other thing is also a statement. But it has taken me all these years to figure this out.

AT: Before I go back in time, that really leads us forward to this: having made this realization, where do you think you'll go next?

GB: What I've been planning to work on next is some kind of piece about my mother, whom I've been photographing since '79 and haven't really made many prints. I've also done a lot of videotaping of her. I have no idea what that's going to be like or if it's even going to be something that will be exhibited.

I've been thinking recently, maybe I would just like to go to the street with my camera because of the feelings that I have certainly after [the riots] because I live in L.A. now, although I'm getting ready to leave—a series about what the streets look like, what America looks like today, going out there and just photographing, because there is something so sad and disquieting about it. And I would imagine if I did that, there would be some portraiture. And of course, it is all about people. But it would be something other than portraiture, too. It would be hard, though, to go at a project like that with this pre-conceived idea, except that that's the way I started in my original portraits.

This pre-conceived idea about the

people I grew up among not having the values that I wish they had had. My not having grown up in an intellectual milieu that I would have wanted to. But what I learned was something entirely different from what I thought I was going to see. So, maybe it's natural to go into a certain project knowing what you are going to find. You just have to be open to seeing something else.

AT: It seems to me, in looking at your work over the years, that you have gone into series that will put ideas, which you think you hold, into question. I'll just run through them. You photographed the Jewish community in the late seventies and early eighties. Then you photographed girls at a summer camp in Maine and the Jewish Community Center in 1981. Then you photographed primarily the elderly community in Miami Beach for a period of three years in the mid-eighties. You had two commissioned projects, where you photographed for the book *Photographic Portrait of Texas: Texas Sesquicentennial Project*, and you photographed employees of the Texas-based HEB grocery stores. Then you did a series that, I think, a lot of people thought was a radical departure from the others, primarily because you asked people to take their clothes off. You photographed people, clothed and nude, in diptychs. And then you began this series, which is being exhibited now, called "Rescuers of the Holocaust." But it seems to me that each of those series paralleled something in your life that you were questioning.

GB: Absolutely.

AT: Whether it was something in your past life, like the girls at the camp you photographed, or . . .

GB: It was a camp I had been to, and my daughter was just in her last of seven

years there. And it was something about, "Oh, my gosh, why have I sent my daughter to the same camp that I went to? Don't I want—haven't I wanted more—better advancement for her? And well, what are girls like today?"

It was my own self-criticism of my decisions as a mother, but also of my own past, my own youth.

AT: But there were very personal issues. These are pictures about adolescence, of becoming aware. There is sexuality, and there are pictures about self-image. It is a very tender, almost poignant, series. You move in close on the girls, and in that way that you look at your own adolescence so ruthlessly.

GB: That's another example of a series becoming something that I didn't set out for it to become. A funny story about those pictures is that Marti Mayo [then curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston] had asked me to have an exhibit at CAM in May of 1982. I took these pictures in the summer of 1981.

She came over in about October, and I had all these hundreds of rolls of film developed with the contact sheets. And I said: "Marti, I think you have to cancel the show. I don't think there's anything in these pictures." And as she looked at the contact sheets, she just looked at me and said: "Just start printing, Gay. Just shut up and start printing." The pictures I printed first were not the pictures that ended up to be the ones that were the best, or the ones that I liked the best, or that really said it. And it took me that whole nine months to make those decisions, to find the project, to find what I had learned. That's why I've always said, "Photography is this learning experience." And I learned things not just about images, but mostly about human beings.

AT: Those first three projects were black and white, and then you went to the Miami series, and that's in color.

GB: Because I went to Miami, and Miami was color. That's what it was.

AT: The "Rescuers" project you started photographing both in black and white and color. Did you photograph in Miami in black and white at first?

◀ **Arnold Douwes and Seine Otten helped many Jews find shelter in Nieuwlande, The Netherlands, and its environs.**

Arnold: "The Jews would stay with them [Seine and his wife] a few days until we found a place. No matter how many we brought, their door was always open for more. And they had a very small house, only two rooms, and the lavatory was outside in the garden. . . . There were usually at least three people hiding, but sometimes they kept twelve or thirteen people at a time, sleeping on the table, under the table, anywhere."

GB: I never used black and white. And the Miami series was sort of the end of the concentrating on Jews in America. All of those first four series go under that heading loosely.

I think it was sort of the full circle for me personally, beginning with my community here, which was the affluent reform community that had gone so far away from "the old country"—from ethnicity. And then staying with that, with the camp series. With the Jewish Community Center, it was much more of a mix. They used to joke at the Jewish Community Center swimming pool: the Israelis sat over here, and the Russians sat over here, and the people from Brighton Beach—they used to call this section "Brighton Beach" because the New Yorkers sat over here.

The Miami series represented the old country Jews who spoke Yiddish, all of them living on their Social Security checks. I only photographed in the poorest section of Miami Beach. What I felt was these were the grandmothers and grandfathers, or "Bubbies" and "Zadies," that I wished I had had—that I didn't have. My grandparents were born in the South.

AT: Miami also moved you out of the Houston community. Even though the summer camp wasn't here—you knew those camp people. Miami was moving into a community—a different locale, a different physicality, a different feeling to the place, different architecture.

GB: And they were also a different kind of people from those I grew up with.

AT: And it involved taking all your equipment, going to a place, and being dependent on the weather, which is a lot more complicated. If you are photographing somebody in town, if it doesn't work out one day, you can go back. Miami was much more complicated project because it had all these other layers of complication, yes?

GB: Yes. But also, if I were photographing in town, I might take one picture a day, have one sitting a day or less. One sitting or two a week maybe. But going to Miami, I would go for four or five days, and I would probably take twenty-five pictures a day.

But when you were saying, "It was a different set of problems," the first thing that came to mind was every day when I would leave my hotel with my equipment

and go down to the South Beach, which was close to where I was staying, I would think, "Oh, [groans] I don't want to get out of the car." It always has scared me. There has always been that sort of fear, before I would photograph. (Not with the "Rescuers" because it was such a subject-oriented thing.) With these things where you have to walk up to somebody and start talking, and sort of prove yourself to them, and [say,] "Oh, I want to take your picture." That was work.

AT: Has that gotten easier?

GB: [Moans] Yes, I think a little bit. Yes, because I have more confidence in the importance of what I'm doing. I don't want to say that, though. [Laughter] At least in the value for myself of what I'm doing.

AT: How do you know on each of these projects when you've finished the project?

GB: I think when I don't want to do it anymore. [Laughter] Even with the "Rescuers," after the riots, I went and photographed a woman in South Central L.A. She's a black woman who rescued a white reporter. He was shot and was on her street in his car bleeding to death. She took him to the hospital in her car, which was a dangerous thing to do. So, I called her and I told her about this book I have done, and was thinking about doing another project on rescuers today. And I think I could do that, but I think I don't want to do that. And that's the way I feel right now. I just don't want to do it.

AT: You've settled those issues.

GB: Yes, but there might be other issues, I'm not sure. But it was a way of working, I didn't want to do right this minute.

AT: The next two projects you did in the eighties were commissions. Was that different?

GB: Well, the fifty Texas artists—yes. That was very different. I don't think I learned so much. I don't think I consider those pictures my art. But the HEB pictures are. I learned a lot about photography and about people. Those were easier, because HEB, the grocery store, commissioned me to do diptychs: pictures of grocery store employees at work and at home. I loved working with the Mexican-Americans, with whom I had never spent much time. And I learned so much about working-class people from that. It's one of my favorite projects; I really like the pictures.

AT: At this point, you moved from Houston to Los Angeles. Your next big project in Los Angeles was this series on photographing people clothed and unclothed. To do this you put ads—

GB: In the UCLA paper. UCLA is such a huge school; I got people of all kinds and all ages. And I paid people \$30 for two hours. I wasn't looking for professional models.

And I didn't know what that series was about, except that it was about body image. For me, it was about trying to figure out my own body image. It was about being overweight, which I always have been since I was born, I think. I don't think I finally figured out what I learned. I never worked on that long enough to resolve it. I did a lot of pictures I like, but I don't know what I learned.

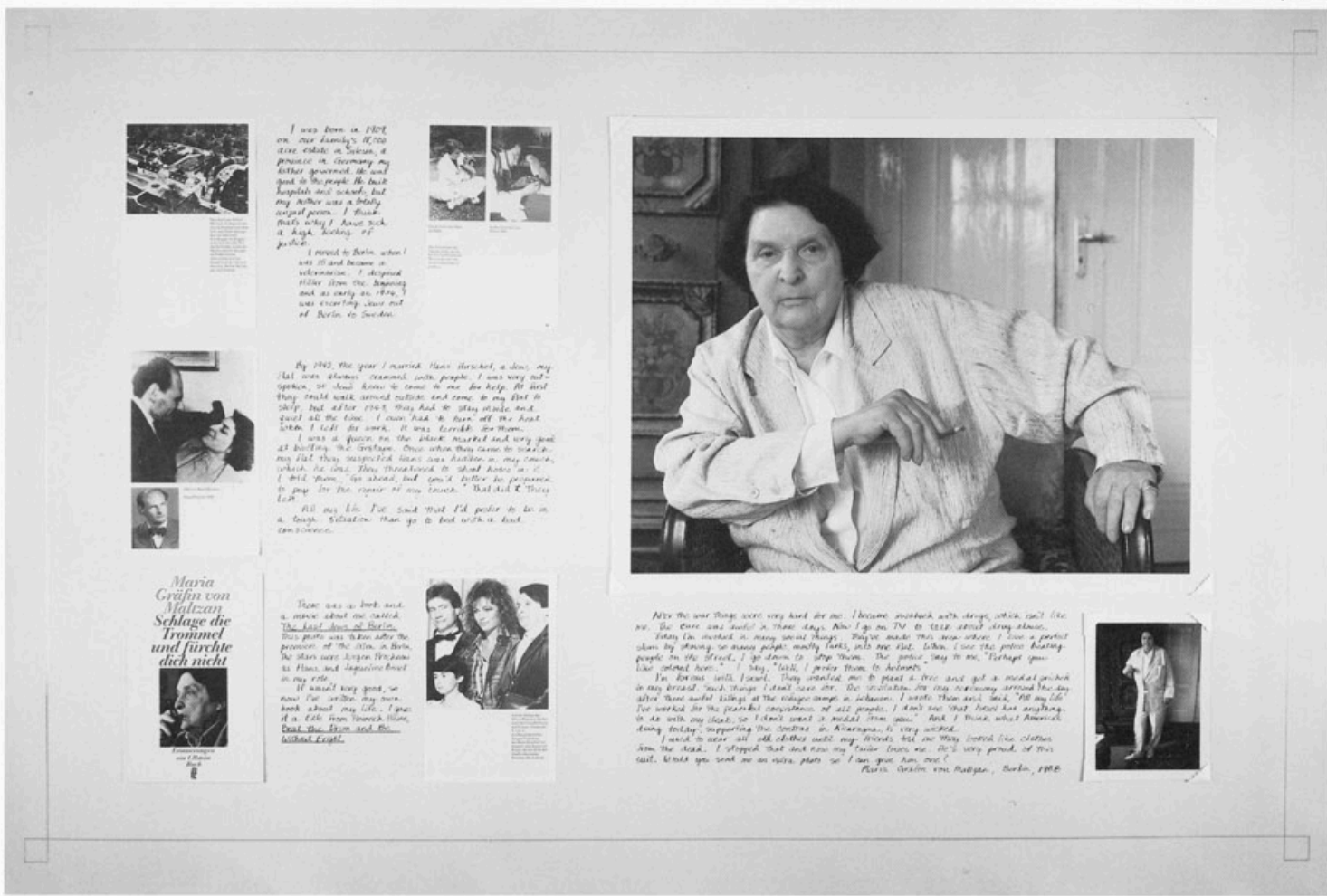
AT: It seemed to me that the seeds of that series are in two pictures, one quite early of you and your mother, neither of which have a blouse or upper garments on, and another one of you and Aaron Siskind.

GB: But that last one—the Siskind was 1985.

AT: Which is the same time as the

Maria Countess von Maltzan housed refugees in her Berlin apartment.
"Most people don't understand that there were a lot of Jews in Berlin who were just sort of wandering about. In the daytime they went to the zoo, or anywhere, and at night they went to the woods, or slept in shops, or at my place. But on May 27, 1943, Goebbles said, 'Germany is judenrien.' They put out a notice that Jews who told where other Jews were hidden wouldn't be killed. Suddenly you could rely on no one. When people live in terror and fright, they simply can't use their brains anymore. The Jews were in a condition that caused them to stop thinking." ▼

From "Rescuers," Maria Countess von Maltzan, Berlin, 1988 © Gay Block





From "Rescuers," Johannes De Vries, The Netherlands/Canada, 1988 © Gay Block

Moral Courage

Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust, by Gay Block and Malka Drucker, with a prologue by Cynthia Ozick and afterword by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis. New York & London: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1992. 255 pages. \$30.

Lynn M. Herbert

This book is about people who stepped forward and rescued those who were suffering Nazi persecution during World War II. This is not a book about photography, nor is it a book for everyone. It is a book about the far reaches of the human spirit, and readers must be willing to venture to the lowest depths of humankind's history before they can soar to the heights that the rescuers achieved during the now unbelievable time that was World War II in Europe.

The material has been very sensitively handled and the book is thoughtfully composed. Individual rescuers' personal accounts are arranged by country, including The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Soviet Union/Ukraine. A concise history of each country's unique record during the war precedes the stories. As Malka Drucker points out in the introduction, "The roles of government and church, national character, culture, politics, geography, and the prevailing attitude toward Jews all affected rescue activities." Each rescuer's account is accompanied by a brief introduction that enriches our understanding of the person and often prepares us for the difficult material that follows. The stories are frightening and tell of circumstances that even in retrospect are difficult to fathom. Each rescuer is portrayed in a recent color portrait by Block and, when possible, are accompanied by photographs taken during the war that relate to their stories. The photographs make them true and force these stories into our reality.

