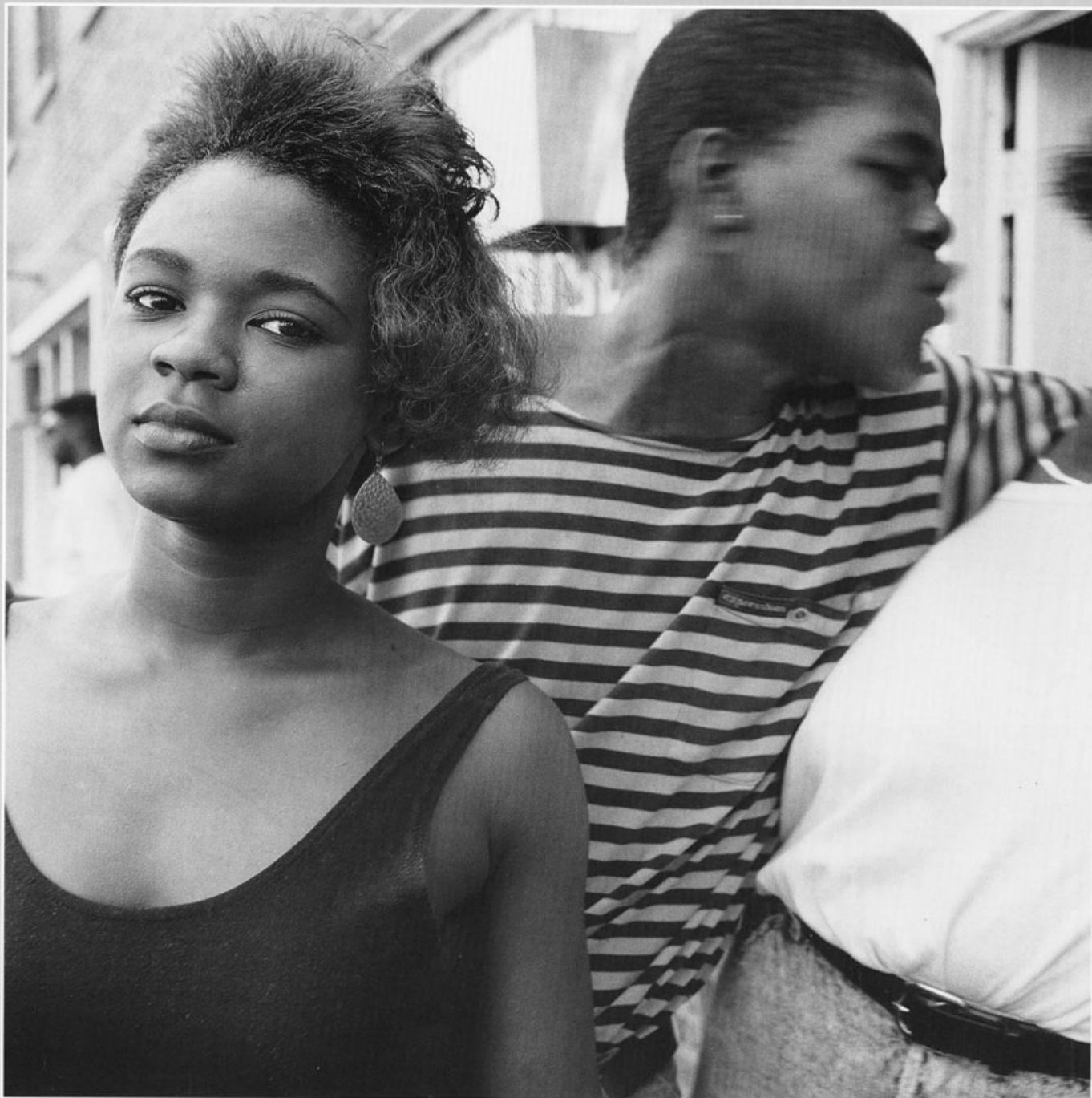


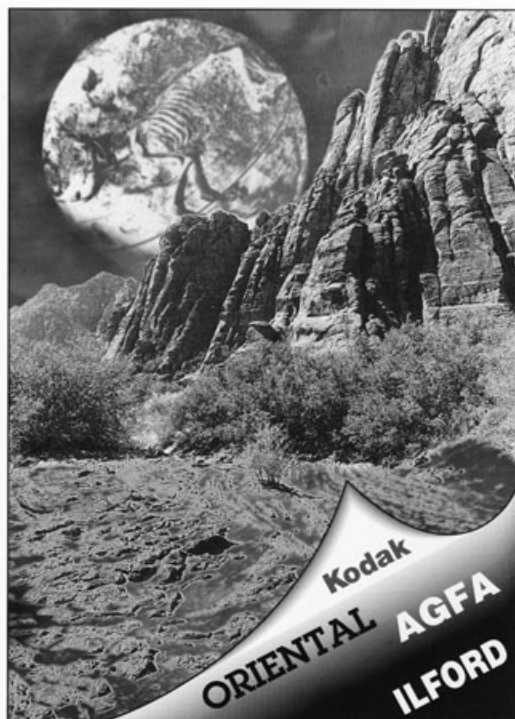
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# WOMEN IN PHOTOGRAPHY

## 4 Women and Telling Stories: Links between Art and Life

Nancy Solomon recounts the theme emerging in the fourth *Women in Photography Conference*—women and telling stories. From "Women and the Land" to "Women and Technology," each panel discussion led to the basic act of sharing stories and strengthening the female artistic voice.

## 6 Women as Women, Women as Artists, Women as Photographers

The fourth *Women in Photography Conference* held in Houston March 24-27 is reviewed by Marlee Miller, a former co-editor of *SPOT* and a conference participant.

## 7 Carolyn Heilbrun—

Excerpts from her keynote address at *Women in Photography Conference*

## 8 Women and the Faces of Aging

Aging is what you make of it. This seems to be the essence of the varied approaches to photographic portrayals of women included in two exhibitions reviewed by Nels Highberg. "Women and the Representation of Aging" and "Nina: Portraits by Herlinde Koelbl," both held in conjunction with *Photography Houston / Spring '94*, offered alternative views—both light-hearted and serious—of aging.

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## 10 The Adventurer

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## 14 Songs of the South

After growing up in the segregated South of the 1950s, Birney Imes discovered the region's juke joints, its patrons and proprietors, and with them a stage for developing a style both technically and artistically his own. Holly Hildebrand examines the artist's work and the methods he employs in capturing this vanishing subculture of the South.

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Emily Godbey's "Classify and Contain" tests the epistemological limits of visual communication and its dependence on the way information is manipulated, used and misused. Reviewed by Ed Osowski.

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David L. Jacobs reviews two books, *Imogen Cunningham: Ideas Without End*, edited by Richard Lorenz and *The Enchanted Landscape: Wynn Bullock* published by Aperture, and the determination of an artist's place in history is largely determined by the friends and families left behind.

## 18 Books Received

Compiled by Juan Garcia

**Cover:** Birney Imes, *Girl on Catfish Alley*, Columbus, Mississippi, 1990

## Editor's Note

To live is to have a story to tell. The artist, in particular, often releases portions of her personal story to the world in her work—a unique and powerful position indeed. But it is a shared power. This revelatory process empowers the teller and enlightens the listener. From classical mythology forward, the art of storytelling has been cultivated and cherished by many cultures, not only as a means of education, but for bonding the participants and creating a feeling of shared purpose and history. For these reasons it seems inherently right and natural that women and storytelling, the theme of the fourth *Women in Photography Conference* be inextricably linked. This powerful tradition can serve women well today by linking them to their histories while banding them together for the future.

Carolyn Heilbrun, professor emerita, English and Comparative Literature, at Columbia University and keynote speaker at the *Women In Photography Conference*, addressed the importance of sharing one's story in her writings as well as in her remarks to conference attendees in Houston in March, 1994. Excerpts from her address are included in this issue of *SPOT*. Marlee Miller, former co-editor of *SPOT*, sums up the conference itself with an overview of its strengths and weaknesses in her story *Women as Women, Women as Artists, Women as Photographers*. Nancy Solomon recounts the fruitful exploration of the Women and storytelling theme that unfolded during *Women In Photography in Women and Telling Stories: The Link Between Art and Life*. According to Solomon, the strength of this idea asserted itself in all aspects of the conference appearing in both informal and planned settings. *The Adventurer* by K. Johnson Bowles, an interview with Anne Noggle, recounts the fascinating story of a woman who rejected limits when shaping her life. Bowles' interview highlights Noggle's past books while previewing her newest book *A Dance with Death: Personal Memoirs of Soviet Airwomen in World War II* published by Texas A&M Press.

Featured in *SPOT* is *Songs of the South*, an essay by Holly Hildebrand, tracing the sources of the photographs of Birney Imes on the occasion of his exhibition at the Galveston Arts Center. This photographer's twenty-plus years of following the trail of the Southern restaurant/bar known as the juke joint have resulted in a time capsule of these vanishing social spots.

Reviewed in this issue by David L. Jacobs are two books, *Imogen Cunningham: Ideas Without End*, edited by Richard Lorenz, and *The Enchanted Landscape: Wynn Bullock*, published by Aperture. Jacobs examines the success of these books in preserving the reputations of these two photographers.

Also in this issue, we have incorporated some design changes to the layout of *SPOT*. These were done in an effort to improve the presentation of the work and make it more engaging to the reader. We welcome your comments.

Karen Gillen Allen

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# WOMEN & Telling Stories

Links Between Art and Life

This essay was based on the fourth *Women in Photography Conference* hosted by Houston Center for Photography in association with the University of Houston, Department of Art, March 24-27, 1994.

Nancy Solomon

"Women and telling stories" was not the announced theme of the fourth *Women in Photography Conference*, but it was the conceptual thread that captured the attention of participants.



W. Snyder MacNeil, video still

The very structure of the conference encouraged the telling of individual stories. The format was one-track with everyone focused on the same primary sessions and ideas. Yet, rooms and time were scheduled and available for breaking into small groups, and discussion questions were suggested, such as: If you had been supported in your resistance to gender stereotyping, how might things have been different for you? Is it possible to resolve a difficult relationship with a parent while that parent is still alive? How does that parent's death facilitate resolution?

The form of the conference also gave rise to fundamental questions. How do life and art overlap? When does the individual become universal? Where is the boundary between therapy and making art? Why grapple with personal issues if your art is not narrative, realistic, or autobiographical? The answers were not neat or complete. Months later, the questions still resound.