I think we all have the same questions about these remarkable people. Who were they? What made them do what they did? How did they cope with the risks inflicted upon themselves, their families, and in some cases, their towns by the choices they made? With words and photographs, this book answers all of these questions. The rescuers came from all walks of life, all religions. Some had community support in their rescue efforts. Those from communities unsympathetic often had older members of their families or religion that instilled a lack of prejudice in them. The rescuers were of all ages—from children to the elderly. Their stories tell of incredible risks, yet most indicate that they would certainly do it again if presented with the same circumstances.

The book also answers questions that most of us don't want to ask. Were these people able to resume a normal life? Did their communities accept what they had done during the war? Have they been amply rewarded and recognized for their heroic humanitarian deeds? The book reveals that many were ostracized for what they did, alienated or forced to move to other countries. Others found that they couldn't bear to live with people who had participated in the atrocities. Starting over in a foreign country was more than many of them could successfully handle. Some have maintained lasting relationships with those whom they rescued. Others seem immersed in bitterness.

In Jerusalem, there is a tree-lined path called the Avenue of the Righteous at Yad Veshem—the Holocaust memorial. Each tree has a small marker bearing the name of a person who rescued Jews during the war. Many of the rescuers interviewed for this book already had trees planted in their honor. Others were discovered by Block and Drucker while researching this book. Some have since accepted this honor. Others have declined.

As a volume, this book of lives told, and young and old faces portrayed, is both painful and reassuring. It is painful because it reminds us that a doorway to evil was opened that can never really be closed. But more importantly, this book is reassuring because, in the face of that overwhelming tide of evil, humankind responded with an element of moral courage that managed to survive and prevail.

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nudes. Well, a little bit before the nudes. And both of those are in black and white. It seems to me that you had been asking yourself, toying with this idea, but took it from self-portrait then to photographing other people. You let them pose themselves, right?

GB: Yes.

AT: What's the proportion of where you let people pose themselves and where you ask them to sit some place or where you arrange the objects around them?

◀ Johannes DeVries and his wife sheltered a Jewish boy for the duration in The Netherlands.

"We talked for some time, but we decided, 'When you would close the door on someone like that and you heard later that he was destroyed, how would you feel the rest of your life? I think I would be destroyed myself.' So in 1942, Shlomo Haringman came to live with us."

GB: Oh, I rarely ask them to hold something or do something, move an arm, perhaps. What I really want is somebody sitting the way they would sit, or the way they do sit, or doing what they do.

In the "Rescuers" pictures of Arnold and Seine (bust portraits) the two men were sitting together when I interviewed them, and I knew I could not photograph them together. They had to have their own images. Arnold, I had been looking at that way, and he was fascinating to me. And I took him just the way I had been looking at him the whole time. Then, Seine, when I went to take his picture I raised the camera. The reason I know this is that the video camera continued to run, so I've seen myself do this. I just moved my tripod over to Seine, looked at him, and raised my tripod about four feet, so that I was over him instead. I have no idea why, it was just an intuitive thing. But it was what it needed because Seine's wife had just died two months ago, and that was his feeling. It was the way he looked. He looked sad.

But it feels to me like I arrange myself more than I arrange people.

AT: Letting people compose themselves. They frequently end up not to be poses that one might traditionally consider flattering. Flattery doesn't seem to be part of the portraits. They are not mean, but they are in no way glossy.

GB: I think that's because I love what somebody looks like. And the thought to flatter somebody wouldn't even come to my mind, because I love the way they look. So there would seem no necessity to flatter them. Certainly not to make them look bad either, but I want to see exactly the way they are. I think that's why I've made film or video from at least three of the projects, because I also love exactly the way people talk, and what they say, and how they say it, the way their voice is, and the way they pronounce their words. And even with my first project, I made an audiotape.

AT: When you say that you love the way people look, one of the points that comes through for me in the "Rescuers" is that we, as a culture, have been taught to think that heroes are always beautiful people. We have been taught that heroes look like Clint Eastwood and John Wayne. One of the "Rescuers" is a big, forceful looking woman, a countess. When Hollywood did their movie, they had Jacqueline Bisset play her. So, one of the things I love about the "Rescuers" exhibition is that it completely calls into question our stereotypes about what a hero looks like. There is this woman with varicose veins. Some of the people are sophisticated people, and some of the people are not sophisticated people. And it really questions our assumptions about an exterior . . .

GB: It seems to me what we have to accept is that we are all the same. That we could all have done what these people did. We could all be doing what Mother Theresa does. Maybe we couldn't do what Einstein does, but in terms of human compassion, we could all be heroic. And so, maybe that's the point.

AT: It's a point that you allow to come through, because you do respect and accept each of them, therefore all of us, for what we are, what we look like. There is an

From "Rescuers," Marguerite Mulder, The Netherlands, 1988 © Gay Block





From "Rescuers," Gertrud Luckner, Germany, 1988 © Gay Block

inherent respect in that direct approach without tidying up, that is not traditionally part of portraiture.

GB: It is like [Diane] Arbus, and it is like [August] Sander.

AT: Are those two major figures for you?

GB: Yes. Arbus, herself, said, "It doesn't mean I want to kiss you, but I love what you look like." She also said that she doesn't have any interest in photographing famous people. And I've never had much interest in that either, because famous people have a certain idea about what they need to look like, much more than we ordinary people. And I don't want to make somebody look in a way that they need to look. I want to make somebody look the way they look. And it has to do with being comfortable with yourself, and maybe they're not all comfortable with themselves. "The Rescuers" had a certain confidence. How can you go against everything—and you know you are risking your life to do something—if you don't know

you are doing the right thing. They believed it was going to end well. They always believed it.

GB: Take the picture of Joe DeVries, with his leg across the arm of the chair. He sat like that the entire interview. It would have been unthinkable to photograph him any other way. And he loved that picture. It looked like him. If you're comfortable with yourself, then you like the way your picture looks when you are looking like yourself. You don't need to lick your lips and put your hands in a certain place.

AT: Now, I want to go back—it's a lesser-known fact that you are also a film and video artist. It is one of the things that you do, and have always done from the very beginning.

GB: The first one is about just the Temple members. Beth Israel, which is the oldest reform temple in the Southwest, and the temple I always belonged to, wanted to do a bicentennial film. And so, because I was a photographer, I took pictures and

did an animated film—a 16mm film. And I interviewed people almost exclusively about their values, about who they are, as opposed to how the Temple grew. I asked them things about the Temple, too, but the film was about a community, and how that community was formed, and what its values, its human values, were.

AT: So, you put the tape recordings and the still photographs together.

GB: That's right.

AT: And then, you moved in the early '80s to video. When and how did you decide that video would be part of Miami?

GB: I decided really early, and then concentrated on it the last year of the work. Because I just loved the accents, and I loved the way people talk. [Laughter] And those Yiddish, European accents are obviously (since there are no more Jews in Europe) practically gone. And I also loved these people's independence, and their detachment from money. They might have a Social Security income of \$400 a month,

but this was the happiest time of their life because they knew how much was coming in, and how much was going out, and they had no problems. They didn't have any worries of any kind. [I asked.] "Well, aren't you worried about death?" [They said.] "No, why should I worry about death?" There was no question that I could ask them what they were really worried about. I thought this was amazing. This is not what we think of as the way old people are. But it is, of course, the way old people should be able to be. These people were independent. They took each day as it came—taking a walk, shopping, going to the beach to sing Yiddish songs in the afternoon.

AT: And so, you edited that into a half-hour?

GB: That's a half-hour video, yes.

AT: You decided all along that "The Rescuers" would be both?

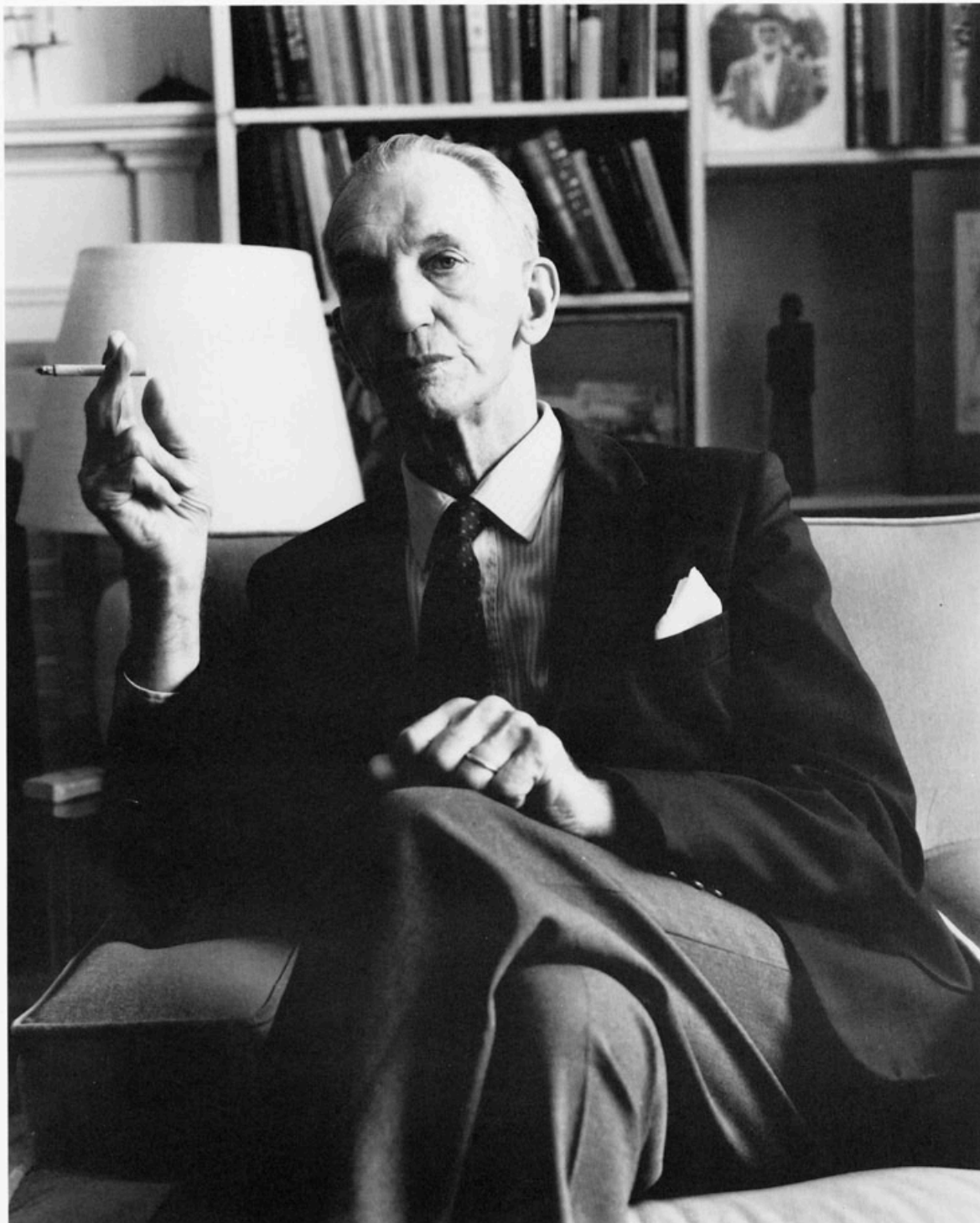
GB: No. I never thought I was going to do a video about the rescuers. [Laughter] Malka [Drucker] and I started doing that together. When Malka starts a project she says, "book," since she's a writer. And when I start a project, I say, "exhibition" and that was it. But I started looking at the videos in order to get the first person words for the book as well as for the exhibition. I would never have been able to transcribe or watch or listen to audiotapes. I have to have visuals. I could not have done it on audiotape: it would have put me to sleep. I couldn't do it. So, I always thought, well, we would just donate the videotapes to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Israel.

Then I ended up watching them, and becoming so fascinated with them, that I had to make a video. I made a long version that turned out to be 54 minutes. Wanting something shorter to show with exhibits or show when I was giving

a lecture about "The Rescuers," I made the short version [24 minutes], which is at the museum.

AT: When you started to do the show, you made another change that you had not done before: you decided to put text pieces with the photographs. How did that decision come about?

GB: I felt that they needed at least some explanation about who they were. "The Rescuers" just couldn't be images on the wall. So, for the book, I had asked the rescuers to send me their old wartime black-and-white pictures. I made copies of them, and sent them back to them. I had all this material, and the pictures were fascinating. So I made another kind of image that didn't work out, but they were third person typeset descriptions of what they did. It was all under one big window mat the 16 x 20 portrait—these little black-and-white pictures. It was so horrible to cut these little window mats. And then I cut even the windows for little captions—



From "Rescuers," Jan Karski, Poland/Washington, D.C., 1988 © Gay Block

for the little pictures. I made ten of those, and I hated them.

Then I went to the art store and milled around and looked and found these big pieces of paper that I used for these things, and I thought, well, maybe it should be like a page from a scrapbook. So, if it's a scrapbook piece, it has to be in the first person—in their words—exactly their words. And then of course, it had to be short. It just evolved that way.

AT: So, you took the interviews that would be two hours sometimes, and you took segments of the tapes—their own words—to tell their story in these 30 x 40-inch scrapbook pieces, and incorporated the older photographs, which are black and white. And you even deckled the edges of the pictures like old snapshots. You put photo-corners on, and then you made your color prints to go with it. And there are sixteen of those in the exhibition, and then, approximately thirty of the others, that are 20 x 24.