"Women and telling stories" was not the theme of Carolyn Heilbrun's keynote address, but it was never very far away. Women's biography is the focus of Heilbrun's current work, and she opened her address with a question that she asks when examining the lives of accomplished women. How did it happen? And, what do accomplished women have in common? Her research yielded an unexpected answer: their ability to resist socialization.

How can this be done? The first chance comes early; for instance, Gloria Steinem, the subject of Heilbrun's next book, avoided early socialization by not starting school until she was 11. Reaching 50 is another watermark when many women often take more risks, as if becoming 50 initiates a rite of passage marking the possibility of change.

Heilbrun said: "Every woman needs to rename herself [to create a new story] and make a list of everything she wants out of [both meanings] and in her life." Understanding the truth of women's experience is essential to making these changes. Women need to talk to other women regularly, to share stories, and to trust and support each other. In the nineties, she sees the best hope in women's reading groups that meet regularly, particularly "those that transform into something else."

In the days that followed, several individual presentations and panels revealed different ways that transformation grows from telling stories. Lorie Novak in the "Women and Autobiography" panel discussion described a flash of understanding. While choosing snapshots from her own life for a large-scale projection piece, she realized that the personal had become universal. She began to add imagery from the lives of others, because the art itself carried a universal human message. On the same panel, Ann Fessler told how her exploration into being adopted was manifested in an installation and an artist's book titled *Genetics Lesson*. The art was not overtly about her personal quest. Rather, Fessler confronted a homogeneity assumed by society and schools and exposed it as a mythology. She established an elementary school setting, where the viewer encountered a student lesson requiring a family history that most adopted students would not know. Here a personal exploration was transformed into a larger societal issue.

Gay Block integrated narrative with images in a strong and emotional presentation entitled, "An Autobiography of My Mother." Block described a moment of transformation that occurred as she continued to work on the piece after her mother's death: Suddenly, she could not distinguish between her mother's version of reality and her own perception at the time.

Mindy Faber's videos *Delirium* and



Mindy Faber, video still from *Delirium*, 1993

*Suburban Queen* star her mother, who comes across on screen as direct and funny. Faber explained that her mother is manic depressive and was often excluded from family activities and decisions. Through sensitive use of humor and obvious exploitation of video formulas, Faber not only expressed her own concerns about how women are viewed, she also gave her mother a voice.

In the panel "Women and the Representation of Aging," Anne Noggle discussed the invisibility of older women in our society—its benefits and its problems. For Noggle, a person's face "doesn't even get interesting until they are at least 60." She showed portraits and told the story of Russian women flyers who were active during World War II and are now abandoned by their society. Noggle devised her own

fundraiser to help these women; in conference hallways and at the Firehouse Gallery, she offered her photograph *Myself as a Pilot* in exchange for a \$50 donation. Herlinde Koelbl presented *Nina*, a series of portraits and nudes exhibited at the Goethe Institut—Houston—images that tell a story of dignity and long life. As one student observed, "I never knew there would be wrinkles all over your whole body."

Joanna Fruch lectured on "Polymorphous Perversities, Female Pleasures, and the Post-Menopausal Woman." She stressed the importance of telling new love stories for older women, "women with flesh that moves." Another strategy Fruch envisioned



Joan Myers, *Mastectomy*, 1993



Ann Fessler, *Genetics Lesson*, 1991

is artists developing the archetype of the crone.

Just as I was surprised to hear the "Women and telling stories" theme in Joanna Frueh's lecture, I was equally surprised to find it emerge in the "Women and Advanced Technology" panel. During her studies at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab, Wendy Snyder MacNeil was intrigued by the way new technologies change the way that stories are told. She wanted to find a new narrative form that encourages interaction and narrows the gap between the maker and the viewer.

Surroundings and interactions with other attendees are often just as valuable as the planned sessions at any conference. The "Women and telling stories" theme continued to develop. Throughout the city of Houston, nearly fifty photography exhibitions were on display, and many of them showed art with narrative elements. The Firehouse Gallery offered the opportunity to see the prints of work by Gay Block, Anne Noggle, and Joan Myers shown in slide form at the conference. The greatest impact for me was Houston Center for Photography's exhibition "The Visual Diary: Women's Own Stories." Wall photographs, installations, artists' bookworks, and video art were all presented in an exhibition that took hours to see. This element of time was crucial to every work. If exhibitions were reduced to equations, this one might be: time/narrative + personal imagery = intimacy.

In the "Visual Diary," artists used low tech ways to narrow the space between maker and viewer. For instance, Sadie Benning used a Fisher Price toy video camera to create *Jollies*, an exploration of an emerging lesbian identity. There is a sense of immediacy in these videos with their simple, contrasty black-and-white imagery. The viewer lives in the moment with the artist;

even her titles and credits are part of the picture. In *Giving Fear a Proper Name: Detroit*, Susan Kae Grant grabs the viewer's attention by integrating parts of her body such as fingernails in self-portraits punctured by pins and intensified by text. If the use of time and text is expected in bookworks and video art, it was also used by the artists like Karen Johnson showing photographs on walls. Looking at and reading the photographs in "Valuable Papers: Constructing My Father/Myself," the

viewer is drawn into a story from different viewpoints and creates his or her own version of the whole.

The resistance of some conference participants to the impact of telling stories continued to fascinate me, as if the artists who attended raised questions that added another layer of inquiry to the conference. What does self-examination have to do with art? If art is essentially human communication, isn't developing an authentic human core an ongoing part of an artist's work? How does telling stories initiate change on a personal level—for the artist and the viewer? When does the personal become universal expression? Isn't all art autobiographical in some way? For artists whose subject matter is not overtly personal, telling stories, developing one's authentic core, might find expression in a freer line or a more intense color.

For me, the best story that surfaced during the conference belonged to several people. During the panel "Women and the

Representation of Aging," Joan Myers was showing slides of her large platinum-palladium portraits of older women. As is characteristic of her work, form and emotion combine to create powerful imagery. When Myers' dignified nude portrait of a woman who bears the mark of a radical mastectomy was projected on the screen, Anne Tucker, curator of photography at Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, called out from the audience asking for the story. The woman in the photograph had seen Myers' work in this series and offered to be a subject. Before her surgery, she had no image of what her body

interests of her museum community. A woman in the audience offered to donate the photograph to the museum, and it is now in its permanent collection.

This is not just one person's story; it is four people's stories. We can label them, artist, curator, subject, and donor. But that misses the point. Their interaction reveals that telling stories is a complex expression where internal and external experiences are integrated. Each one. Speaking and hearing. Giving and getting.

Through this multi-layered example, we return full circle to that need expressed by



Anne Noggle, *Myself as a Pilot*, 1982

was going to look like afterwards, and she wanted to help provide that picture for other women.

Tucker, it turned out, had her own story about the photograph. At another conference, Tucker's track record of acquiring work by women artists was called into question. She explained that fundraising is necessary for all her acquisitions and that what she purchases is in response to the

Carolyn Heilbrun at the start—to understand the truth of women's experience. Sharing stories is a way to find this understanding. Listening is as important as telling, and giving is as crucial as receiving. Honest stories are a powerful means of growth and expression on all levels, both individual and universal.

Nancy Solomon is an artist who makes bookworks and video art. She is also Director of Publications and Public Information at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona.



Lorie Novak, *Collected Visions*, 1993

# WOMEN *as Women*, WOMEN *as Artists*, WOMEN *as Photographers*

The fourth Women in Photography Conference was held in Houston, Texas, and presented by Houston Center for Photography in association with the University of Houston Department of Art, March 24-27, 1994.

Marlee Miller

Nationally renowned feminist, scholar and author Carolyn G. Heilbrun set the stage: "Women's Lives—Telling Our Own Stories." She opened the fourth *Women in Photography Conference* with challenges, insight and humor about women and their lives.

It was an apt beginning, but what came after her inspiring address were three days of interaction with more than 300 women who are living their lives as women and showing it through their art, work and love.

Participants of the *Women in Photography Conference* were from all across the nation, with thirty-two states represented and four foreign countries. The conference was held at the University of Houston, hosted by Houston Center for Photography. The lead sponsor was Professional Imaging of Eastman Kodak Company and additional support was provided by Compaq Computer Corp., Texas Committee for the Humanities and American Airlines.



Keynote speaker Carolyn G. Heilbrun

Keynote speaker Heilbrun, who is the Avalon Foundation Professor Emeritus in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, spoke of what it is that allows a woman to become "accomplished": it is her ability to resist socialization. Some women resist socialization as girls and others have a second opportunity past 50, according to Heilbrun.

She spoke of telling the advantages of being past 50 to young women: "It's a lot more fun being me than you. One day when you are burdened down with all the marvelous thrills of youth, I hope you'll look ahead to that wonderful time when you're 50, when you can really be yourself. People don't look at you very much, but you will look at them. It is better to look than to be looked at."

Gloria Steinem is the subject of Heilbrun's next book and she quoted Steinem's 1994 commencement address at Wellesley College. Steinem suggested to the graduates that women invert the Golden Rule: "To learn to do for oneself what one has been doing for others."

As Heilbrun concluded her remarks that Thursday night, and answered a variety of



Conference participants shared their experiences in breakout groups.

questions from the audience, we knew we would soon be called upon to interact among ourselves. We all tentatively "broke-out" and sat with strangers to hear their stories and possibly share our own. It began slowly. Our group decided to go around the circle, introduce ourselves and tell a little about our lives. It was a good beginning, some of us were academics, some professional photographers, a few under 30 and a few over 50.

We discussed Heilbrun's theory on power and where the women's movement had gone. Heilbrun had said: "The hardest thing about power is personal cost. We all grew up thinking that if we are nice, they'll love us. If we're good they'll love us. When you get into any institution—academic, religious, business, government—they don't love you. And power is not a source of love, it is a use of love."

One of our group members had never experienced lack of respect or power in her academic career, yet her husband had felt it in the business community. Another woman had raised her children on her own and felt power from that and enjoyment of her freedom after 50. Yet another woman spoke of her struggle to do her art while working full-time and mothering three children.

And so the conference began. We were starting to talk, we were sharing our stories and bringing it all back to ourselves as women, some as visual artists, others as scholars, curators, mothers and daughters.