GB: They are just portraits without the text.

AT: Well, with that small explanation off to the side . . . Did you ever feel as though "The Rescuers" story was overwhelming you as an artist?

GB: No, I think it has overwhelmed the book.

AT: This is the third component.

GB: Yes. And I might have, in the way that I made the scrapbook pieces, made the rescuers' story overwhelm the work, the portraits. Because to me, what was the portrait without the story, in a way? The portrait can stand alone, but it's because of who they are that it's interesting. It seems that's got to be true with everything almost, though, with all pictures. I mean, the content is always right up there with the form.

AT: Did the book come after the pictures or was this all simultaneous?

GB: The book definitely came after the pictures. This show that's at the museum opened in Los Angeles in November of '90, and we were in the middle of our twenty or so rejections on the book, which is now getting ready to go into its third printing.

AT: And the format of the book is much more like a chapter format, where people are grouped into countries, and then each person has much longer stories to tell. I mean, they have three, four, sometimes five pages in the book of text. Is that what you mean when you said, it's because the text—the proportion is so

much greater—that you feel like the story overwhelms the book.

GB: No. As you can imagine, it took us a long time to find the form, both for the exhibition and for the book. And as I said, I made these first ten pieces in third person. Malka was writing the pieces in third person, and it wasn't working. And it was not 'til I conceived the scrapbook idea and started trying to put them in their own words that I realized, "Ah, this is the form the book has to take, too." And then, we had to figure out how to use the old pictures, and how to divide it by chapter. Malka then wrote a historical background for each country. What I mean when I say that the subject has overwhelmed the book is that the book hasn't gotten anything that I would consider really like a critical review to talk about how it's written or what it says. Every review is so overwhelmed with what the rescuers did. And that's what I mean.

AT: The final part of the program presentation at the museum will be a symposium, where you and Malka will talk, and then we will have community leaders talk about moral courage in the post-holocaust age. Having seen this similar format done in other cities, I have always been fascinat-

ed watching you and Malka make a joint presentation. I think prior to this, our conversation hasn't been enough about collaboration. This is clearly another aspect of this project, as opposed to all your prior ones. You said it was a collaboration.

GB: That's right. The first one of the Jewish community here I signed on to do myself, and then asked Linda May to do it with me. And that was a collaboration in terms of the film. But this was really a collaboration. Because I realized that when I went to interview this woman in South Central L.A., and Malka didn't go with me, I realized how much I depended on her to ask the right question, and to help with the setting up of the trust, and the relationship between the rescuer and us. And I really missed her. It was definitely a collaboration.

She can do things I absolutely can't do, like write. She wrote all the generated text. I can do things: when she read the edited first person interviews, she said, "I could never have done this. I wouldn't have wanted to keep their words the same." As a writer, she would have wanted to fix some of their words. I absolutely would have gone nuts, if she had changed one of their words. So, it was such a good collaboration.

Malka has a new idea about the rescuers every time we talk. And it's great because it is a subject that needs to be understood better. Because certainly the point of your symposium is we need rescuers today all over the place in this country and everywhere else. And she's been talking a lot about that kind of thing. We should get her to say something about it, except she's not here yet.

AT: This is a show that you curated. I mean, you selected the images, you constructed it. You worked with curatorial assistance to do all the framing and everything. And then, you did a show with the Museum of Modern Art, which was more in the traditional format, where Susan Kismaric and you selected the pictures, but she had a much more dynamic

role.

GB: Yes. It's a smaller show, and when you talked about the subject overwhelming the portraits, I think she was very cautious about that. However, in the end—she was just going to hang a show of portraits, and she started working with the work, and came up with the exact same solution in a slightly different form that I had come up with with these pictures, except that visually, it's done differently. It's not on one piece of paper. She kept the portraits separate, apart from the text.

But the text is the same, and it uses the wartime pictures, is what I'm trying to say. It was hard to curate this show myself because of being so involved with the people. We have continued to write them, they write us back. We get a death notice here or there. And we care. We feel like even though we were with these people for three hours, we feel like so many of them are such close friends. So, deciding which ones to put text with, and not to put text with, and how to do it—it was really, really impossible to separate myself from my feelings about the people and what they did. And from whether or not that portrait was better or worse. So, it was so hard to do that.

AT: In every city that I have seen the

exhibition, people have stood and read all the text pieces, and I have yet to be in the gallery when there wasn't somebody crying.

GB: It's gotten good reviews, but it's really not gotten much—art review. It had a good art review—the very first one—in *Art Week* in November of '90. And the MOMA show got a good review in the *New Criterion*. Otherwise, they've almost entirely been subject-oriented, about the holocaust and the rescuers and goodness, and that kind of thing. Or else they've been like the review you have on your desk. A. D. Coleman starts it out by saying, "Just exactly what Gay Block's portraits are doing at the Museum of Modern Art is anybody's guess."

And I thought that when the Modern decided to hang it, I thought, "Well, it certainly isn't cutting-edge photography." But why did they hang it? Well, it had something to do with—well, maybe photography and all art needs to be a little more humanist than it has been. Maybe that's the direction that we need to go in. Maybe art's been the visionary thing of the way the country or the world has been going, which is sort of away from the human need or content. I don't know. It's a big, long subject.

AT: But I think that actually, that leads us back to two things you said earlier. One was that you were thinking of working out on the streets because you thought that we do need to look at our environment, and look at our surroundings. I think that what you have always done is used your art to provoke inside of yourself an awareness of certain questions that are important to you, and in so doing, have engaged your viewers on those issues. And what "The Rescuers" does is make each of us question, "Could I have done that? Then, what could I be doing now?" And that's not all bad, if a piece of art does that.

GB: As Peter Galassi at MOMA wrote to me, "I don't know if the pictures have made me a better person, but they made me know it's more possible to try."

Note: Except for Summer Camp, all photographs are originally color. The Rescuers' quotes are from the Block-Drucker book reviewed on page 8.

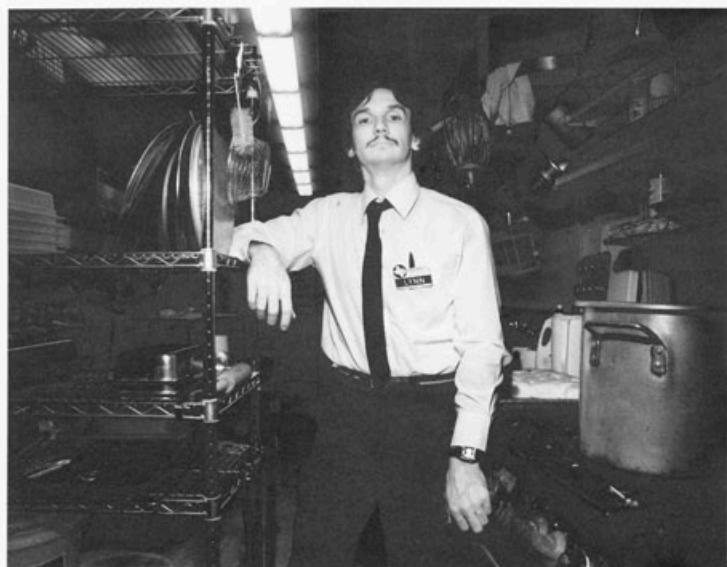


1987 © Gay Block

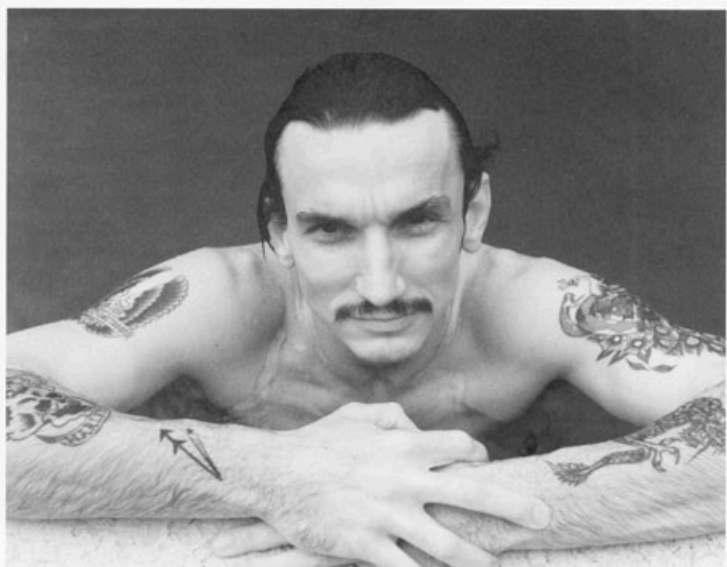


Summer Camp, 1985 © Gay Block

Lynn Appleyard, Austin HEB, 1985 © Gay Block



Lynn Appleyard, Austin HEB, 1985 © Gay Block



The TV Family

Michael G. DeVoll

On Monday, April 18, 1992, before an audience of 21 million people, Murphy Brown gave birth to a son. On Tuesday, April 19, Vice President Dan Quayle said that Brown, because of her decision to have a baby "without the benefit of marriage," was not a good role model for inner-city youth and that the Los Angeles riots were caused by the "Murphy Brown mentality." That evening, his comment was discussed on local and network news programs. The next day, op-ed articles, front-page headlines, and a half-hour late-night news segment were dedicated to the topic. Even opinion polls were conducted on whether Murphy Brown was a good or bad role model for American youth.

The influence of television cannot be denied. When a politician uses a fictional character from a network situation comedy to make a point about family values, and that reference elicits such passionate responses, it's time to reevaluate how television actually represents family values and the American family. This inevitably takes us back to that old mirror vs. window question.

As a precursor, we should consider where the rhetoric of "family values" originated: from a very polar, highly volatile political campaign. The terms "family values" and "traditional family" are being tossed about in an attempt to cast asper-

sions on those who would not hold to conservative mores. In addition, Quayle's comment clearly denies that the L.A. riots could be caused by any deep-rooted, long-standing cultural unrest piqued by the acquittal of the officers charged in the Rodney King case.

If the political right insists on the "traditional family" model, let us begin by defining a "traditional" family so that we can then identify, by contrast, a "non-traditional" family. If a tradition, according to the dictionary, is a custom or practice transmitted from generation to generation, then we must look back to our parents' and grandparents' generations for this definition. From the 1930s through the '50s, 78 percent of America's households were composed of married-couple families.¹ Although this statistic has dropped dramatically (to 56 percent in 1989²), it is still the most common household arrangement in the United States. So, for the purposes of this discussion, the

"traditional family" will consist of a married male/female couple with an average of 2.63 persons³ in the household.

Out of a sampling of 24 prime-time network series, only 50 percent of the families represented fall into the "traditional" category. Several of these "traditional" families, however, have a few traits that boost them out of the "ordinary." *Step by Step*



Roseanne, ABC Television Network

(ABC), a '90s rework of the ever popular '70s series *The Brady Bunch*, has the traditional married couple, but it is a second marriage for both with each spouse bringing several children to the household. Unlike the less controversial coupling of the widow and widower of the Bradys, this series features one widow and one divorced man. Following in the "widow" pattern is *Major Dad* (CBS) in which a widow with three girls marries a confirmed career-Marine bachelor. This situation allows for variations on a duck-out-of-water father-raising-little-understood-prepubescent-teenage-girls theme present in many episodes.

Other shows of the traditional family genre rely on more mundane family conflicts for their storylines. *Home Improvement* (ABC) shows us the conflicts of a recovering chauvinistic pig who is host of a TV handyman show. He still makes pig noises but struggles to understand his wife while bumbling through various *I Love Lucy*-inspired home improvement schemes. All this in the midst of raising three pre-teen boys who receive the traditions of the handyman father. For seven years, *Growing Pains* (ABC) showed us the travails of a two-career couple raising teenage kids. This show presented a semi-affluent bent to the two-career family theme, as opposed to *Roseanne* (ABC) in which both parents in a lower-middle-class family are forced to work to make ends meet (also while raising three kids). Although the political right would have you believe that *Growing Pains* represents reality, a much larger segment of the population is actually represented by *Roseanne*.

Other variations are seen in *The Wonder Years* (ABC), the show with voice-over narration presenting childhood memories and life growing up in the late '60s and early '70s; *Evening Shade* (CBS), which presents an idyllic view of the traditional family in small town contemporary Arkansas; *Doogie Howser* (ABC), with the genius son of the family following in his father's footsteps to become a doctor; and

The Cosby Show (NBC), that ended an eight-year run. *The Cosby Show* basically falls into the traditional family category mold, but for the last three seasons, the producers added a second generation to the regular household in the person of a step-granddaughter. *The Cosby Show* and *Family Matters* (ABC) are two of the few shows that represent minority families.

FOX, which markets itself as the hip alternative with shows that push the edge of the envelope, has three series that walk down the "traditional family" path. On *Beverly Hills, 90210*, the featured family is the affluent Walshs. Dad works in finance, Mom stays at home and thinks '90s thoughts about her twins. ("It feels like she's drifting off on some emotional iceberg.") The twins, Brandon and Brenda, deal with the problems of growing up privileged in the '90s. In stark contrast, *Married with Children* shows us the ultimate lower-middle-class dysfunctional family in what might be described as dark humor with its satirical look at family life. *The Simpsons* is a closely related prime-time cartoon (by cartoonist Matt Groening), presenting a slightly less dysfunctional family in which the dad works at a nuclear power plant while, along with his wife, raising the ultimate smart-mouthed son and two daughters.

So, how do these shows with their "traditional" families compare with reality? In the twelve shows mentioned, only five of the mothers work outside the home, making it 42 percent of the shows. In reality, 61 percent of all mothers work and 75 percent of all U.S. children will grow up in a household with both parents working outside the home.⁴ Although the percentage of traditional families on television is close to reality, and only slightly more than half of all U.S. families fit the picture, it is still considered the norm.