This aspect of interaction was a pre-dominant theme. We weren't allowed to sit back and listen. We were forced to tell our own stories through breakout groups. The planners of the Women in Photography conference—Jean Caslin, Executive Director of Houston Center for Photography; Adele Horne, Houston Center for Photography Program Coordinator; and Nels Highberg, a graduate fellow in the Women's Studies Department at Ohio State University—developed this essential difference through their experiences at previous Women in Photography

conferences, similar events, feedback from more than twenty focus groups, and a desire to present women the opportunity to share and grow from one another's friendships and experiences. They had even taken the advice of a few psychologists on how to best set up the interactive groups.

From the positive responses of conference attendees, the interactive groups provided them with opportunities to personalize the broader issues being discussed at the conference. "Sometimes this was very painful," wrote one woman on her conference evaluation form. "However, women must face their fears in the supportive environment of other women." A few women expressed frustration

## RECURRING THEMES

Thirty-one speakers participated, including specialists in the fields of photography, video, literature, art history, psychology, law, medicine, ethnic and women's studies. The panelists discussed women and the representation of aging, women and their relationship to the land, women and autobiography, women and technology and glass ceilings and closed doors.

The themes winding throughout the discussions and panels, however, were not so clearly marked. Anticipating and/or celebrating ourselves and our lives as we age, exploring our relationships with our mothers and how they have impacted our lives and art, and finding strength and kinship in others' stories as we struggle to keep art from being a lost priority in our lives.

In reading the participant questionnaires from the conference there are no favorite speakers or topics but there are standouts and a few disappointments.

Nationally-known artist Gay Block's moving slide show and discussion of her mother and their relationship clearly impacted the entire audience. Block photographed her mother for eighteen years but did not work with the images until her mother's death two years ago. She said that now maybe it is possible to see her mother as a person.

Block began her presentation by showing a series of family photographs—of her mother growing up, herself through the years, and her own portraits of her mother. As slides slowed, Block turned to the screen and said: "Hello mother, I love you."

She hated her mother most of her life, Block said, and felt overwhelming guilt in her presence because she had wanted her dead. "My anger interfered with my life more than my mother's. The purpose of this work is redemption for her and for me."



at the groups not having a facilitator, not enough time or losing focus, but most agreed it broke the ice and kept them interested. The breakout groups followed several of the speakers and panel discussions and the printed program included questions to help lead the discussion.

**BREAKOUT GROUP QUESTIONS:**  
*Photography by its very nature can provide routes of introspection that differ from traditional media. The group will discuss other models for representing maternal and paternal relationships.*

One of the most favored panels of the conference was "Women & the Representation of Aging" moderated by Linda Kaeser, professor in the School of Nursing and the director of the Center for Aging, both at the University of Texas at Houston Health Science Center. She was joined by German photographer Herlinde Koelbl; New Mexico photographer Joan Myers; Anne Noggle, a former captain of the U.S. Air Force, a photographer and photo historian; and Ohio professor and photographer Elise Mitchell Sanford.

These artists specialize in photographing women over 50. They spoke of the fact that to age in our society means to become invisible. Television and films have shown little interest in the aging female except as a caricature and seek to counter existing stereotypes, creating new ways of picturing the vitality and sexuality of their subjects.

**BREAKOUT GROUP QUESTIONS:**  
*(1) What are your greatest fears about growing old? (2) If you were to ask three questions of an older person about growing old, what would they be? (3) What are three things that you would share with an older person?*

Both of the panels "Glass Ceilings/Closed Doors" and "Making a Living While Making Art (Oxymoron or Occupation?)" dealt with the reality of working in the world of photography—and working as a woman in general—whether you are an artist, curator, administrator or academician.

In "Glass Ceilings/Closed Doors" we were inspired by Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, photography curator Anne W. Tucker telling us we just have to think of Flip Wilson and tell yourself "Just do it honey, just do it!" Tucker urged everyone to network, to turn to our colleagues for

support. She said that women are not as aggressive as men about getting their work out there. Only one out of six portfolios that pass over her desk are from women. Tucker also said that of the 704 photography curators in positions of power in the United States, only thirty-four are women.



Conference participants share insights into each other's work.

Ideas of reorienting ourselves to that glass ceiling were given. Other panelists gave encouraging words not to give up. Others spoke of the "gatekeepers" and cautioned us against looking at leadership and professionalism in traditional ways. Offer an inspirational voice at key moments, said Los Angeles photographer Pat Ward Williams, as well as keep quiet when needed.

When it comes to making art and making a living, most agreed that promoting oneself and exhibiting take as much time as making the art itself, and that most people don't make a living through their work but make a living while making art.

K. Johnson Bowles gave us a list of skills needed to make a living—besides having multiple personalities. She said one needs the ability to communicate—write and speak about one's work—organizational skills, ability to edit one's work, create promotional packets and know how to pack the art and get it sent where it needs to go.

**BREAKOUT GROUP QUESTIONS:**  
*(1) How do your own experiences compare with those of the panelists? (2) Are there experiences that were not brought out in the panel? (3) Have you developed personal methods that help you work through personal or professional barriers?*



Anne Tucker, photography curator at MFAH, discusses Judith Black's portfolio

## MINUSES

Only a few panels and speakers were repeatedly listed in the conference surveys as disappointments. "Women & Advanced Technology" and "Women & Their Relationship to the Land" were two of them.

Throughout the conference, women spoke of moving more and more into using computers to create their art. Many said it was a necessity in their jobs, others were fascinated with the possibilities, the freedom it gave them. The panel didn't seem to meet the needs of the audience. "Not only were the presentations long and tedious, but most of the speakers were obviously uncomfortable addressing a large group," wrote one attendee.

"I think the topic is just too broad."

The high sugar content of the food, the lack of audio visual expertise exhibited by University of Houston staff (trouble focusing), and the somewhat haphazard car pooling arrangements during the conference were mentioned in the questionnaires, but only briefly compared to the praise given to the HCP staff for their helpfulness and organization—Caslin, Horne, Sam Lasseter, Michael DeVoll, and HCP board member Deborah Garza were all mentioned.

Several of the few men who attended the conference had complaints that they felt excluded. One wrote to HCP to say: "I believe that the several males attending were looked upon as observers rather [than] participants. . . . You will note that none of the males ever were in discussion circles. Although this might well have been good

because of content of the discussions, it made the males feel alienated and unwelcome. Perhaps in the future there can be some way to exclude males from this meeting. (Yes, I know that it is illegal.) Maybe a registration category called observer."

During the first several discussion groups, men were segregated to their own groups, especially when it came to gender relations and self-esteem discussions. But later in the conference, the groups were encouraged to "adopt a man" into their discussions. Including men wasn't a major concern, according to the organizers, because the conference was designed for female photographers and administrators, and only twelve men attended.



Time allowed for informal conversations among participants.

## NEXT TIME

The 1994 conference in Houston was the fourth *Women in Photography Conference*. The first was held at Syracuse University in 1986. The second was at Bryn Mawr College in 1989 and the third was held by the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona in 1992. There has been one offer to have it in Kansas City in 1996. Nothing has been decided yet, but it is clear that holding this conference is good for the host organization, good for photography, and certainly good for women.

Marlee Miller is communications manager for a local non-profit organization and former co-editor of SPOT.

All photographs by E. Lynn Baldwin from the Women in Photography Conference.

Conference logo created by MANUAL.



Kathleen James and Herlinde Koelbl converse during a quiet moment.

**EDITOR'S NOTE: THE FOLLOWING REMARKS ARE EXCERPTED FROM CAROLYN G. HEILBRUN'S KEYNOTE ADDRESS TO CONFERENCE ATTENDEES.**

I've been thinking more and more that there comes a second chance in woman's lives to resist socialization... One thing that happens to women or girls who resist socialization is that they are often what they and others call lonely.

It has taken me many years to realize that loneliness is something someone can feel anywhere. In a crowded room, in a first marriage, in a close partnership...anywhere. We tend to think that those who go their own way are especially lonely. I think we have to learn to call it something else.

I've been working rather hard with the help of a lot of people, to find a ritual that could be undertaken, say on a woman's fiftieth birthday. To metaphorically mourn the possibility of this change. For one thing I think the woman needs to take a new name. She should rename herself.

Then she should decide, make a list and write it down, of everything she wants out of her life and everything she wants in it. Now I don't just mean walking the dog I mean dinner parties, luncheons with no meaning to them, dry cleaning, perhaps one's whole life and ask again what one wants in it. To ask herself what went wrong here?

One of the things we need more of in this country is reaching out of hands between generations of women. We have very little of that. We have teachers and we have students... I think I can tell you what will happen... this young woman will come back in five or ten years and say you don't remember me. "You know I thought you were terrible when I took your classes, but you were right." And that's what happens when you teach feminism.

Our job as feminist teachers is not to be loved and when you grow up in this world it's very hard to learn not to be loved. When they (students) meet marriage, children, jobs and aging and so that they'll not think "My God, something must be wrong with me" then they'll remember they've heard it before. That's what we're there for.

"Women's irrational fear that if they use traditional male power they'd risk becoming like men. At a time when many women are learning to use power a threat is posed to our psychological comfort. If women were familiar with the delights of men's privileges and powers they'd fight against giving them up just as men do."—quoting Naomi Wolfe.

The hardest thing about power is its personal cost. And that is something we all have to learn about power. We all grew up thinking if we're nice they'll love us. If we're good they'll love us. When you get into any institution (academic, religious, government) they don't love you and power is not a source of love, it's a use of love.

When there are women [in power] in the army, navy and all the military bodies in great numbers we'll have fewer wars. Many men go to war to get away from women.

I don't go to weddings much anymore. I've read too much feminism and I know what weddings are about. Even when they redo them, the sight of some woman who's been living with a man for ten years in a white gown always disturbs me a little. I believe very much in rituals but we must keep asking ourselves what they mean.



Elise Mitchell Sanford, Margaret Deppen as Betty Grable, 1990



Elise Mitchell Sanford, Nancy Adams as Marilyn Monroe, 1992



Elise Mitchell Sanford, Ruth Barnard as Marlene Dietrich, 1990

# WOMEN & Aging

**Women and the Representation of Aging:** Gay Block, Anne Noggle, Joan Myers, and Elise Mitchell Sanford at Firehouse Gallery, March 12-April 9, 1994, presented by Houston Women's Caucus for Art. Nina: Portraits by Herlinde Koelbl at the Goethe Institut—Houston, March 19-April 15, 1994. Both exhibitions were presented in association with Houston Center for Photography.