After looking at the traditional family, one has to consider the alternative. Statistically, the next most common family household is headed by a female with no spouse (12 percent of all households⁵). Currently,

Murphy Brown, CBS Television Network



Murphy Brown (and technically only in the last episode this past season) is the only show that falls into this category. Looking again at actuality, 24.5 percent of all births are to unmarried women.⁶ Of these women, 25 percent are in an unmarried household couple that includes the father of the baby.⁷ It appears that the father of *Murphy's* baby is following a trend: 29 percent of all fathers who live apart from their children have never seen the child, while 54 percent offer no support.⁸

On the other hand, 3 percent of American households are headed by a man with no spouse.⁹ Contrary to this statistic, there are numerous single dads on TV today. *Blossom* (NBC) features a daughter and her two older brothers being raised by their divorced musician dad. *Empty Nest* (NBC) features a doctor dad (widower) with two grown daughters living at home. *Full House* (ABC) has a widower raising three young girls with the help of a friend (also male) and a brother-in-law. These shows follow in a long tradition of single-dad shows, such as *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Gidget*, *The Courtship of Eddy's Father*, and *My Three Sons*. Almost exclusively, all shows with single dads offer us widowers rather than divorced fathers. This common pattern serves as a way to have a single parent without having to deal with the ostracized, "less-than-moral" divorced person.

Who's the Boss (ABC) almost fits into the single dad category (with widower Tony raising his daughter Samantha) but more closely matches the multiple person, non-family household. Even though this only represents 5 percent of American households,¹⁰ it is a common plot device on television series. On *Boss*, Tony works as live-in housekeeper for Angela, a divorced advertising executive, and her son. Angela's mom has an apartment over the garage and is a constant presence. *Perfect Strangers* (ABC) offers us two distant cousins: one from the mythical island of Mypos, sharing living space (most recently with their wives). *Golden Girls* (NBC) presents four single senior women (two are mother and daughter) sharing a house in Florida. Three of the women are widows while the fourth is divorced. *Stand by Your Man* (FOX) features two sisters who share a house while their husbands serve time for bank robbery.

Rating as the second most common household in the United States, the single person household (24 percent of all U.S. households¹¹) as a main character on TV today is almost non-existent. *Coach* (ABC) offers one of the few examples of a single person household, although he does have a long-time girlfriend whom he is engaged to marry and a college-age daughter. *Seinfeld* is probably the truest single person on the air with the stand-up comic not having a current girlfriend. *Murphy Brown* was in this category until the final episode of this season. In *Northern Exposure* (CBS), almost all of the characters are in single-person households. It also presents one of the few, if not the only, unmarried couple households on the air. This is not surprising when you consider that it takes place in Cicely, Alaska, a fictional town founded by a lesbian couple at the turn of the century. The creators of this series push the boundaries and are innovative in their depictions of the family.

They are known for their controversial subject matter going back to their previous series, *St. Elsewhere*.

There is another class of shows that will not be discussed here. These are what Ella Taylor, in her book *Prime Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America*, refers to as "work-families." In shows such as *Cheers*, coworkers in the workplace become substitute families. "In television, workplace comes to express (among other things, but with particular force) an idealized construction of family, a workplace utopia whose most fulfilling attributes are vested not in work activity but in close emotional ties between coworkers."¹²

So what is the state of the family on TV? Most episodes center on the conflict of the week, which is resolved with open, two-way communication within the half-hour to one-hour time frame. Although they have their problems (preteen-SAT pressure, unfulfilled Christmas wish-list, the agony of choosing the right college), they cannot be seen as dysfunctional

families? Remember that, above all else, TV is a commercial venture—people have to make money. Advertisers want to sell their products so they buy advertising time on shows with high ratings. The producers and networks want high ratings so they can charge more for their advertising. They look at statistics and see that more than half of all American households are married-couple families, so their programming is geared to that model. Along with this, there is the perceived ideal that all stable families are completely functional when it comes to interpersonal relationships. In so doing, they have created a stereotypical family to placate a perceived collective ideal. Television as escapism dictates that a family in turmoil does not want to tune into a family in turmoil, and that if a person is not living in a married-couple household, it is only because that ideal has yet to be achieved.

In catering to this perceived ideal, the approximately 40.7 million other American households are not being considered. In *Prime Time Families*, Ella Taylor states,

watching. In light of Quayle's comment and the resulting furor, it seems that many people accept what they see on a very basic level without considering that TV can be a criticism or satire of modern life and above all else, it is fiction. We still have to wrestle with many issues. Although television gives us many non-traditional families, are they being realistic by presenting them in such an idyllic (i.e. functional) light? Is there really any such thing as a functional family?

In presenting this broad range of family styles, it is obvious that television is reflecting the changes in society. Political conservatives would have it mired in the '50s style of *Leave it to Beaver*, with the thought that as television goes, so goes the nation. But, in a profit-driven medium, the presentation of such an outdated family would not produce the income desired. Although television does seem to reinforce certain values, it follows, rather than leads, societal changes by several years. And when it finally follows, it does it conservatively so as not to assault those who have yet to update their thinking. Television is primarily used as escapism but it can also be used to educate and promote certain cultural and philosophical viewpoints. How effective is it at doing this? Should it do this? If so, whose viewpoints should it promote? In a culturally diverse, democratic society, one would hope for the presentation of varying viewpoints so that each person could decide which they agreed with and want to watch. This would effect ratings, which would effect advertisers, which would then cause less popular shows to be canceled. Then, you have the pattern of society and its collective ideals being replicated in this medium called television.

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The Cosby Show, NBC Television Network

because they are able to resolve every crisis. Some of the shows attempt to deal with more pressing issues. Loss of virginity was popular this past season with *Roseanne's* oldest daughter, *Doogie Howser*, and both Brenda and Brandon of *90210*. In all three cases, the teen talked with their parents after the fact but let them know that they were "safe"—television as educational tool. The drama, *Sisters* (NBC), has dealt with the whole gamut: marriage, divorce, remarriage, transvestism, cancer, single motherhood, alcoholism—you cannot fit much more into a one-hour show. No matter what the conflict, the pattern is always the same: conflict, discussion, resolution. Here, do you have the perfect pattern for any family attempting to be functional or do you just have good story-telling technique?

Who has constructed these mythical

"Industry rhetoric stresses the importance of 'demographics,' the effort to make and schedule 'quality' programs for target audiences whose purchasing power and lifestyle will be attractive to advertisers even though they compromise a smaller audience."¹³ TV is not a mirror of society but a window into a fictional land. Even *Murphy Brown*, much to Dan Quayle's oversight, is highly fictionalized. This ideal modern women who can have everything—a career, a large townhouse in Washington, D.C., and a baby—denies the statistic that children in one-parent households are six times more likely to live in poverty.¹⁴

When you consider that 98 percent of Americans have one or more televisions and spend 40 percent of their free time watching, you have to consider not only what they are watching but how they are

FOOTNOTES

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A Slice of Fiction

Icons and Idols: TV Images, featuring Paul Berger, Diane Bush, Kathy Pilat, Michael Brodsky, Bob Paris, Ilene Segalove, was exhibited at the Houston Center for Photography May 22–June 28, 1992.

Peter Harvey

"As one of the most effective tools for creating and reflecting popular culture, television turns personalities and fictional characters into idols of both the young and old," wrote the curators of "Icons and Idols: TV Images" in the introduction to their show at the Houston Center for Photography. Michael G. DeVoll and Hans Staartjes described television as "... a behemoth of commerce and propaganda." Since these ideas are at the crux of the show, they warrant close examination.

The majority of Americans live under the influence of television and thus it is no surprise that the broadcast medium has taken a predominant role in defining our cultural identity. Amplified by bright lights and make-up, television supplies us with a version of our own image; not a twin, but an idealized simulacrum implicitly endorsed by viewers who purchase a sponsor's product. What we believe to be true in relation to national or world events is filtered through television. People who grew up watching television have learned, by osmosis, a complex language of symbols and sounds. While the effects of viewing programs with messages ranging from those on *Leave it to Beaver* to those on *Miami Vice* are difficult to measure, their impact on our culture is undeniable. In the '80s, characters from both of these programs appeared on T-shirts as emblems for an idealized lifestyle rooted in nostalgia or adventure. The act of taking an image of a television personality or program title and putting it on one's body is not insignificant. Characteristic of most fashion statements, it is an effort to communicate one's personal identity through pre-existing cultural symbols. Two semiotic assumptions are made in purchasing such a shirt. The first is that other people will recognize the character or title as a signifier and subsequently comprehend its signified. The second is that they will apply the idea of the signified to the wearer of the shirt.

Let us return to the example of *Miami Vice* for illustration. The characters on the program were not new to television. Two "plain-clothes" detectives add some contemporary slang to Sam Spade's vocabulary and go about fighting crime in an atmosphere of exaggerated violence and romanticism. The secret to the show's success was in its marketing. The producers came up with their own *Miami Vice* look and sold it throughout the telecast. The look of the whole program was directed toward a macho, cool, and overall sexy attitude. The show gained a large audience and it wasn't long before *Miami Vice* T-shirts could be found in malls across the country. Viewed in this context, the power of this medium is redoubtable. People saw the show, liked its image, and bought the shirts because they wanted to be identified with it.



Diane Bush, installation view, from the series "Suppose They Gave a War and Nobody Had Cable"

Television also provides us with models and analysis for understanding ideas and events on a worldwide scale. Network news programs are the most obvious example in this category. A case in point is the ABC *Nightline* broadcast. This program was instituted in the early days of the American hostage crisis in Iran. Ostensibly a perpetual special report, the program took advantage of the dramatic events in what seemed to be a very strange land and attempted to make "sense" out of the issue for the American public. As developments stagnated, the network shortened the portion of the show dedicated to the crisis and began branching out into other areas that

they thought they could elucidate for us. The change in programming was made in order to maintain the interest level in the new viewing audience they had created. Ten years later, the formula is a simple one. The staff prepares a brief report on an issue that is already in the news or had been presented in one of the evening's entertainment offerings. Following the background report, the host or moderator introduces the panel (usually three in number) who, with more than a little steerage from the host, will present the expert view on the situation. After thirty minutes, we are all homogeneously informed and may consider ourselves in the know. *Miami Vice*

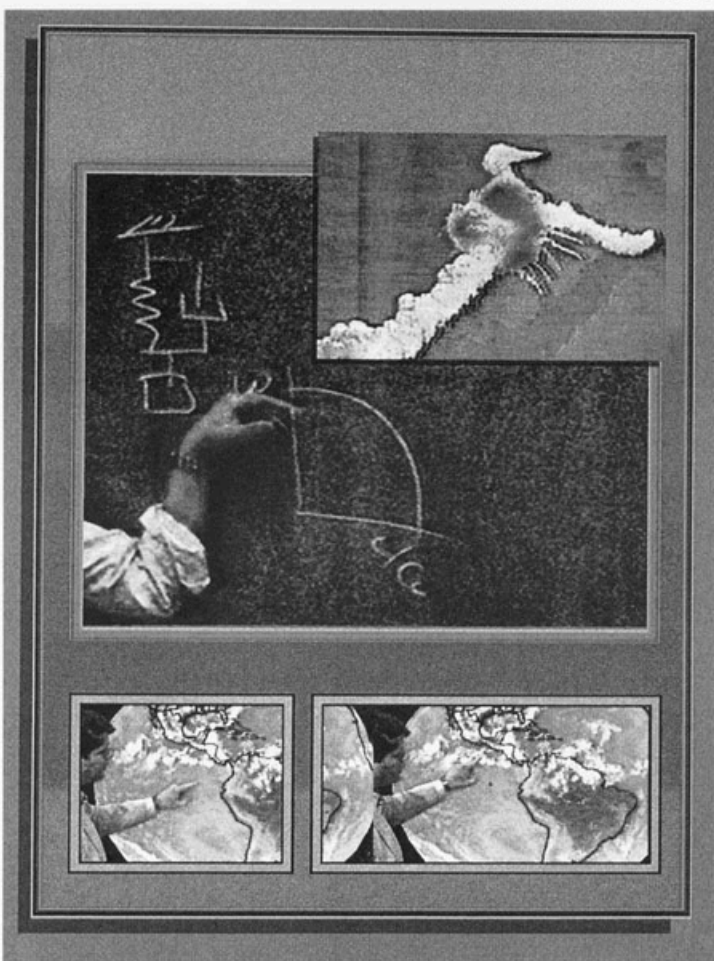
and *Nightline* were arbitrarily chosen examples of how television functions to present people with a uniform idea of what the truth is or how one should behave.

To conclude that we are slaves to television would be inaccurate because it is the viewer buying the sponsors' wares that keeps the process going. American viewers definitely want to be free, with certain guidelines. As testimony, one need only consider that television has never suffered a significant drop in popularity. We are not what we eat; we are what we watch. DeVoll and Staartjes point out that "the iconography (of television) has permeated society to such a degree that even print ads and news articles incorporate video stills to promote their products and ideas. In much the same way, artists have incorporated TV images into their work to comment about the medium." So it was with sensitivity to this mediated environment that the curators set out to find a group of artists who look at what they termed the "non-reality" of television. The group they chose included four still photographers and two video artists.