## Nels P. Highberg

Carolyn G. Heilbrun writes, "[T]he last third of life is likely to require new attitudes and new courage."<sup>1</sup> In *Writing a Woman's Life*, Heilbrun reflects upon these challenges and points out that there are few outstanding women available for women to look to for guidance as they age. One example, May Sarton, began a new journal on her 70th birthday and later published it as *At Seventy*. In it, Sarton discusses her attitudes towards aging:

*What is it like to be seventy? If someone else had lived so long and could remember things sixty years ago with great clarity, she would seem very old to me. But I do not feel*

*old at all... I suppose real old age begins when one looks backward rather than forward, but I look forward with joy to the years ahead and especially to the surprises that any day may bring.<sup>2</sup>*

For "Photography Houston/Spring '94," two exhibitions displayed photographs by five women that dealt with the representation of aging. Like Sarton, these photographers, Gay Block, Joan Myers, Anne Noggle, and Elise Mitchell Sanford at Firehouse Gallery and Herlinde Koelbl at Goethe Institut—Houston, created work that articulated the experiences of older women with clarity and honesty.

A sense of fun infiltrated much of the work, and Sanford's gelatin silver prints most explicitly expressed this sense of playfulness. In her images, women over 50 from Athens, Ohio, dressed up as famous women including Harriet Tubman, Marilyn Monroe, and Georgia O'Keeffe. At the fourth *Women in Photography Conference* on a panel exploring "Women and the Representation of Aging," Sanford discussed how the process of photographing these women revealed a group of strong, tough, independent women who did not fit the stereotypical docile older women who needed to be cared for. Thus, the images expressed more than the fun of dress-up. They also showed how the subjects took on the role and modeled themselves after those strong women from their past.

There was also an interesting sense of lightheartedness in some of the work of Gay Block. In the Type C prints *Freda and Marianne*, Block photographed each of these women in two ways. First, she

photographed them clothed and seated in their homes. A sense of starchiness and stuffiness surrounded these women as they sat upright and formally for the camera. Next to these images were photographs of the same women standing naked in the same setting. Literally stripped of confining clothing and the social expectations associated with them and their surroundings, the women laughed and relaxed.

The emphasis on the real bodies of older women carried over into the work of the other photographers. For example, one print from Anne Noggle's 1975 series "Facelift" shows the stitches that initially remained after her eye surgery. Noggle looked directly into the camera, confronting both women like her who want such surgery for themselves and women who reject it as a tool that subverts women and makes them conform to societal expectations of beauty. In the photographs, Noggle does not hide from either scrutiny or approval. A similar sentiment holds true in the work of Joan Myers, particularly *Mastectomy*, (1993). In this image, a woman stands before the camera holding her bra so that it covers one breast while exposing the space left by the removal of the other by a full mastectomy. Again, the woman looks directly into the camera, facing an eye that has for years forced women to hide such bodies from view.

The work of Herlinde Koelbl utilized a somewhat surreal approach towards the body. Koelbl photographed a longtime artist's model from Munich named Nina. Some of the images are conventional, such as Nina wearing an elegant hat with a veil while holding her poodle. In others, the

camera moved closer to Nina's nude body. These images accentuate the results of the aging process, the wrinkles and softness of the skin. During the panel discussion Koelbl described how these photographs reminded her of a landscape. The use of lighting to create long shadows in a closeup of Nina's abdomen creates an otherworldly landscape because it is an image so often hidden from view.

Sanford noted that as feminist scholars age, they begin to write and theorize about aging, and this fact is reflected in the recent writings of Heilbrun, Sarton, and others, at least as it pertains to the tradition of white, Western women. The same theory holds true for these photographers, as well. As they age, they present their lives to the camera and the viewer with candor, humor, and, most importantly, honesty.

Nels P. Highberg is a graduate associate in the Center for Women's Studies at The Ohio State University in Columbus, OH.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*, (New York: Ballantine, 1988): 124.
2. May Sarton, *At Seventy*, (New York: Norton, 1984): 9-10.



Herlinde Koelbl, Portraits of Nina



Herlinde Koelbl, Portraits of Nina

Laura Letinsky: *Venus Inferred* at Lawndale Art and Performance Center, March 26-May 7, 1994 and *Intimate Stages* at Sally Sprout Gallery, March 10-April 16, 1994

Cara DeBusk

The subject of romantic love has fascinated philosophers, writers, musicians, and artists of all media for centuries. Expressions of love and intimacy are as varied as the humans who practice them, yet certain images of love have predominated in Western culture. The female body has been used to represent "love" and "sex" from the *Venus of Willendorf* to contemporary advertising and film. The symbolic equation of "female body" = "sex" has had a profoundly narrowing effect on the expressions of female subjectivity and female desire. Individuals of both sexes have struggled to explore female desire in ways that counter commercially-produced images of women as objects (not subjects) of desire. In particular, some women artists have tried to incorporate a woman-centered experience in work dealing with sexual expression. Yet few artists have lived up to the difficult task of redefining in art what has been so thoroughly co-opted by commercial media. In "Venus Inferred," Laura Letinsky, who spent last year in Houston as a visiting



Laura Letinsky, *Untitled*, 1990, original in color

## The Look of Love

ized these commercial images of sex have become. This acting shields the viewer from any glimpse of these individuals' true feelings about one another; complex feelings that may not be present during sexual play,

authentic or posed. These photographs contextualize the images of other couples so that it is difficult to read them except as staged scenarios that explore only the *image* of heterosexuality and coupling. This in itself could be powerful, yet runs counter to Letinsky's goal.

The female subjectivity alluded to in "Venus Inferred,"

which Letinsky represents here by posing many of the couples so that the woman faces the camera, is Letinsky's strength. She forces the viewer to contemplate the possible realities of each woman. What is she thinking? How does she feel about being photographed? What does she think of the man with her who is gazing at her in such a lovingly-proprietary way? How does she relate to the female who is photographing her? Why is she doing this? These questions

are never answered adequately in the photographs themselves. It is noteworthy that in the one image of herself with her partner, Letinsky poses herself looking down and away from the camera. Where is *her* subjectivity?

Letinsky's stated goal in making these photographs is to explore issues of love and intimacy—tenderness, vulnerabilities, regret, and disgust—through male/female couples in various stages of intimacy, with an emphasis on female subjectivity. Unfortunately the result is only a "posed" intimacy, and very little revelation beyond sexual practice. The question is: Is it really possible to get at the highly-complex feelings that couples experience only through representing them in a sexual context? Is it possible to achieve intimacy and authenticity through photography that is so loaded with implications of voyeurism and pornography?

Letinsky explores the issue of female subjectivity with greater success in the exhibition "Intimate Stages" at Sally Sprout Gallery. Again, using large Type C-prints, Letinsky presents both couples and women alone. Far and above the strongest work in either of these exhibitions are Letinsky's photographs of women alone. One image depicts a woman, perhaps "30-ish," lounging alone on a couch dressed in a silky slip. The traditional pose, referencing a history

of art crowded with paintings and photographs of lounging women who have been put on display for the pleasure of men, is subverted by the expression on this woman's face: an intricate mixture of desire, loneliness, fear and amusement that says volumes about how many women relate to themselves and their own feelings.

These quietly powerful images are simultaneously beautiful and disturbing. The women are seen in moments where they are both vulnerable and strong, seeming to be feeling a mixture of emotions that draws the viewer to look deeper. Included in the exhibition are more images of couples, with many of the same problems as the work in the Lawndale show, yet the context is much altered by the presence of the photographs of women. In "Intimate Stages," much more is being said about the issues of self and desire that women face, in or out of relationships with men. The women alone may seem sometimes sad, or frightened, but they are always self-possessed. The women in relationships look questioningly at the camera, as their male partners gaze at them with love and desire that seems to slip so easily into ownership. The work in "Intimate Stages" alludes to the complex issues that women face in relating to themselves and their partners with a power and thoughtfulness absent in "Venus Inferred." These subtle issues of self-identity in the face of love are delicately and successfully addressed in the less overtly-sexual images.

Cara DeBusk is a photographer and video artist, teacher, and the curatorial assistant at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in the Film and Video Department.



Laura Letinsky, *Untitled*, 1990, original in color

professor at the University of Houston, attempts to deal with images of love and desire that incorporate a female subjectivity. She photographs heterosexual couples, usually young, captured in intimate moments in their own private spaces. She presents these as framed 20 x 24 inch or 30 x 40 inch Type C-prints. On first viewing, the initial reaction is a series of questions: Are we looking at real people who are really in love? What is the image of love in the minds of people being photographed? What do they want Letinsky, and consequently the viewer, to see about their relationship? The answers gleaned from these photographs is that the couples show us exactly what they think we expect to see, and no more about themselves than is comfortable, which is very little.

Of the sixteen photographs shown at Lawndale Art and Performance Center, images of one couple (Robin and Ken) seemed to dominate, although they comprised only three images. This couple is expert at imitating the classic poses of pornography: the straining, the arching, the biting of the lip. With their acceptably blonde, buffed and tanned physiques, Robin and Ken demonstrate how internal-



Laura Letinsky, *Untitled, (Francesca and Don)* 1992, original in color

# THE Adventurer



Anne Noggle, Raisa Sumachevskaya, from *A Dance with Death*

**Editor's Note:** What follows is the product of K. Johnson Bowles' interviews with Anne Noggle. *A Dance with Death: Personal Memoirs of Soviet Airwomen in World War II*, Noggle's latest book, published by Texas A & M Press in fall 1994. The exhibit "Out of the Sky: Portraits of Russian and American Pilots of WWII" is planned for November 7-December 10 at Firehouse Gallery, sponsored by the Houston Women's Caucus for Art.

**K. Johnson Bowles**

*"I think I've always had a sense of adventure. It doesn't happen to everyone." — Anne Noggle*

Joseph Campbell, explorer of societal and personal myth and "self-construction," has examined the individual's need and/or desire to seek self-actualization as opposed to conforming to options thrust upon one from chance or inaction. He describes this process as "following your bliss." According to Campbell, the path to fulfillment is blocked by many obstacles, some internal and some external, and great personal effort—and risk—is required. The person who successfully follows his/her bliss recognizes the risks and accepts them as part of life's experiences. As one progresses, fear dissipates and life's "shoulds" and "should nots" are forgotten. Such strong people become the heroes of society, those that break, or set, the archetypes to which the rest of us compare our life experiences.