Paul Berger (Seattle) uses a computer to overlay and manipulate images "grabbed" from television broadcasts, often juxtaposing them with mathematical and scientific iconography. The final image is an inkjet print. Berger's images are, in a word, complicated. They have a color saturation similar to the effect one gets from turning the color level on the TV way up. The combination of images in each piece approaches the look of photomontage usually with one dominant image "grabbed" from television combined with smaller images also from TV or from other sources. The finished prints have a distinctly intellectual tone that reflects Berger's firm grounding in academia. These pieces are at once familiar and foreign. The images from television, be they the Challenger explosion or a TV weather map, are immediately accessible as a part of our visual environment. The riddle begins as the other images are viewed in the context of the TV icons. Viewers are put in the position of the final editors of the work as they put the individual parts together and come up with their own interpretation of the elements.

Diane Bush (Buffalo), in her series "Suppose They Gave a War and Nobody Had Cable," photographed talking heads during newscasts of the war in the Persian Gulf, physically distorting them to refer to

Paul Berger, MARC-04, 1989



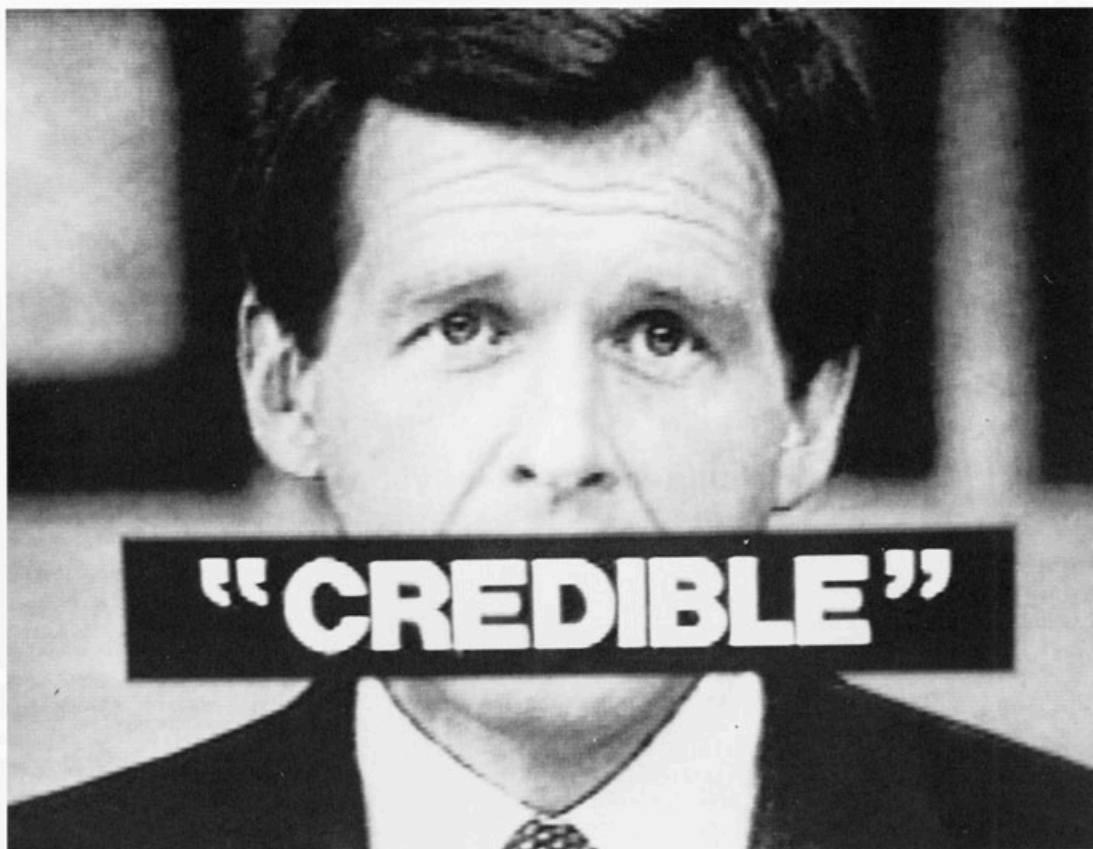
the "distortion of reality of the Gulf War coverage." These pictures are immediately accessible. They are the images we've seen on the news for years—but with a twist. The cool objective gaze of the newscaster is mocked by a funhouse mirror compression or elongation. In Houston, these photographs were presented in a grid that heightened the distortion effect from one image to the next. The only glitch in the concept of this series is that there is still a gap between the simple distortion of a face and actual misrepresentations or omissions on the part of the newscaster. Then again, it is possible that other news items are being distorted on a daily basis, thus supporting a broader interpretation.

Kathy Pilat (Chicago), concerned with the "illustration of TV as . . . reality and truth," created large-scale triptychs combining images and text. There is a palpable tension in this work. In her piece *Pretend It Doesn't Exist*, Pilat flanks the title text with close-up images from TV. On the left side is the face of a man and on the right of the bold text is a woman covering her eyes. The viewer is left to fill in the blanks in the relationship between these two characters. Were they on the news? Were they in a movie? Are we pretending or are they? What is "it"? All of these questions relate to Pilat's statement about truth and reality on TV. Television would certainly tell us what "it" is; Pilat allows us to wonder if "it" exists.

Michael Brodsky (Los Angeles) uses a computer to combine slices of images from 1-800, 1-900, and 976 phone commercials and broadcast programs to create large gelatin silver prints that explore "marketing imagery that plays upon the viewers' fears and interpersonal needs." Brodsky "takes pictures of TV" by connecting the computer to a television and manipulating the images without a camera. The most identifiable image in the work is a telephone number that stretches across the bottom of the print just as it would on the TV screen. Behind this number are what appear to be slivers of the scenes that were going on during the commercial. It is as though an exposure was made every second or so from left to right as to resemble a test strip with each section having the same exposure of a different image. The backgrounds are further obscured because the prints are made of enlarged, high-contrast black-and-white pixels with no intermediate gray values. So, from a distance, figures are visible, but up close it is a complete abstraction. While Brodsky states that he uses the left to right vertical slivers to call attention to the methods of TV editing, the effect is closer to a formal element in an abstract work.

Ilene Segalove (Venice, California), in her narrative video works *Why I Got into TV* and *More TV Stories*, demonstrates the influence of television on her life. These videos have the low-tech look of home movies. There is a premeditated "dumbness" about the work that separates it from the slick world of TV, especially in terms of pace and delivery.

Kathy Pilat, from the series "Fear, Ignorance and Power," 1988



Bob Paris, video still from *T.V. News: Looking for the Right Stuff*, 1991

Bob Paris (San Francisco) uses found footage in his video works. *TV News: Looking for the Right Stuff* explores what Paris calls "the shallow criteria commonly used in selecting TV newscasters." In this revealing work, talking head wannabes have been critiqued by the folks who know. Experts put their comments on the video tape in black boxes with white letters over the faces of individuals reading the news. Paris then took that footage from the companies. The comments range from "credible" to "geeky" and may explain why it seems like the same people with the same hair style are reading the news on TV in the same accent all over the country. The second piece by Paris, *Behold, I Come Quickly*, is a fast-paced work using found footage of Jimmy Swaggart before, during, and after his sexual revelations. The piece has the fervor of the evangelist and the titillation of his temptation and that makes for good TV.



Michael Brodsky, 900-500-5000 ext.28-9, from "Telecommunications," 1991

In shifting from still photography to video work, one notices the obvious differences between the two mediums: time and sound. Suddenly we're not looking at pictures of TV, we're actually watching TV. Staartjes points out that this difference was important to the genesis of the show: "Still photography has the ability to take a slice of TV out of context and force the viewer to look at it." "Icons and Idols: TV

Images" was a pertinent show drawing attention to the fact that television has become the broadest influence on public opinion and a fertile ground for artists interested in social commentary.

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Strike A Pose

Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference, by Lisa A. Lewis. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992. 258 pages. \$39.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper. Art of Music Video: Ten Years After was shown at the Museum of Fine Art, Houston, June 1992.

Nels P. Highberg

During my senior year of high school, I met a freshman named Jackie. She told everyone to call her Madonna. Every day Jackie wore the same outfit as most of us, a T-shirt and jeans, only she added a lot of costume jewelry: necklaces, bracelets, and earrings in the shapes of crosses and crucifixes. She looked like the images of Madonna in teen magazines and music videos. She wanted to be Madonna. I thought the choice was odd, but at that time in our lives we all sought models on which to shape our personal identity. It was not until I read Lisa A. Lewis's *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference* that I realized what an influential medium



C'est Comme Ca, "Art of Music Video: Ten Years After"

music video has become in adolescent self-definition.

Since MTV's inception in 1981, parents worried that the sexual and violent images prevalent in many videos would render a negative effect on their children. Scholars of the late 1980s, such as E. Ann Kaplan in *Rocking around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism and Counter Culture*, came to few definite conclusions as to whether MTV was positive or negative, though Kaplan tended to believe that MTV was degrading to women. In her book, Lewis modifies this trend by showing how MTV has evolved into a positive role in the development of female adolescent identity.

Lewis initiates her analysis, however, by examining the lack of role models for female adolescents during MTV's early years. At this time, most videos were performed by male musicians, especially white males, until the cross-over success of Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. The most successful videos portrayed male musicians in self-assured positions of power—power as defined by patriarchal discourse. To illustrate her point, Lewis analyzes four popular videos from 1983: Jackson Browne's *Tender is the Night*, ZZ Top's *Sharp*

Dressed Man, Stray Cats' *Sexy and 17*, and Michael Jackson's *Beat It*. The narrative of each video represents strong images of male adolescent discourse. First, they utilize the image of the street. In each video, the lead male character, leaves his home, usually at night and enters the outside world of the street. These city streets represent freedom and adventure, the masculine domain. No decent woman would venture into these streets as do these men. For women, these streets imply danger and fear. That is, unless they are the type of woman who inhabits dark streets—a prostitute. Except for *Beat It*, where females are practically nonexistent, the women in these videos never move beyond the prostitute model. They flirt and entice the male subject, and it is he who ultimately prevails by showing everyone in the street that he can make a sexy, attractive female sexually desire him. Adolescent boys see themselves as the men on the screen and, through transference, feel power. For adolescent girls, however, these videos have little to say that is positive.

Lewis shifts her analysis to four female musicians—Tina Turner, Pat Benatar, Cyndi Lauper, and Madonna—who transformed music video into something self-assertive and meaningful for the female adolescents watching. First, Lewis recounts how each woman "made it" in the music business. Her discussion moves to specific videos, and she demonstrates how these videos appropriate images from male videos and transform them for a female adolescent audience. Turner's *What's Love Got to Do with It*; Benatar's *Love is a Battlefield*, Lauper's *Girls Just Want to Have Fun*, and Madonna's *Borderline*, perhaps

each of these artists' first truly successful videos, all modify the manner in which the street was presented in the four previously described videos by male artists. Here, the lead female characters define the street as their own symbol of freedom. In Lauper's and Benatar's cases, the street becomes a place where women meet and find solidarity. For Turner and Madonna, the street functions as a setting for gender politics, be it Turner's heroine walking

down a New York street alone, meeting men's eyes directly and walking assertively through a group of men playing craps, or Madonna's heroine spraying graffiti and loitering in the male "turf" of the pool hall. After the success of these videos, the four musicians created others that move beyond appropriating symbols from male videos to dealing with other themes from a female viewpoint. These themes include how society views female sexual desire as taboo (Lauper's *She Bop*), how female bodies are made into commodities (Benatar's *Sex as a Weapon*), and how the public sees female "stars" (Madonna's *Material Girl*).

The female adolescent audience saw the strong, self-affirming models these musicians presented and began to take part in what Lewis calls "style imitation." Lewis discusses events around the country where female adolescent fans dressed as the images presented in these videos, especially fans of Lauper and Madonna. For example, Lewis uses photographs taken at live concerts in Austin, Texas, to show how Lauper and Madonna influenced fashion styles. In these photos, some Lauper fans wear old formals and other brightly colored recycled clothing like Lauper wore in her early videos while others wear the male attire of hats and neckties that she presented in subsequent videos. Likewise, Madonna fans adopt the fashion styles of her videos by



Boys Keep Swinging, "Art of Music Video: Ten Years After"

wearing crucifixes, black lace gloves, multiple bracelets, and headwraps. Lewis also points out other popular events such as Macy's "Madonna Look-Alike Contest" and MTV's "Madonna's 'Make My Video' Contest." In all of these events, the collective style imitation by fans provides a concrete, visual demonstration of how music videos inspire fans. Lewis points out that style imitation is primarily a feminine form of expression. By appropriating the images of these videos into their styles of attitude and dress, female adolescent fans expressed support for what the artists are saying in their videos and they show that support in their own, non-masculine way.

Lewis masterfully succeeds in proving MTV's influence on its adolescent audience. The only weakness is the glaring omission of any video stills in the chapters of video analysis. Such support would help readers see the images to which Lewis refers and understand her points more easily. Lewis's ample documentation and investigation of these early years in female music video opens up a branch of both media and feminist discourse that has not been thoroughly analyzed in this way before and that can and should be extended today. The addition of female rappers and hip-hop artists, such as Queen Latifah and Sister Souljah, presents an area for inquiry not prevalent when Lewis completed her research. Madonna's latest ventures such as last year's full-length documentary *Truth or Dare* and the upcoming release of both an album, which includes a song celebrating

and video artists have seen music video as a viable art form and have produced innovative and experimental work. The film department of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, presented a film program curated by the Long Beach Museum of Art entitled "Art of Music Video: Ten Years After" during June 1992. This exhibition collected alternative visions and included a section of videos that deal with attitudes toward female gender. These videos present a stronger, more direct view than the previously described videos by Turner, Benatar, Lauper, and Madonna. In *We're Talking Vulva* by Shawna Dempsey and Bad Tribe, a woman dressed as a larger-than-life vulva darts around the set describing what the vulva is and quelling commonly held myths about it. Other videos, such as Bongwater's *The Power of Pussy* and The Cramp's *Creature from the Black Leather Lagoon*, also tackle attitudes toward female bodies and sexuality with humor while also making a point. Other videos in the exhibition discuss AIDS (k.d. lang's *So in Love* and Erasure's *Too Darn Hot*) and poverty (R.E.M.'s *Talk about the Passion*). The program's curators, Michael Nash and Kim Harlan Tassie, call this form of music video "agit pop," likening the medium to the social criticism of agit prop theater prevalent in America during the Depression. While the political and social commentary of these videos does not play for an adolescent audience, it shows how this medium can be used as a tool for social consciousness.



"The Power of Pussy," Art of Music Video: Ten Years After

lesbianism entitled *Eating Out*, and a book of erotic poetry and photographs entitled *Sex* this October, adds to the performer's substantial amount of work that Lewis only begins to evaluate. Lewis' book is one of the formative texts in this emerging and energetic area within feminist media analysis.

Lewis centers her analysis on commercial, mainstream videos commonly broadcast on MTV, but independent filmmakers

Whether MTV executives still see their enterprise as a simple money-making venture or, as one MTV promo states, "an obedient tongue licking the shiny, black leather boot of rock-and-roll," music video does more than entertain and advertise. Music video is a social construction. Its succinctness allows for numerous videos to be broadcast in a shorter time frame than other popular forms of broadcast media. The varied opinions and points of view displayed in music videos can practically bombard the viewer. For years people shouted, "I Want My MTV!" Now they have it, and, if they are paying attention, they have much to absorb.

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Symbolic Actuality

Faces: Nancy Burson was exhibited at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, March 14–May 17, 1992. The book *Faces: Nancy Burson, with an essay by Lynn M. Herbert*, is also available. Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 1992. 60 pages. \$17.50

Patricia Carter

As an artist, Nancy Burson always seems to begin by questioning, by asking, "What if?" Her photographs, however, provide no safe answers, and ask their own questions of viewers. Indeed, questions seem to swirl around every aspect of this artist's work, making her computer-generated portraits seem the still eye of a rather considerable storm.

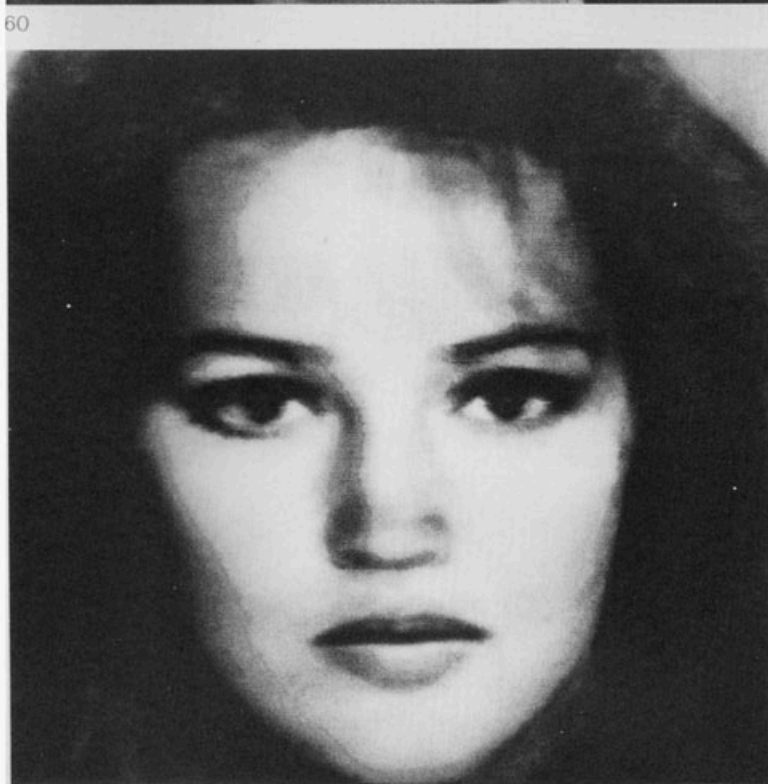
Those who still believe that a photograph equals reality will find that belief shaken anew upon seeing Burson's work. No longer is a photograph the "mirror with a memory" that Oliver Wendell Holmes described. But a belief in the absolute verity of a photographic image was never very well founded, and viewers would do better to remember that Walker Evans told us the camera was "the instrument of symbolic actuality," not of actuality itself.

Nancy Burson has mastered the technology of computer imaging, which makes it possible to recompose and combine images in a way that is virtually undetectable. By this means, an image can be cut loose from its moorings at a certain point in time and launched into a simulated future conceived in the mind of the artist/technician. This new technology carries with it the power to change the fundamental nature of photography, but it can also lead its users in entirely unexpected directions. It is intriguing to trace Burson's progress through the works shown in the Contemporary Arts Museum.

The earliest of those works were composite portraits done between 1982–84. In this series, Burson poses a number of questions that challenge society's beliefs, suppositions, and prejudices, and presents her composites as possible answers to those questions. The composites are produced by scanning images into a computer with a television camera. Burson adjusts each image to a standard size, then stacks and averages the faces using a program that maps facial features. Each image is then stretched or "warped" to fit the average.

It is important to know the equation used in arriving at the composite "answers." For example, *Three Major Races* is a composite of an Oriental, a Caucasian, and a black proportioned according to the world's populations. *Warhead I* is a composite of world leaders weighted to the number of nuclear warheads deployable by each. In this portrait, Reagan and Brezhnev, whose images predominate, are merged to chilling effect. In some cases, however, the composite seems considerably less than the sum of its parts. This is true of *1st and 2nd Beauty Composites*, wherein famous faces, which represented ideals of feminine beauty in their day, are merged into one image more ordinary looking than any of its component parts. On the whole, these are interesting but somewhat unsatisfying images.

It may be that Burson found them unsatisfying as well, for in 1988 she began to venture far beyond those composites to create portraits of beings born largely of her own imagination. She also abandoned the large social and cultural questions to pursue a more personal inquiry into the visual perception of normality and abnormality.



Nancy Burson, top: *First Beauty Composite*, 1982 (Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, Sophia Loren, Marilyn Monroe); bottom: *Second Beauty Composite*, 1982 (Jacqueline Bisset, Diane Keaton, Brooke Shields, Meryl Streep)

In these 20x24-inch Polaroid Polaroid ER prints, images of birth defects and genetically induced malformations are combined with "normal" features—and sometimes with non-human elements—to produce seamless composite portraits of astonishing power. In each of these, a large, incorporeal head appears against a black background of seemingly endless depth. The faces swim up out of a dark sea of unreality to stare directly out at the viewer. Most of these portraits are untitled, leaving the viewer to guess at their origins. Some are like apparitions born of dreams.

For viewers, these images stir emotions that are hard to name. Many people find them disturbing; a few even dispute Burson's right to call them portraits, since they depict non-existent beings. Some viewers (this writer included) have looked into those eyes and had the disconcerting sensation that it is *they* who recognize us.

These images, with their alien beauty, represent "the Other" of which the poet Antonio Machado wrote: "The Other does not exist: This is rational faith, the incur-

able belief of human reason. Identity equals reality, as if, in the end, everything must necessarily and absolutely be *one and the same*. But the Other refuses to disappear; it subsists; it persists; it is the hard bone on which reason breaks its teeth."

The interactive part of the CAM installation was Burson's "Age Machine," a computerized apparatus that shows the viewer what he or she may look like 25 years from now. The notion for this machine was in Burson's mind long before the technology existed to make it possible. But Burson held on to her idea, waiting for science to catch up, and in patient collaboration with engineers and computer graphics experts, finally found the means to realize her vision. A breakthrough came in 1976 when a means was found to hook up a computer with a camera. In 1981, she received a U.S. Patent for "The Method and Apparatus for Producing an Image of a Person's Face at a Different Age."

In an unexpected outgrowth of that work, Burson soon began hearing from parents of missing children, who asked her

to provide updated composites of those children to aid in their searches. The aging system that had been developed did not work for children under 18, whose facial structure was not fully developed, but Burson found a way to adapt that technology to fit this need. In 1987, the FBI licensed the software and several missing children were found in the first years after updated images were aired on national television. Few artists have had the profoundly affecting experience of finding a practical application of their art that brings such immeasurable benefit to people's lives. Burson is now married to computer scientist David Kramlich, and together they continue to collaborate in implementing and developing the technology.

My own experience with "The Age Machine" was an adventure that, in the beginning, seemed a little like my first attempt at driving a car. Intimidated by the machine itself, and anxious to follow all the rules, I had a very shaky start at the controls. Once the journey was finally underway, I left comfortable middle age and, within thirty seconds, roared into my 80s. I had thought to see a face like that of my father, who I most resemble, but surprisingly found more of my mother in the face that came into view. Mostly, of course, it was me. But, the face on the screen was all science and gravity, devoid of the experience of those intervening years. In that respect, my image was like the beings in Burson's ER prints: an inhabitant of an imaginary, never-to-be future.

Burson's most recent works shown at the CAM were part of a still-developing series she began in 1991. Although these photographs represent a complete departure in technique, they seem a natural progression for Burson as an artist. These are portraits of *real* children with progeria (a syndrome characterized by early senility) and craniofacial deformities. For this work, Burson abandoned the computer and took up a Diana camera—a crude plastic camera mass-produced in the 1960s. These soft-focus, delicate portraits are presented with great care. Most of these photographs are 15-inch square silver gelatin prints, framed in softly burnished, substantial metal frames. Three of the images are presented as exquisite 2 1/2-inch square daguerreotypes. Some of the most moving portraits in this series show a parent with the child. In these images, a triangle of interaction is formed by the artist's sensibilities, the transcendent spirit of the child, and the transformative love of the parent. This inspired trinity allows us to gaze with understanding where before we would have averted our eyes.

Nancy Burson has her critics. Certainly the technology she uses so expertly has ushered in a new age of photography, and many fear the application of this technology in the hands of some photojournalists, news editors, and image makers. In the hands of Nancy Burson, with her sense of artistic purpose and profoundly humane instincts, there seems little to fear. It will be interesting to see what questions she will ask next and where she will look for answers.

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Constructed Beings

Kathleen Campbell's Photographs of Widely-Known Non-Existent Beings and Other Cultural Commentary was shown at the Houston Center for Photography, May 22-June 28, 1992.

Judith Steinhoff

Under attack for depicting unedifying subject matter, the nineteenth-century painter Gustave Courbet defended his realism with the retort, "Show me an angel and I'll paint one." Kathleen Campbell has chosen to "photograph" angels precisely because it is impossible to do so. While questioning photography's apparent truth-to-fact is hardly new, Campbell uses the medium's documentary reputation to challenge our belief in rationality and our attitude toward the irrational.

Technically, her work appears simple and straightforward, printed directly from unmanipulated negatives. However, the "cultural commentary" is made not only through the pictorial contents, but also through the physical form of the photograph as object. Each image is an assemblage of exposures made on several large sheets of photographic paper that are deliberately misaligned so that the seams between individual sheets are clearly visible and the usually continuous contours of the rectangular field are ruptured. Shot in black and white, the images are then hand-painted, mostly in soft pastel tones. The representations themselves are created through intentionally transparent staging and use of props. For instance, in *Crown of Thorns*, the "thorns" are obviously plastic sword toothpicks, while *Plastic Angel* has wings of cardboard covered with packing bubbles and styrofoam peanuts.

By these means, Campbell emphasizes that her photographs are constructed images, not captured reflections of visible reality. Thus, too, these "non-existent



Kathleen Campbell, *Dark Angel*, 1987 (original is a hand-colored silver gelatin print)

ourselves and the forces of nature," as well as the conflict between "the banality of our existence and the universal longing for transcendence." For Campbell, material images of "non-existent beings" embody our illusions about our ability to transcend human limitations.

The hand-painting of Campbell's images seems tinged with a postmodern historicism. It recalls a time when photographs had to be hand-painted to have color, as well as the revival of such early photographic processes during the 1970s, when the artist received her photographic training at Florida State. In combination

much like High Renaissance or Baroque heroicized portraits. The angel's strong physical presence is reinforced by the sensually deep folds of the thick cloth draped over her right shoulder. Yet behind this full-bodied figure is a wholly darkened, non-specific, and consequently non-earthly space suggestive of the infinite void. And, like Baroque religious paintings, which also contrast an intense worldliness with the supernatural, light is important here as an expression of spirit. The angel's wings are iridescent and a bright yellow bandanna creates a glow around her head. In referencing past artistic traditions in which

angels and other supernatural powers were normative subjects, Campbell invites us to re-value the irrational for our own time.

Another level of meaning is brought out by the play between the title and the image, which teases us with the possibilities of different meanings and challenges our expectations. Is darkness a physical property or a characteristic of the soul? *Dark Angel* is an angel of color and clearly not a demonic being. Campbell has fashioned a visually beautiful image that, without bombastic rhetoric, argues for a socially egalitarian definition of angels.

A more recent work, *Plastic Angel* (1992) similarly draws on multiple spheres of discourse to make a statement about present-day angels. In her gallery talk, Campbell claimed a connection between the artificial materials of the wings and environmental exploitation. However, the image makes such a critique in only the gentlest terms, by suggesting that such noxious products have become components of today's angels.

The reclining although fully-clothed female figure recalls a famous, non-angelic but liberating woman: Manet's *Olympia*, as well as the long tradition of representations it commented on and the by-now long list of appropriations of and references to Manet's own image. Campbell further seems to suggest that this pretty, very contemporary, but ultimately very ordinary young woman should also be encompassed within our notion of angel. Yet, even as Campbell calls for an updated, expanded definition of angels, she leaves undefined

their role in promoting either a socially responsible or fuller spiritual life.