Anne Noggle is one of Campbell's strong people. She has always followed her dreams and desires and lived a life filled with the exceptional—exceptional to everyone but her. First she found her spirit and breath in flying, both physically and metaphorically, as a pilot and as a photographer. She has challenged conventional views of women in her life and in print, thriving on the energy and fulfillment her experiences

have produced. In 1939, at the age of 17, she gained her pilot's license. From 1943-44 she was a Woman Air Force Service Pilot; from 1945-53 a flight instructor, air show stunt pilot, and crop duster pilot; and then a captain in the United States Air Force from 1954-59.

In 1959 she retired from the Air Force due to disability and decided to return to college. About this time in her life Noggle recalls "I was excited about the possibility of going back to school. At first, I decided to be an art historian. I attended the University of New Mexico when I was 37. In my last semester Van Deren Coke came to the university as chairman of the art

department and started the photography program. So I took a class in photography." In Noggle's first photography book, *Silver Lining*, Noggle explains the power photography had over her: "It was the first time since I'd been grounded that I felt completely happy. I knew what I was going to do for the rest of my life."

Noggle finds being a pilot and being a photographer fulfilling in much the same way: "The similarities between photography and flying are that you are totally independent. Once you're off the ground flying you are completely on your own. I've always wanted to be completely independent and photography is a very independent thing.

You either rise or fall because of that. There is no question in your mind about who is responsible."

Being a pilot also affected her way of looking at the world when she began to photograph. "Initially, I used a wide-angle lens to take in all I wanted around me which probably stems from my years as a pilot—scanning the horizon. Those were in my early photographs. It felt good to photograph that way. It took me a while to get closer to people, to really look at them as portraits."

Her influences are as wide-ranging as Arbus, Sander, Avedon and the like. Noggle contends, "The only one who influenced

Anne Noggle, 125th Regiment, Pe-2 Aircraft, from *A Dance with Death*



me was August Sander. I liked the very straight-forwardness of what he was doing even though he was categorizing the people. My greatest influence was having lived and done all the things that I had before I approached photography. Some of my friends had died flying. I had lived in Europe. I had seen an awful lot right down to the raw bone. I believe that it was my experience of life more than it was outside influences that caused me to photograph the way I do."

Noggle's insistence on doing things independently and on her own terms is deceptive. She is a humanist nourished by her relationships and life experiences. Her photographs are not those of an outsider looking in or of cold scientific categorization by an anthropologist. "My approach is very personal. It is the way I feel, it is the rapport between myself and the person being photographed. What I wrote some time ago I still find to be true. To look straight into a face and find a pulse of what

but strength, and beauty and humor and the aging of real human beings whose lives are so visible. Now I am one of the elderly and I use my self-images in a humorous way, being perhaps naughty, reminding us of the sensuality and playfulness that remains with us even as ancient citizens. And I offer it to the viewer in hopes that while they are enjoying the images they will also see us as viable human beings. Attitudes are changing and the elderly are speaking up nowadays.

"The second book, *For God, Country and the Thrill of It*, 1990, explored the uniqueness of Women Air Force Service Pilots. It was the first work I had ever done that was formal. I photographed a good number of people in a short period of time at a reunion of Women Air Force Service Pilots. I felt it was time to photograph us. I knew we were special in relation to what we had done. In the late '30s, it was uncommon for women to fly airplanes. I wanted to see if there was something visual

I re-photographed their snapshots from World War II. The book is called *A Dance with Death: Personal Memoirs of Soviet Airwomen in World War II*. The text is so powerful I decided to make the images secondary; it is not a coffee table book.

"They [the Russians] were the first women ever to be in combat. I think it was the only freedom they ever knew. Most of them were born about the time of the Communist Revolution and spent their whole lives under that dictatorship. To get to fly an airplane was a real release. They were such daredevils in the air! Once they were off the ground, as long as they fulfilled the mission, they got away with naughty things like slow rolling the field; things they would have never done, never allowed to do during peacetime.

The interesting thing is that they are

a lot like us at least in looks. There is a powerful thing in them that gives them a sense of self. They have certainly proven themselves!"

Noggle and the Russian women developed a decisively caring friendship going beyond the distance implied in the artist/model relationship. "When I arrived in Russia, the women came to my hotel where I interviewed and photographed. The very first ones that came gave me bear hugs and a kiss on either cheek. Even though I couldn't understand the language there was understanding in a number of ways. We were the same age. We had been in the same war helping each other. We were all pilots or crew. There is something in those things that makes you alive. We formed a friendship in spite of the lack of language through our translator. I never felt the distance that might have been between us."

Noggle's concern for their well-being turned to action. "Since they have to spend all their money on food they have nothing left over. They can no longer afford medications from the West. I carried over a lot of medicine. What I took over there did not solve the problem, but every little bit counts. I realized that in order to raise the money for the medicine I would have to do something. I made a whole bunch of prints of

myself as a pilot and offered them to anyone who could give at least \$50. I raised \$8,000. That's a lot of prints."

The content of Noggle's photographs express the strengths of women. "Women have many modes of expression and each adds to our knowledge of them; style of hair, makeup, clothing, almost everything about her is chosen to effect her self-image. The body, the stance, pose and then the face, the face—we learn to read a face even before we learn to speak. The subtleties of facial expression and the openness of women to using them are legion. Girls are free to emote, to express their feelings at the same time as boys are taught to be stoic

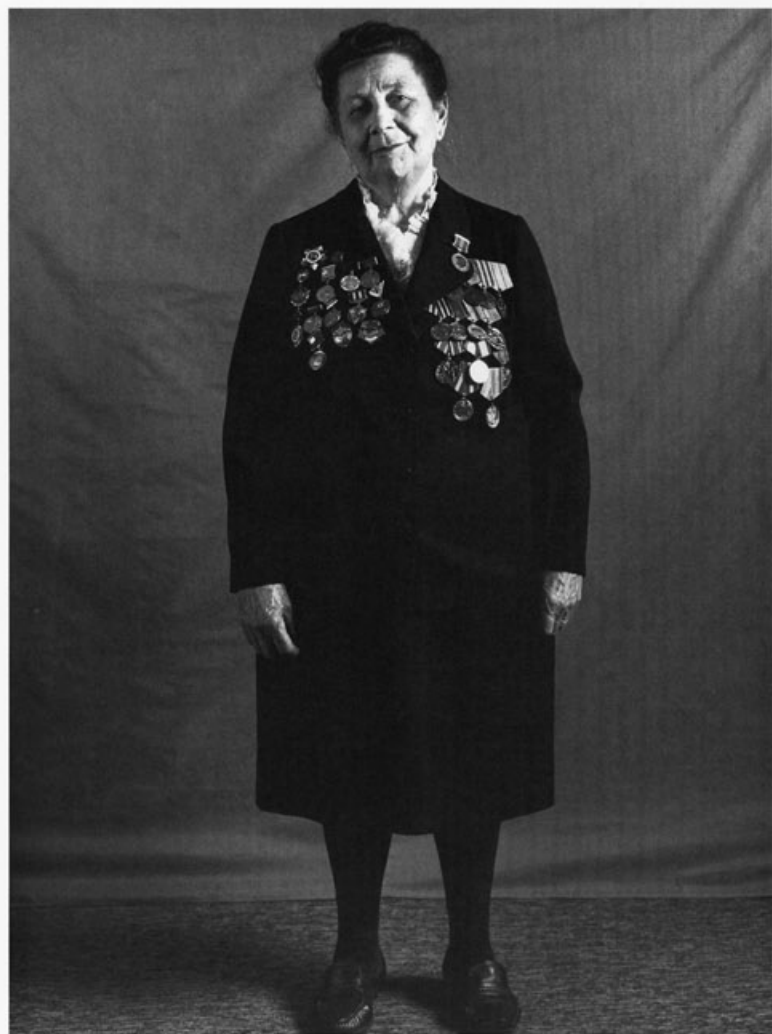


Anne Noggle, Valentina Volkova-Tikonova, from *A Dance with Death*

and impassive. And on the face of an older woman you can often trace a life, not just a mood. I believe when women are old they grow stronger. Not physically of course but inner strength. I find them to be beautiful. I do and don't call myself a feminist. I think the ideas of the basics of feminism I certainly agree with. I don't call myself that for one thing; I don't call myself much of anything. I'm not a joiner, but I do believe in the rights of women."

Noggle, in her life's process (or progress) did not purposefully reject the typical for the atypical, for her bliss was not in being a rebel but to be completely herself, an individual in search of her soul's desire and her heart's excitement. Just as with her subjects, on her surface, from looking at her or talking to her in everyday conversation, she could be anyone/everywoman. Just as with her subjects, it's only through her photographs and writings that those who are not intimates of hers can experience her uniqueness. Through her documentation of her own and other women's lives, she has significantly contributed to an expansion of expectations of what is possible/typical for anyone/any woman. But Anne was just being herself.

K. Johnson Bowles is an artist and the Director of the Moreau Galleries at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana. She resides in Niles, Michigan.



Anne Noggle, Mariya Akilina, pilot, 1991

it is to be human, that is what fuels me, that is the sum of my mind and longing."

Her images express a collaboration with the people she has photographed. The images are non-threatening yet raw. There is an obvious trust. Each of Noggle's photographic projects is tackled with sensitivity, personal involvement and a certain level of intimacy. This can be found in her first book *Silver Lining*, 1983. "Since I began photographing my mother and her generation when I was still relatively young. I was both surprised and then shocked by the degree of discrimination directed against the elderly, and its de facto acceptance by the society at large. It became a cause for me and a dominant direction in my work—not pathos, certainly not wrinkles,

that would distinguish us as women pilots. In looking at our photographs I realized there was not. Indeed, we were a cross section of American women of our age. I think I had expected otherwise but upon reflection, it reinforced my belief that women can do whatever they are bold enough to do."

Noggle's latest project continues her focus on women and freedom. "I had a call from the organization of Women Air Force Service Pilots saying 'Guess what? The Russians have women pilots who flew combat in World War II.' I sat there at my desk and thought 'Oh, Lord. Now I'm going to have to go to Russia and photograph.' I traveled to Russia four times and interviewed and photographed seventy women.



Anne Noggle, Mariya Dolina, from *A Dance with Death*

**I Remember It Well**  
by Pat Ward Williams at the Community Artist's Collective, co-sponsored by Houston Center for Photography, and Houston Women's Caucus for Art, with funding from Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County, March 26-April 30, 1994 and Portraits of Community: African American Photography in Texas, group exhibition, at Diverseworks, March 19-April 24, 1994.