Several of the images deal more explicitly with evil. One of the most powerful is *Fallen Angel* (1987). The figure, traditional in its personification of Lucifer as male, rises up from the lower edge of the frame in a frontal, seated pose. He wears black jeans and is bare-chested, except for a number of small strewn feathers. Feathers are also used to delineate his arched brows and a kind of halo. The shallow space is delimited by a black drop-cloth, reminding us of countless traditional studio portraits. From behind this back cloth we glimpse a warm peachy glow that, perhaps a little too gently, suggests the fires of hell.

While this image is a highly effective portrayal of Lucifer's decadence, it also points up some of the weaknesses of Campbell's images. The tension between the sinister and the charming or visually appealing threatens to fall out of balance, and not only to soften, but in fact to trivialize the seriousness of the message. The playfulness, the whimsy, the staginess of these tableaux are clearly intentionally part of Campbell's message. Indeed, they are part of the works' great strengths. Their visual and fantasy appeal draws us in to engage the wealth of issues and references with which Campbell invests her images. However, her images often remain superficial, failing to penetrate very deeply into the issues they raise.

Pandora's Box (1991) is another highly intriguing image that ultimately disappoints for these reasons. The background, a yellow-orange piece of torn paper painted with ominous birds, is powerfully foreboding and suggestive of mysterious dark forces. However, the figure lacks comparable mystery. Her face is fully revealed by the harsh, glaring light, and she stares at us somewhat hypnotically, but expressing no trace of evil, fear, or conflict. The box itself, said in the myth to contain inconceivable horrors, here reveals its contents openly and completely. It is as if the darker, disturbing aspects of the myth are contained, made safe or acceptable by the straightforward presentation. Thus, while Campbell presents us with the reality of the irrational, she removes/denies one of the things that troubles us most about the irrational: its inaccessibility to rationality.

Campbell's single-figured images, mostly presented in isolated non-narrative settings, are thereby offered as contemporary icons. Earlier religious icons were images for meditation. Like Campbell's, they usually depicted well-known spiritual beings, and were often thought of as having a mystical identity with the sacred figure represented. They were images to which people addressed wishes and prayers and, in return, were granted at least solace for their troubled souls. With prolonged contemplation a person was likely to be moved to a new awareness or understanding and, in special circumstances, to receive a miraculous cure for their problems. For medieval icons to be effective in this way required more than an acceptance of the irrational. The most powerful images must have carried the projections of beliefs and needs deeply felt by both the individuals and the society of the age. Like medieval icons, Campbell's images simultaneously engage us in pondering their meaning and elicit an immediate emotional response. However, their power is in intriguing and beguiling us rather than precipitating a profound transformation of our understanding or outlook.

Judith Steinhoff is an art historian who specializes in medieval art but has also done work in photography and photographic history. In Houston, she has taught art history at Rice University and the University of Houston.



Kathleen Campbell, *Fallen Angel*, 1986 (original is a hand-colored silver gelatin print)

beings" are seen to be both inescapably bound to materiality of a particularly lowly sort and to defy our notions about nonreal, nonrational entities (which ought not to have such substance). In the text accompanying the exhibition, Campbell links the contradictions implied by the constructedness of her work with her concern for the myth that we are "scientific rationalists and... can comprehend and control both

with the angelic, mythic, and historical subject matter, which would have been the norm in the "grand tradition" of art against which Courbet rebelled. Campbell's hand-work also invokes the old debates about the status of photography as an art. Indeed, Campbell's work is rich in art historical allusions that add yet another voice to a complex social and psychological discourse.

One of the most visually striking images in the exhibition is *Dark Angel* (1986), which is also one of Campbell's earliest angel pictures. The large female figure boldly occupies the entire field,

Equal on Paper

Equal before the Lens: Jno. Trlica's Photographs of Granger, Texas by Barbara McCandless. Texas. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992. 197 pages. \$34.50.

Ed Osowski

The photographs of Mike Disfarmer would be unknown today had a resident of Heber Springs, Arkansas, not purchased Disfarmer's negatives in 1959 after the photographer's death. Disfarmer's studio portraits of the white residents of his small town date from the 1940s, when he operated a simple studio not unlike those that dotted the Main Streets of hundreds of small towns across America. His portraits are straightforward and free of cant. But they are also something else: they are dense and compelling works that recall the photographs of August Sander.

Disfarmer's achievement comes to mind because of the recent publication of *Equal before the Lens* by Barbara McCandless, which tries to rescue the work of Jno. Trlica, who photographed in Granger, Texas, from the 1920s to the 1950s.

Now a curator at Fort Worth's Amon Carter Museum, McCandless came across Trlica's photographs while working at the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas. In 1980, following Trlica's death, his grandson approached the university with a donation: the family wanted to give a collection of prints and negatives, studio equipment, and business records from Trlica's tenure as a photographer in Granger. Approximately 15,000 film and glass negatives were part of the gift and studio portraits of the residents of Granger dominated the collection.

Granger, northeast of Austin in Williamson County, was one of the many Texas communities where Czechoslovak immigrants settled. In places such as Granger, they were able to purchase land and continue the agricultural life they had known in the old world.



November–December, 1941.

Trlica was born near Granger in 1882. He first worked at farming but soon found employment as a bookkeeper and store clerk. In 1909, he bought an already-established portrait studio, although no records survive from this first venture into photography. Eventually he ran an insurance agency and devoted considerable time to administrative tasks relating to the benevolent organization of the Church of the Brethren to which he belonged. Trlica was largely self-taught as a photographer, but between 1909 and 1915 he attended training sessions run by the Eastman Kodak Company. McCandless recounts that while traveling to Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio, Trlica learned two things from



Summer, 1930.

the Kodak instructors: how to take studio portraits and how to market his business to maximize profits. He learned a "democratic style of photography," she writes, one that was flattering to all but also one that was economically available to as wide an audience as possible. It was a style that was essentially conservative, one designed to give sitters a recognizable and pleasing likeness.

Offering a wide audience the chance to be photographed was no easy task in Texas at that time. Whereas Heber Springs, Arkansas, had almost no African-American residents so Disfarmer never had to cross the color barrier, Granger was a different case altogether. In addition to its native-born and immigrant white population (Protestant and Roman Catholic), the town had sizeable African-American and Hispanic populations. McCandless raises the point that for religious reasons Trlica was uncomfortable with the arbitrary—albeit legal—restraints imposed by segregation upon his efforts to keep his studio functioning. He opened his studio to all. That alone was no small achievement. What his portraits present, then, is the opportunity to see how a sampling of Granger's ethnic mix presented itself to the camera and to the future.

The camera may be democratic but those who sit before it bring the burdens and hopes of their economic and social conditions with them. The portrait gives the sitter the chance to share with an audience facts as well as fictions: this is a photograph of my face, of my body, of my clothes, of how I look; this is also an image of how I choose to be seen.

If one reads these portraits as records of how the sitters wanted to be seen, then the finery they wear actually functions as a "screen" to really "knowing" these people. Many of Trlica's sitters wear their best, their "going to church" or "going to party" clothes, exactly what one would expect, but this passion for adornment suggests an equality in income one knows to be untrue. His solid, European burghers look successful, established, comfortable (with themselves if not with the camera), and indeed they were all these things. But what of the young African-American women who sport equally impressive outfits? Surely a greater portion of their incomes had to be spent to buy these clothes. And what of the Mexican workers who present themselves in clothes that are worn and wrinkled? Trlica's Hispanic subjects wear the clothes they wear to work in the fields.

Men carry the hats that shield them from the sun. Their shoes are scuffed and worn. The women with them wear dresses or skirts and blouses that do not seem as "current" or fashionable as the outfits worn by their Anglo and African-American contemporaries.

Trlica's photographs commemorate rites of passage—couples pose in their wedding finery, girls pose in the First Communion dresses, a young girl and child appear on the baby's baptism day. In these and other photographs, there is an "equality," to use McCandless' term, a democratic impulse connecting the sitters. Shared rituals linked the citizens of Granger. Births, marriages, graduation, reli-

gious ceremonies—they all provided a rhythm, not unlike the rhythm of planting and harvesting, that supported the town's economy.

These links are shared in only the broadest, most mythic sense. How tenuous the links actually are becomes clear when comparing two graduation photographs. In each image, Trlica re-employs the same



April–July, 1928.

Painted background. This artificial setting, with its window looking onto an idealized landscape and its great swags of painted drapery suggesting royal portraits from the eighteenth century, is intended to be a neutral space, a territory in which all are equal. In one photograph, four African-American school students face the camera soberly, seriously. Its companion portrait shows two Anglo girls, perhaps sisters, who meet us with the same directness. Their equality before Trlica's lens extends no further than the limits of the print, the space in which they pose, and the events celebrated. They are equal on paper only.

McCandless calls Trlica's portraits "bread and butter" photographs because they were so inexpensive. For \$1.50, one could buy a set of twelve postcard-sized images to send to friends and relatives.

In addition to the portraits, which McCandless believes are Trlica's real achievement, *Equal before the Lens* also includes a number of "documentary" photographs that give a sense of life beyond the photographer's studio. There is the high school's track team. There is downtown Granger, its streets paved with bricks, making it the first town in Texas with a population under 5,000 to pave its business district. And there is another view of a residential neighborhood, its streets still unpaved. Workers in a field of cotton, trucks loaded with bales of the same product, a fair in city park, the town's bank under construction, the funeral procession of a much-loved Roman Catholic

priest—Granger becomes in these documents a symbol of prosperity, harmony, shared values. These are images of a reality so removed from our own, another country almost—removed not only by years but by the current absence of a system of beliefs—that it is their quaint charm we first notice.

The viewer is caught short when an image breaks through the static, frozen style in which so many of Trlica's subjects are locked. Among the 120 photographs reproduced in the book is a small group in which one feels that the subjects themselves possess too much life to be contained or controlled by Trlica's camera. The photographs of two young African-American girls dancing and of two African-American men, hugging and laughing, hold our attention. Several images of mothers with their children contain tender, soft, touching elements missing from many others. In several, humor creeps in accidentally—a young cowboy poses in that same painted, formal setting, as out of place as a person could be, and again, against that same backdrop that has supported brides and their husbands stands a resident of Granger holding two large-mouthed fish. The book's cover, depicting a young girl holding an ear of corn whose kernels have formed a Christian cross, is certainly a piece of surrealism.

McCandless writes that the "role of the community photographer is to focus on the positive events that inspire community pride rather than events causing embarrassment or discomfort." To expect Trlica's photographs to do anything else, to shock us with hidden secrets about the dark side of small-town life or to probe the psychological depths of his sitters, is to

approach them incorrectly.



January–August, 1933.

The studio portraits offered the sitters few opportunities to carry in props, visual symbols that would reveal something about their souls. These "documents" are meant to celebrate, not to reveal, to present on paper what the community wants presented. Trlica's world was small, self-contained, conservative. A reading of *Equal before the Lens* reinforces that impression.

Ed Osowski is a member of the National Book Critics Circle and his reviews appear regularly in the *Houston Post*.

April–July, 1928.



Enchanted Technology

Nuclear Enchantment, photographs by Patrick Nagatani, essay by Eugenia Perry Janis. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991. \$45 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

Elizabeth Claud

Nuclear Enchantment, Patrick Nagatani's most recent book, marks a subtle yet effective change in the photographer's approach to the subject of nuclear technology and its ramifications. Although Nagatani explored the topic of nuclear apocalypse in his collaborative works executed with the painter Andrée Tracey in the 1980s, this body of work is, as a whole, more focused and politically charged than the earlier work. In the forty staged and manipulated color plates included in the *Nuclear Enchantment* series, Nagatani's personal vision shines through. Each of the images relates to the theme of nuclear power, but Nagatani's use of irony and humor brings the subject to a level that entices rather than repels.

In the series, Nagatani's commentary masks itself in subtle imagery or boldly emerges in highly charged compositions. In plate 21, for example, two lawnchairs are pulled up to a blazing barbecue—symbolic of domestic bliss. The scene is surrounded by a tall fence topped with barbed

As in Nagatani's earlier works, the theme of nuclear apocalypse recurs and the photographs are staged using bright colors and obvious props such as model airplanes and missiles, paper cutouts, and toys. However, for this series Nagatani ventures out of the studio, away from painted backdrops, and instead photographs nuclear sites throughout New Mexico—the "Land of Enchantment"—to serve as backdrops. Before constructing his final images, Nagatani photographs places related to the nuclear industry, from the relatively safe—the Rocket Lounge in Alamogordo, Air Force bases, and science museums—to the verifiably radioactive—the markers at the Trinity Site and Project Gasbuggy uranium mines. The site photographs serve as the basis for the final images, and the effect of using real sites rather than painted backdrops seems more germane to the real problems faced by residents of New Mexico, and, by extension, everyone.



Patrick Nagatani, *Koshare/Tewa Ritual Clowns, Missile Park, White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico, 1989*. Original in color.

Throughout his photographic career, Nagatani has explored the potential of the manipulated or staged image as a vehicle for artistic expression. He painstakingly arranges people and props against his own photographs of New Mexico's nuclear landscape, often adding bright colors to the images in the studio and

rephotographing the result.

While the subject matter of Nagatani's photographs is serious, the staged quality and bright colors add a degree of humor to the work. The objects superimposed on the photographs of sites are obviously props and play against each other to create visual puns. Nagatani's unearthly bright colors, often noxious greens, bright reds, and glowing yellows, draw the images out of the realm of the believable and into that of the dream or nightmare. Nevertheless, Nagatani's treatment of the subject does not overwhelm his serious intentions.