Jo Ortel

In her talk at the *Women in Photography Conference*, Pat Ward Williams posed some seemingly straightforward questions: "How," she wondered, "do we use the term 'race'?" What does race mean? How do we evoke the images of race? Two exhibitions on display in Houston in the spring of 1994, including Williams' own at the Community Artist's Collective, offered opposing but complementary ways of addressing questions of racial identity. "Portraits of Community: African American Photography in Texas," hosted by Diverseworks, was representative of the view of race as an essential fact, and from this starting point it celebrated the richness and variety of African-American experience.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, "I Remember It Well," Williams' installation, looked more critically at the underlying concept of race and examined how racial identity is constructed through representation.<sup>2</sup>

"Portraits of Community" showcased the work of fifteen African-American photographers, many of whom began their careers in the 1930s and '40s, and most of whom earned their livelihood by providing services within their communities.<sup>3</sup> Commercial studio portraits and "glamour" shots hung beside photos of the urban landscape framed within a self-consciously modernist high art aesthetic. The photographs documented both the ordinary and the extraordinary events and individuals in various African-American communities in Texas. From photographs of parades, weddings, confirmations, and church ground-breaking ceremonies, to Louise Martin's poignant photographs of a mournful Coretta Scott King, and Robert Whitby's pleasing *Hula Hoops* (1957) composed within a more formalist aesthetic, the "portrait" of African-American community presented was rich and multifaceted. In its eclectic selection, the exhibit offered a powerful and textured alternative to the stereotyped (and often negative) image of African-American identity so pervasive in our media-saturated visual culture.

Defining one's identity, whether with words or with images, can be empowering, and empowerment constitutes an important step in any liberatory struggle, as African-American cultural philosopher bell hooks has pointed out. She writes, "...a dimension of the oppressor/oppressed, exploiter/exploited relationship is that those who

dominate are seen as subjects and those who are dominated objects. As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject.<sup>4</sup>

Later, hooks goes on to write that "oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story."<sup>5</sup> Taken together, the works in this exhibition defined a reality, shaped an identity, just as individually, each photograph had been framed by an African-American photographer who had a story to picture, a

and recognition.<sup>6</sup>

Still, there was something troubling about the definition of race that lay just beneath the surface. "Portraits of Community" embraced uncritically the concept of race as something permanent, irreducible, and natural (as opposed to socially-constructed). As Rosemarie Tong has written, "falling into the trap of essentialism... is an analytic dead-end as well as a political danger."<sup>7</sup> Because the essentialism retains and indeed, celebrates the categories of race as they have been produced historically, the possibility still exists that these categories can be used to justify marginalization and oppression.

Ironically, "Portraits of Community"

exploitation just as readily as it can be used as a strategy for empowerment. As Tong has written, essentialist claims about what makes certain groups of people the way they are (for example, women, blacks, Jews) are the political-philosophical constructs of conservatism. The history of essentialist arguments is one of oppressors telling the oppressed to accept their lot in life because "that's just the way it is."<sup>8</sup>

The practice of lynching in this country is an example of what happened when, instead of understanding that race is a socially constructed (and therefore arbitrary) system of classification, a community of people operated under the belief that race is fixed, constant, and therefore constitutive of a given person: individuals were singled out and murdered in the most gruesome ways "because of their race."

In her installation at the Community Artists' Collective, Pat Ward Williams took an alternative approach to the issue of identity. Whereas "Portraits of Community" accepted race as an essential fact, Williams' art reminds us that the very concept of race is itself a social construction. Her work seeks to analyze and scrutinize the processes by which identity and difference are constituted.

For her pieces exhibited at the Collective, Williams used photographs and snapshots gleaned from her family's photo album, many of which her father had taken. Some, enlarged to mural size, had been overlaid with unaltered snapshots, great swashes of paint, and bits of handwritten or stenciled text; others were combined with found objects. In *Unhappy Children*, for example, nine snapshots were tacked to the wall around a simple wooden shelf in a random arrangement that recalled the way treasured photos and mementos get wedged among miscellaneous clippings and coupons on



Pat Ward Williams, *Lovely Ladies*, 1991

# Questions OF IDENTITY



Calvin Littlejohn, *Self Portrait*, 1940s



Pat Ward Williams, *Unhappy Children*, 1991

reality to name. In its overall conception and in its details, "Portraits of Community" was constructive, hopeful, activist: it sought to replace invisibility with representation

included images, somewhat incongruously, that underlined this very problem. In an adjoining room were displayed photographs and memorabilia relating to African-

kitchen bulletin boards. Only one yellowing, 5 x 7 inch photograph, the type of formal studio portrait that has become a fixture in every middle-class American home, sat in a lucite frame on the shelf. It showed a young black girl in her Sunday-best dress holding her baby sister. The elder sibling smiles shyly for the camera, the younger one fairly beams. The rest of the photos documented predictable events and moments in a girl's young life: birthday parties, Christmas, school events, a summer morning spent with giggling friends. In one, the little girl, with hair straightened into a single curl across her forehead, stood before a fireplace mantel, and beside a large TV. She proudly held a blonde, white-skinned baby doll for the camera.

"If I was so unhappy as a child then why are all my pictures smiling?" This question was scrawled in metallic ink along the top side of the shelf in *Unhappy Children*. By making the deliberate distinction between

some other signifier of middle-class American prosperity.

To four of the women in the mural Williams has added garishly bright paint. One seems engulfed by flames: tongues of red paint leap from her head and spread upward onto the wall above. Two other



R.C. Hickman, *Melba Theater Protest*, 1955

women have been singled out, given painted dresses, blue and green. Here, too, the paint extends beyond the mural and drips down the wall below in sloppy rivulets, as if in mockery of the elaborate care with which

This text reveals a fault line in Williams' thinking about identity, one that the artist herself apparently recognized before the Houston exhibition of *Lovely Ladies*. Williams saw her mother emulate and aspire to white, middle-class values and lifestyles, and she interpreted this as her mother's attempt to elide differences between black and white—as if racial identities were monolithic, fixed, and unchanging. Yet Williams' own work suggests that race and identity are neither stable nor permanent. Our various identities are always changing in endless reconfiguration. Different company, different settings, different circumstances: we continually slip on identities like so many items of clothing from a sale rack. Still, we communicate our values to

others. Just as cultural values concerning desirable skin, eye, and hair color were conveyed to the little black girl in *Unhappy Children* through her little blonde, blue-eyed doll, Mother's preferences and aspira-

believe that without blue eyes, she was no one and nothing. In her art, Williams consistently addresses the construction of identity. Her work interrogates "the intricate and interlacing processes which work together to produce all seemingly 'natural' or 'given' identities."<sup>10</sup> She explores how we learn who we are by taking a closer, critical look at the sites and the mechanisms where and by which identity and difference are produced.

Jo Ortel received a Ph.D. from Stanford University and is currently writing a book on contemporary artist Niki de Saint Phalle.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. "Portraits of Community" was scheduled to travel to 5501 Columbia in Dallas; to the Center for American History at the University of Texas, Austin, and to the Tyler Museum of Art. The exhibit was curated by Alan Govenar.
2. Williams' installation was co-sponsored by the Community Artists' Collective, HCP, and the Houston Women's Caucus for Art. It was partially supported through the Collaborations Program of the Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County. The installation was on view from March 26 through April 30, 1994. Williams also spoke at the HCP Conference on Women in Photography on a panel discussion entitled "Glass Ceilings/Closed Doors." In her talk, Williams addressed issues of race and identity within academia.
3. The photographers featured included A.B. Bell, Marion Butts, Morris Crawford, Rodney Evans, Elnora Frazier, Earlie Hudnall, Jr., Curtis Humphrey, Benny Joseph, Calvin Littlejohn, Louise Martin, Herbert Provost, Carl Sidle, A.C. Teal, Robert Whitby and Juanita Williams.
4. bell hooks, "feminist scholarship: ethical issues," *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press, 1989, pp. 42-43.
5. hooks, *Talking Back*, p. 43.
6. This theme was repeated in wall texts, many of which were drawn from Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*.
7. Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* Boulder and San Francisco: Westview Press, 1989, p.135.
8. Tong, "Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction", p.135.
9. As quoted by Celeste Connor in a review of Williams exhibit at SF Camerawork for Artweek, 25 no. 9 (May 5, 1994), p. 27.
10. Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*. New York and London: Routledge, 1989, p. 2.



Curtis Humphrey, *Wedding*, 1960s

"I" and "my pictures," Williams compels us to consider the relationship between self and the representation of self. What role, she seems to ask, does the photographic image play in our understanding of who we are? Williams gently prods us to acknowledge that history, memory, and identity are produced in and through representation.

Moreover, by phrasing a question that has complicated implications as a simple "if-then" equation, much as a child might, the artist allows us to see the naiveté of believing in and seeking such absolutes as a single truth, a single history.

These concerns reappear with greater subtlety in *Lovely Ladies*, an enlarged wall-size photograph of ten glamorous women of color lined up in a companionable row, their arms clasped around each other's waists. The women wear formal evening dresses and sparkling jewelry, and flash beguiling smiles at the camera. Their hair has been straightened, curled, coaxed and pinned into stylish coiffures. Superimposed on the enlarged photo are tiny snapshots in which (presumably the same) women are shown at other moments in their lives, posed before a shiny automobile, in a fur coat, or with

the women have presented themselves.

In an earlier version of *Lovely Ladies*, Williams included text that read, "As a child of the '60s I often criticized my mother for not uplifting the race by being more Afro-Centric. I realize now that learning to use the correct fork was her idea of progress."<sup>9</sup>



Earlie Hudnall, Jr., *Lady in Black Hat*

tions were also transferred. One can almost imagine the little girl in *Unhappy Children* poring over the photograph of her mother and friends in their elegant finery. It is with these affects that the "lovely ladies" will forever be folded into the family photo album.

In her novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison tells the tragic story of Pecola, a young black girl in Ohio who prayed every night for blue eyes. Pecola was convinced that if she only had blue eyes, she would be beautiful, she would be noticed and her life would be perfect. Her parents would stop fighting, her father would stop drinking, her brother would stop running away from home. Of course, Pecola never actually received her blue eyes, but she was finally noticed, by her drunk father, who raped and impregnated her. I was reminded of Morrison's story as I viewed Pat Ward Williams' installation last spring. Williams' work is not pitched at the same level of high emotional intensity as *The Bluest Eye*, but her work does explore the processes by which we learn that we are different, the processes by which Pecola, for example, came to



Birney Imes, Alligator group, Alligator, Mississippi, 1982

# Songs of the South

This essay traces the evolution of Birney Imes' work and was inspired by the exhibition *Juke Joints at the Galveston Arts Center* July 16-August 28, 1994. Represented by Radcliffe Morgan Fine Art, Houston.