The layering of comedy and tragedy within the images relates to the contradictory nature of nuclear power itself. A theme that runs throughout the series is the conflict between myth and reality. Over the years, Nagatani has collected clippings from the popular press and from government publications about various military and nuclear operations and "incidents" in New Mexico. He uses the information he gleans from various sources as a starting point for the photographs, investigating the idea that "truth" is often difficult or impossible to decipher from fiction. Nagatani is concerned with the idea of history, not only the long history of the nuclear industry in New Mexico, but also the histories of other peoples, notably those of Native Americans and Japanese, and of future generations. Native Americans established their cultures in New Mexico long before the United States

government began nuclear experiments in the state. Nagatani shows his sensitivity to that by including pueblos, Navajo tract homes, kachinas, ritual clowns, and historical sites in his compositions. In addition, due in part to the fact that the Chicago-born Nagatani is Japanese-American and in part to his interest in history, he incorporates Japanese elements into many photographs, including a Hiroshige eagle, carp, Japanese tourists, and occasionally the style of *ukiyo-e* prints. Because radioactive waste will be around for future generations, Nagatani often depicts children in his images: a Native American boy watches a television program about the Waste Isolation Pilot Program (WIPP), the photographer's son emerges in a glowing green from Radium Springs, ghost-like students are juxtaposed against the missile display in front of their high school, a Japanese child holds a model of a missile in her hands.

Despite the fact that Nagatani deals with a politically loaded topic, a viewer can appreciate the aesthetic qualities of the rich images without knowing the context of the pieces. Fortunately, though, the introductory essay by Eugenia Parry Janis offers a substantial amount of factual information for those viewers who feel compelled to learn more about Nagatani and the series. In the essay, Janis analyzes thirty-nine of the forty plates in depth, discussing not only content but also Nagatani's creative

process. She even accompanied the photographer on the shoot for plate 20, *B-36/Mark 17 H-Bomb Accident (May 22, 1957)*, 5 1/2 Miles South of Gibson Boulevard, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1991, and details the photographer's exacting methods. Janis' discussion of the series is adept, and her insight comes across as more of a collaboration with the photographer than a mere introduction to the series. The introduction triumphs by creating a balance between the essayist's well-researched material and the photographer's complex imagery.

Overall, *Nuclear Enchantment* is successful on many levels. The photographs are visually complex and enthralling, and despite being exciting as objects, they also bring up themes that need to be addressed by all of us—although the Cold War is over, the problems of radioactivity are still very much with us. The introductory essay and the two maps at the back of the book, which show the locations of raw materials mines, nuclear power plants, testing sites, weapons production facilities, and nuclear waste sites throughout the United States, extend the scope of *Nuclear Enchantment* to remind us that, whether or not we live in New Mexico, we are all surrounded by dangerous possibilities.

Elizabeth Claud is working toward a master's degree in art history at the University of New Mexico.



Patrick Nagatani, *Waste Isolation Pilot Plant TRUPACT II Accident, Atomic Auto Wreckers, near Las Cruces, New Mexico, 1990*. Original in color.

wire, and a mountain in the background, a seemingly harmless and beautiful topographical feature. The only hint that something is amiss here are the two military planes at the upper left of the image. Upon reading the title of the image, the insidious reality of the scene is made all too clear: *F-16 Falcons (U.S.A.F. Thunderbird Team), Residential Backyard Facing Hollowed-out Manzano Mountain Nuclear Warhead Storage Area, Kirtland Air Force Base, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1990*.

In another photograph (plate 2), the photographer's message is more obvious. In the foreground, three men and a woman with Japanese features prepare to take photographs of an Asian man and child standing in front of the marker commemorating the detonation of the first nuclear device. The background is painted an eerie red, and a replica of the Enola Gray, suspended by monofilament, floats over the scene. *Trinity Site, Jornada del Muerto, New Mexico, 1989* is an ominous vision and represents not only the historical relationship between the Japanese and the atomic bomb, but also the naïveté of the general public (represented by the stereotypical tourists) toward the dangers of radioactive waste, a problem that will remain with us for tens of thousands of years.

Many of the photographs in *Nuclear Enchantment* are similar to Nagatani's works executed in the 1980s in collaboration with Tracey; three of the images are in fact partial collaborations with Tracey.

Patrick Nagatani, *Kwahu/Hopi Eagle Kachina, White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico, 1989*. Original in color.



Books Received

The Houston Center for Photography periodically receives review copies of books from publishers around the country. They are available to visitors for perusal during HCP's regular gallery hours.

Ascherman, Herbert, Jr. *Voyage*. (Cleveland Heights, OH: Books on Photography Press, 1991)

Bad Object-Choices, ed. *How Do I Look: Queer Film and Video*. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991)

Burson, Nancy. *Faces*. (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1992)

Dunitz, Jay. *Pacific Light*. (Hillsboro, OR: Light Press, 1989)

Easter, Eric D., Michael Cheers, and Dudley M. Brooks, eds. *Songs of my People*. (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1992)

Edwards, Jim and Clint Willour, curators. *Island Inspired*. (Galveston: Galveston Arts Center, 1991)

Evans, Art. *Photo Business Careers*. (Redondo Beach, CA: Photo Data Research, 1992)

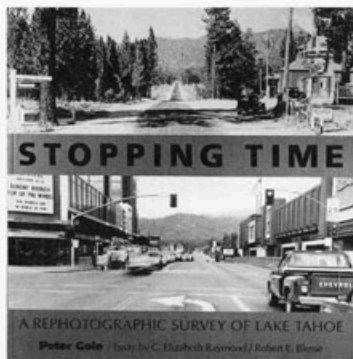
WITNESSES OF TIME

FLOR GARDUÑO

INTRODUCTION BY CARLOS FUENTES



Garduño, Flor. *Witnesses of Time*. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992)



Goin, Peter. *Stopping Time: A Rephotographic Survey of Lake Tahoe*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992)



Greenfield, Lois. *Breaking Bounds*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1992)

Heiden, David. *Dust to Dust: A Doctor's View of Famine in Africa*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992)

Henri, Florence. *Florence Henri: Artist-Photographer of the Avant-Garde*. (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1990)

Hine, Lewis. *Lewis Hine in Europe: The Lost Photographs*. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988)

Kismaric, Carole, and Marvin Heiferman, eds. *Frida Kahlo: The Camera Seduced*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1992)

McCullin, Don. *Unreasonable Behavior: An Autobiography*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992)

Miller, Lee. *Lee Miller's War*. (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1992)

Persky, Robert S. *Stock Photo Deskbook*. (New York: Photographic Arts Center, 1992)

Saudek, Jan. *Life, Love, Death and Other Such Trifles*. (Amsterdam: Art Unlimited, 1991)

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Stevens, Payson R., and Kevin W. Kelley. *Embracing Earth: New Views of Our Changing Planet*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1992)

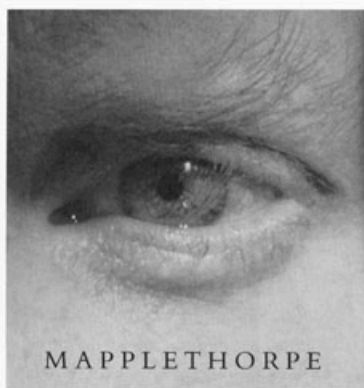
Trager, Philip. *The Villas of Palladio*. (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1992)

Vetter, John Paul. *Biomedical Photography*. (Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1992)

Wojnarowicz, David. *Tongues of Flame*. (Normal, IL: University Galleries of Illinois State University, 1990)

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The Curator's Eye

The 1992 New Orleans Triennial Exhibition: *New Southern Photography* was held at the New Orleans Museum of Art, May 9–June 28, 1992. A catalogue is available from the show through NOMA.

Bill Frazier

The 1992 New Orleans Triennial Exhibition includes 118 photographs by thirty artists chosen by John Szarkowski, the former director emeritus of the Department of Photographs at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Eight hundred artists from twelve Southern states submitted work for the juror.

The New Orleans Museum of Art's triennial format is important. It allows artists to submit work and participate in a museum-sponsored exhibit and have their work published in a catalogue. It is rare for artists, whether they are established or just beginning their careers, to have such opportunities. Of the artists in this show, some of them, such as Nic Nicosia and Jerry Uelsmann, have received significant national and international exposure. Sally Mann and Debbie Fleming Caffery are representative of mid-career artists. There are also many who are just now finding a regional audience and several have just finished graduate school and are beginning their exhibition careers. Such is the nature of juried shows, and that is their strength.

In general, the work chosen is quite good. It is not surprising that, given Szarkowski's curatorial proclivities, the exhibition has a strong formalist stylistic bias. Szarkowski first defined photographic formalism in a 1964 exhibit at MOMA titled *The Photographer's Eye*. Much of his curatorial career was spent refining those ideas. To see the NOMA exhibit, one would inevitably conclude that formalism is the dominant photographic practice in the Southeastern United States today as well.

The exhibit has some very strong qualities. Women represent eleven of the thirty photographers included in the exhibit. While that ratio could stand improvement, it is better than many other such exhibits. Patricia Dalzell, an artist from Virginia, is represented by six large black-and-white portraits of women who return our gaze. They are thoughtfully composed, honest and direct images of subjects who present themselves with confidence. Sally Mann, one of the better-known photographers in



Sally Mann, *Night Blooming Cereus*, 1989



David M. Spear, *Mamie Neugent Washing Her Hair/Lee*, 1989

the show, has three romantic, softly focused prints most aptly described as lovely. Her image *Night Blooming Cereus* is strangely evocative of Gauguin's Tahitian paintings made in the last century. The languid eroticism of Mann's images seems primitive and remote when compared to the deadpan style often adopted by contemporary photographers.

Several of the artists work in a documentary mode. New Orleans artist Richard B. Oliver records folk life in and around southern Louisiana. His portraits of musicians and others are straightforward records of individuals who present themselves for the camera, and in so doing, indirectly reveal something of their personalities and culture. He is a latter-day August Sander, traveling the back roads to small communities portraying individuals who give southern Louisiana such a distinct flavor and culture.

David M. Spear, from North Carolina, has photographed people who live close to the economic edges of our society. The image titled *Mamie Neugent Washing Her Hair/Lee* pictures some of the harsh realities that people must endure in their daily lives. His work also includes the suggestion of narrative, which is an important part of the Southern tradition.

A more political approach to documentary is found in the work of Texas photographer Sharon Stewart. In her series *Toxic Tour of Texas*, Stewart insists upon making very specific indictments of the corporate policies of the petrochemical and defense industries in Texas. She combines image and text to illustrate the disastrous affect that the actions of these industries have upon the environment and those of us who live near these sites. Hers is the only work in the show that undercuts the apparent insistence that the formalist qualities in a work are sufficient.

Not surprisingly, the color photography included in the exhibit bears a striking resemblance to the kind of work that Szarkowski promoted in his role as curator of MOMA's Photography Department. New Orleanian William K. Greiner and Birney Imes from Mississippi both have works that are suggestive of William Eggleston in their deadpan observations of the small incidental detail. The work by Larry E. McPherson from Memphis could be mistaken for Eggleston's as well. Lawrence McFarland from Austin, Texas, is represented by some black-and-white work that is remarkably reminiscent of the New Topographics photographers, which Szarkowski promoted in the early 1970s.

While much of the work in the show is very strong, there are several impressions that emerge from the exhibition. If this show is indeed representative of photography in the South, then photographic activity in this rather large twelve-state region has been almost completely unaffected by the photographic activity of postmodernism and photography's interaction with politics and popular culture. It is possible, of course, that many photographers chose not to submit work if they worked in photographic modes that were beyond Szarkowski's tastes. But this show is actually like a stylistic time capsule and bears an uncanny similarity to the shows from the early 1970s at MOMA.

Much water has passed under the tripod since photographic formalism was a vehicle for the excitement and sense of discovery that it carried twenty or thirty years ago. Now it has matured, but it seems mannered and out of touch. In the triennial exhibition at the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Southern manifestations of formalist imagery are a curious stylistic and curatorial anachronism.

Bill Frazier is a Houston artist.

Patricia Dalzell, 1990.



PARTING SHOTS

This issue of *SPOT* would not be complete without mention of two recent photography exhibitions on view this summer in Houston: "Ansel Adams: American Icons," June 13–August 30, 1992, at the Blaffer Gallery on the University of Houston campus, and "William Wegman: Paintings, Drawings, Photographs, Videotapes," May 16–August 23, 1992, at the Contemporary Arts Museum.

The Ansel Adams exhibition comprised 59 photographs chosen by the artist to present what he considered to be his best, most significant work. The show provided few surprises but did serve to remind us of Adams' superior craftsmanship and dedication. William Wegman's exhibition, organized in Switzerland, included approximately 119 artworks created between 1970 and 1990. The press release from the Contemporary Arts Museum began with a description of the photography—more specifically the Man Ray and Fay Ray portraits—and appropriately so, for this was by far the most extensive element in the exhibition. How the artist, working in multiple mediums, plays one medium off the other, incorporates one into another, or simply shifts from one to the other—questions raised by this exhibition—will be the subject of a future *SPOT* article.

Maggie Olvey



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© Julie Newton. "Eloina's Mother." 1978. Kodak Tri-X film, professional film and Kodak Polyflex paper. © Eastman Kodak Company 1992

*The light through the doorway pressed gently
on her face,
showing me her world, her house, her bed,
her eyes.
She looked into my eyes through the camera,
as if she knew she would be looking at the world,
and without fear.
She always cried when I showed her a picture
of herself.
Eloina told me later her mother was unhappy
with how she looked,
old and wrinkled.
"Julie's camera never lies," Eloina said.
I never thought of her as old and wrinkled.
I saw a woman, a friend.
And she always asked me to take another picture.*

—Julie Newton

Julie Newton is a photographer in Austin, Texas, and a faculty member at the University of Texas at Austin.

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