Holly Hildebrand

As a child growing up in the segregated South of the 1950s, Birney Imes says he never faced the question of race head on. What he calls the "richness and diversity of a culture" had been hidden from him, and when he began photographing in the 1970s he chose, as a way to overcome his "ignorance," the rural life and culture of his native Mississippi.



Birney Imes, Walter Brown and Joe Savage, Greenville, Mississippi, 1982

Since those days in the 1970s when he began rambling around the countryside with his camera, Imes' work has evolved from taking black-and-white photographs of people and events in Mississippi to the portrayals, in exotic, saturated colors, of juke joints and the "irresistible" world of the restaurant-bar that he discovered at Whispering Pines in 1976. Three books display many of these photographs: *Partial to Home*—Smithsonian Institution Press by Constance Sullivan Editions, 1994—in the Photographers at Work series; *Juke Joint*—

University Press of Mississippi, 1990—and *Whispering Pines*—University Press of Mississippi, 1994. Many of the Mississippi clubs portrayed in *Juke Joint* are gone now, and since he took these clubs on as subjects in 1983, Imes has extended his geographical range to Texas. A selection of his Texas photographs were exhibited at the Galveston Arts Center.

At first look, the world of Imes' juke joints seems other-worldly, even ghostly. Imes himself admits that although he's been photographing the same subject for nearly twenty years and people understand what he is trying to accomplish, he remains "an alien of sorts, coming into a world in which I'm an outsider." Yet human beings in general seem aliens in the world of the juke joints; rare is the figure who makes a solid appearance in one of these photographs. For instance, pool players in *Riverside Lounge*, (Shaw, 1984), are transparent blurs, and in *Leland Juke*, (Leland, 1983), the face of a man, cue in hand, is partially hidden by a translucent red curtain. Even when figures are sharply defined—a man standing by a "King of Beers" sign in *Emma Byrd's Place*, (Marcella, 1989), customers at *The Playboy Club, No. 2*, Louise, 1983—they often serve only to remind how at odds with their lives—and how far from the realm of possibility—is the often regal, frivolous imagery of their surroundings.

Imes explains that the ghostly blurs in his juke joint photographs resulted from a preference for a small lens aperture to achieve adequate depth of field. This required exposure times that ranged from several seconds to several minutes, and any movement within the frame usually appeared as one of the ghost-like blurs.

oasis-like green of the pool table, but Imes seems to be saying, "They'll be right back in a minute, maybe not the same person, maybe somebody different, but somebody." There is even a *carpe diem* quality to some of them; in *The Social Inn* (Gunnison, 1989), a clock marks the time next to an orange, yellow and black mural of male and female Playboy bunnies. "Yo Baby Yo Baby You," the male bunny is saying. It is a Mississippi Delta variation on the gift of a would-be lover's rose, a reminder that tomorrow we die. In one of the most beautiful photographs in the Galveston exhibit, Imes recalls Van Gogh with saturated, chrome yellows, empty chairs and suggestion of imminent return. *Curley's Place*, (Gladewater, 1993), is reminiscent of the painter's portrait of his room.

Part of the power and interest of Imes' photographs comes from the juxtaposition of dreams and grosser reality; in *Monkey's Place*, (Merigold, 1989), a painting of lovers hangs next to a crude sign that says, "Please do not put cups or can on the table. Thank you. Monkey." The bright yellow *Magic Star*, (Falcon, 1984), seems never to have been touched by fortune, and Christmas lights on a dilapidated *Turk's Place* beckon at the end of a dirt road (Leflore County, 1989). Similarly, *Dorothy's Disco*, (Tyler, 1993), in the Galveston exhibit offers a contrast between the drab beige of the

building itself and the promise of something exciting playing in the reflection of lights in a puddle on the muddy drive. In his introduction to *Juke Joint*, novelist Richard Ford tells the story of one of Imes' friends who suggested that the juke joints had never really existed on earth and were only the subjects of Imes' imagination. Ford says Imes laughs at the story—and well he should. For while Imes makes the juke joints seem exotic, he shows us all too much how they are rooted too solidly in this world.

Imes shows us places that, although unable to stop time, still manage to slow it down; his prime subject here is *Whispering Pines*, a restaurant-bar built in 1949 with a "black side" and a "white side." The lord of *Whispering Pines* was Blume Clayton Triplett, and when Imes found the place in 1976, he struck up a friendship with Triplett and Rosie, the black woman who worked there for decades, gradually taking care of not only the business operation but Blume, who seems never to have thrown anything away. Indeed, his decades of collecting all sorts of trinkets and debris had made the "white side" of *Whispering Pines* unlivable, so Blume turned it into his "archives" and moved over to the "black side." Fascinated by this world of the old melding into the new, Imes began photographing *Whispering Pines* and Blume.

A salty old character, Blume is captured by Imes firing off his guns, celebrating his birthday, smoking his cigars, and resting in bed. Mementos and memorabilia, ranging from family photographs to old jukebox title cards to newspaper clippings about a Chuck Berry arrest, become elements of fascinating time capsules as Imes photographs them in bright colors stored in the old cigar boxes that fill *Whispering Pines*. But even here the clock hasn't entirely stopped. The demarcation of black and white is no longer enforced; after the death of his wife, Blume came to depend more and more on Rosie, and one of the most touching photographs, *Blume and Rosie*, 1986, shows him with his arm affectionately about her shoulders. Rosie wears a gentle smile.

Joyful, skeptical, weary, calm—these are the other faces Imes gives us in the photographs of *Partial to Home* taken between 1979 and 1991. From barbecues to baptisms, ball games to birthdays, Imes shows us the spectrum of humanity and human activity in rural Mississippi. In one of the most moving photographs, we see the arm of a black woman reaching down to hold the hand of a white child. The child wears a pout, but turn a few pages and you will see the contagious joy of *Alligator group*, (Alligator, Mississippi, 1982), or witness the tenseness of *Oaklimb baptism*,

(Crawford, Mississippi, 1979). Intimacy, tenderness, openness and poignancy mark the work of Birney Imes, and his involvement with the life of the South involves the viewer as well, to the benefit of human understanding and compassion.

A former photo editor, Hildebrand is a writer, critic and playwright.



Birney Imes, Blume and Mary Dora, June 1988

## Seeing Isn't Always Knowing

Classify and Contain, an installation by Emily Godbey, at Houston Center for Photography, Gallery X, June 3-July 3, 1994

Ed Osowski

A large, red, plastic sign, hanging from the ceiling and positioned over a wooden desk, greeted the visitor to Emily Godbey's "Classify and Contain."

**ART INDEX**  
the sign announced.

**REFERENCE & INFORMATION**  
it offered. And, then it encouraged the viewer to

**ASK QUESTIONS HERE.**



Paul Hester, Installation photograph of "Classify and Contain," 1994

Asking questions is at the very center of Godbey's installation. Specifically, Godbey is concerned with how the visual information found in the photograph (and related media) can trick, mislead, and misinform. Her questions are basic to the very nature of epistemology: how, why, and what we know.

Godbey takes her cues from two sources, both of which address the question of how information is manipulated. In the center of the gallery she placed a desk. Behind it and waiting for a reference librarian to take her place was a chair, quite ordinary, on first inspection, seemingly quite sturdy, also, with a passage incised rather crudely into its back. Quoting a passage from the story "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" by the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, the passage claimed to derive from a "certain Chinese encyclopedia" that contained an early system for classifying animals. There are fourteen ways, the encyclopedia advises, not all of which are mutually exclusive, to arrange animals. First are those animals "belonging to the emperor," a category large enough to include all those that follow. But the category of "tame" animals excludes those that are "frenzied." Those that are "drawn with a very fine camel brush" may include those "that from

a long way off look like flies." Borges has found—and Godbey is clearly taken by—this systematic ordering that is, actually, illogical or irrational, certainly non-linear, surely imperial.

Her second cue can be found in five medium-sized panels of text spread out across one wall that reproduced the "tables" or classification systems employed by the Library of Congress to catalog books in two areas—Technology (Class T) and Fine Arts (Class N). Among the arts listed in Class N—painting, sculpture, drawing—one does not find photography. It is with the other tools of technology that the Library of Congress classification system places photography, because of its origins in eighteenth and nineteenth century experiments with optics and related visual equipment.

What Godbey has done in "Classify and Contain" is look at the ways in which information and, here, specifically the information found in photography is used

identified by the name of the photographer, the work's title, and a date. One pulled out the desk's large drawer to find twenty-eight compartments, each one large enough to hold one of the cards and each compartment labeled with a category: "children," "nude male," "nude female," "portrait," "urban scene," "botanical," "the blur" (a favorite of mine), "vacation," "industry," to cite just a few. The cards, spread out across the desk, were waiting, inviting, encouraging the visitor to impose order on them, to box and contain them.

One began to work. Or began to play. Because the seriousness of Godbey's installation left room for great amounts of humor and wit. One could take the Chinese perspective. Or one could proceed with the perspective suggested by the Library of Congress tables. Where does one put the female nude by Clarence White? Into the box labeled "nude female," of course, until one spotted another category, "self-reflexive

photography is complicated by the most fluid part of the information equation: ART.

How context can skewer one's reading of the photographic image is made clear when one uses the card catalog that sits on the desk's left edge. Here the official symbol of how the library controls and arranges access to information is made into anything but an authority figure. Look under the heading "Friends of Photography" and one does not find the San Francisco organization housed at the Ansel Adams Center. What one finds, barely larger than a postage stamp, is an Alfred Stieglitz photograph of Georgia O'Keeffe. Yes, she was indeed a friend of photographers (Stieglitz, Strand, Gilpin, among others), but, how odd, how enlightening, how funny is Godbey's choice of illustration! Look under the category "Resembling Flies at a Distance" and one finds two images—Kusokabe Kimbel's 1890 photograph *New Year Drill of the Japanese Fire Brigade* and another, dated 1865, by Alexander Gardner showing the Lincoln conspirators/assassins hanging from scaffolds. Yes, indeed, they resemble flies when the image is so reduced to fit on a small card.

Godbey subtly pushes one to conclude that any system that attempts to control and contain by its very nature is aggressively limiting, is about reducing the power of the object that is "contained," is, in the case of the images which equate people with flies, about reducing the person to the non-person.<sup>2</sup>

For Godbey information contained in the photographic image is not fixed by cultural schemes but is tricky and unwilling to sit quietly in a box. She fills one corner of the gallery with crumpled sheets of newsprint that have seemingly exploded from the pages of three sculptural books that stand over them. Godbey urges the viewer to recognize that the ways in which photography functions are too many and too alive to stay in one place. In "Classify and Contain" she acknowledges those points in a clever, intelligent, and playful manner.<sup>3</sup>

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

### FOOTNOTES

1. It is instructive and amusing to see how one dictionary visually makes the point Godbey is making. When one looks up the definition of "décolletage" in the first edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1970) one finds a photograph of Marilyn Monroe. Interestingly, Monroe herself does not merit an entry in the dictionary although President James Monroe does. The date of Monroe's photograph and its photographer are not provided. Subsequent editions of the dictionary dropped her illustration.

2. Godbey deliberately made the process of seeing and knowing difficult. Two walls of Gallery X were lined with small specimen boxes, each one about one cubic inch in size, which contained minuscule versions of "The Twenty Biggest Pictures in Gardner's *Art through the Ages*," each one too small to be viewed with much certainty of what one was viewing. One looked and squinted and finally identified the images only because one had seen these famous images reproduced so many times before.

3. In the preface to his *Order of Things*, Foucault quotes the Borges' passage that Godbey finds so important and goes on to describe how, upon reading the section in Borges, he began to laugh, laughter coming from his realization that systems of classification are based on the perceived threat of the other and that it is precisely because the "other" is so disturbing that systems are devised to impose order. Such systems, he writes, are actually efforts to "tame the wild profusion of existing things."

and misused. Informing her installation is the belief that the Library of Congress system—or, for that matter, any system—which makes of photography little more than a technical tool or merely a very accurate way of illustrating the flotsam and jetsam of life is inadequate and limiting if one holds that photography is an art.

Godbey raises the difficult question of utility: if photography is an art, how does it function? What does the photograph do? What is its purpose if not to provide information, if it is not an illustrator's tool?

It may be that the Western mind cannot rest until it imposes order on the random pieces of information that comprise the "world of learning." It may be that something in Western culture rages until discrete bits of data are boxed and contained. It may be that to the Western mind a Chinese system that describes some animals as "fabulous" and others "innumerable" is simply unworkable.

The rather grand and beautifully crafted desk which sat in the middle of the gallery offered the visitor the chance to participate in the process of filing, cataloging, classifying, and containing. The desk's surface was covered randomly with a collection of index cards, numbering approximately 150, each one mounted with a small photo-copied image of a photograph. Each card was

photograph," and realized that White's female also partook of that category. One wished for an emperor who could contain all in one simple file. In Godbey's effort to uncover the limiting strategies of any system that holds no room for spontaneity and discovery, one was forced to make limiting choices.

The difficulties mounted as one continued to look at images. What does one do with Cecil Beaton's portrait of *Marlene Dietrich* and an orchid, each object as large as the other, and each dramatically lit and posed? Is it a "botanical"? Is it a "portrait"? And what if one wanted to place it in a category marked "photograph by homosexual"? A similar problem emerged when one tried to place Lartigue's photograph of a bourgeois woman, wrapped in fur, walking her dog. Is this an example of "fashion" or is it an "urban scene"? Or is it a "portrait"? Or a "street scene"? (And, one asked, just how does a "street scene" differ from an "urban scene"?)

What Godbey's installation instructs the viewer to recognize is that information is slippery. She knows that how we see and what we learn are as much functions of what we already know as they are functions of what we are afraid to know. For Godbey context is always important. For Godbey the context within which we study

## The Artist as Exposer

Celebrating my 40th birthday alone at the blue hotel room by Lydia Schouten at the Houston Center for Photography, Gallery X, in association with Julie Saul Gallery, N.Y., and the Consulate General of the Netherlands, and Mondriaan Foundation, April 15-May 29, 1994

Hans Staartjes

*"Loneliness, great loneliness. Need for contact, but the feeling is never satisfied. I hate myself because I feel so lonely and long so much to touch someone, because it is humiliating. I hate everyone else in the world because they are all potential lovers but they don't love me."*

Lydia Schouten, *Perspektief #40*

Lydia Schouten's installation "Celebrating my 40th birthday alone at the blue hotel room" was an ambiguous project. It claimed unextraordinarily to be about a single woman's feelings of fear and loneliness living in New York City, when in fact it was a display of multiple levels of voyeurism. I was fortunate to meet Schouten and exchange a few ideas with her during her stay. Many of our observations seemed similar, perhaps because we share the same nationality (Dutch) and experiences of living in this country. As European nationals we have a pernicious habit of condescension towards the United States, deploring the exaggeration that seems to cover every facet of life in this country. Life here is visually and physically more tumultuous (as is the landscape); car crashes more spectacular and the accompanying sirens and flashing lights of the police cars more loud. Murders are always more callous and frequent, and the television viewer's appetite for lugubriousness is unfettered; the television preens and manufactures heroes (O.J. Simpson) out of athletically gifted but intellectually atrophied individuals and then gloats without compunction (helicopter videos of a white truck driving down a freeway) at their demise, while laughing all the way to the bank. The public appearance of someone in the nude brings out loud protests of



Lydia Schouten, creating "Absence makes the heart" on the windows of HCP.

"pornography" while protocol seems hardly necessary for sexual activity behind closed doors. Life in Europe just doesn't seem as dramatic! Her installation came to Houston via the Julie Saul Gallery in New York, where it had been previously shown. In addition to being a photographer, Schouten is a sculpture graduate of the Rotterdamse Academie; with a performance art background; she is also well versed in the production of her own films. Her installation combined sculpture, drawing and photography. It was also proof of the blurring of lines between artistic media presently taking place. Her drawings, which were displayed on the large front windows of HCP, gave little intimation of the thought-provoking work within. The show was a reflection of life as a woman today under a constant threat of violence, and the

ensuing feeling of personal isolation. This woman was dramatically symbolized through a bodiless female form lying in a bed in the middle of a blue-green bedroom. Long locks of hair from her sleeping head flowed over the bedclothes. The bed was actually a bulbous, transparent mattress filled with air. It was covered with a translucent yellow, frilled bedspread. The glowing effect originated from a strong light source underneath. It created what seemed like a tongue-in-cheek, art-historical reference to a *Dormition of the Virgin*.



Installation photograph of "Celebrating my 40th birthday alone at the blue hotel room," 1994

On the surrounding walls were the blurry and ominous television-appropriated images of captured murderers; male faces that appeared to be the spectators at a wake. They hid behind lines of text from sexually-charged personal ads. Superimposed over the twisted face of a disheveled man with a black beard text read: "SWM, 40, depressed but somewhat glib and has nice manners. I need a kind woman to rehabilitate me." Another, over a fierce, unkempt face read: "GWM, 26, healthy with great appearance & is HIV + likes Levis jeans. Interested in similar F who likes long weekends and fun times." Around the room there were five, small round tables covered in a translucent white cloth. On the surface of these backlit tables were transparencies of female faces, the victims of violent crime. The sculptural execution of this family of elements was quite extraordinary. The metal framework holding up the tables and bed clearly took some careful design and thoughtful use of lighting to create these glowing volumes. The use of these sculptural devices aided in the objectification of the victims and the assailants alike. Moreover, it was impossible not to notice the glaring irony of the missing bodies. The suggested subtexts were of a body under assault, a body denied, and a body "celebrating" its fortieth year of inexorable decline. The clearly sexual content of the text and the persistent reminders of violation, refer to a body who, though visually absent, is strongly present in the mind of the viewer.

The appropriated imagery (taken from New York City's nightly television news) poignantly exacerbates this distance from the body. The (sexual) murderer's assault of the body, echoes the television's remote assault of its viewers' bodies, through the nightly promotion of fear and sensationalism. Even the viewer cannot dissociate himself from this relationship. By salivating on the fates of the victims and their murderers, the television viewer completes a voyeuristic circle. Promoting the viewer's feelings of guilt is probably partly the artist's intent, but I doubt this work is simply moralizing. The artist is encouraging introspection and highlighting contradictions. She is high-

lighting the tyranny of the spectacle, where the spectator becomes the spectacle, where the innocents become guilty. Perhaps unwittingly so, the artist can't separate herself from this game, in the position of the provider of her own spectacle.

The underlying sadness expressed in this work left some lingering effects on me, and added to a sense of consternation over certain current artistic trends, that I have felt for some time. Not necessarily seeking to categorize this show as such, it is nevertheless clear that the purpose of much

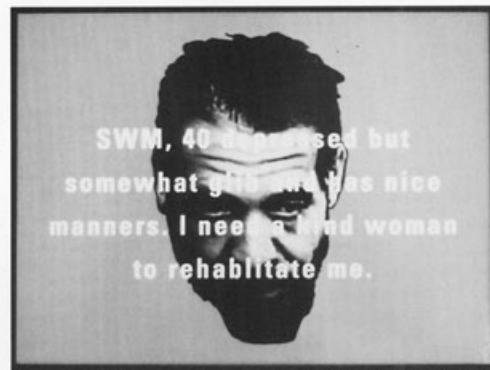
Postmodern art, particularly photographic art, is social criticism, which is often centered around issues of identity and gender. Indeed, work without this agenda or political bent is often thought of as not having enough "bite." The artist posits himself as the "exposer" of ills, and actually places the burden of responsibility in the hands of the viewer. While not denying the importance of deconstruction, the artist can come very close to smugness, as the delivery person of another note of bad news. Can the artist then be contributing to the spreading of a pervasive nihilism? If our technological world has exacerbated feelings of alienation, isolation and bitterness, should the artist restrict himself either to criticizing it, or the other extreme of becoming an apologist for it? Each day we seem to be reminded of the supremacy of logic and mathematical formulae over intuition and emotion. Who, but the artist, can remind us of the "human" in "human beings?"

Making reference to current cultural thought, the British writer and professor Madan Sarup explains: "Postmodernity emphasizes diverse forms of individual and social identity. It is now widely held that the autonomous subject has been dispersed into a range of plural, polymorphous subject-positions inscribed within language. Instead of a coercive totality and a totalizing politics, Postmodernity stresses a pluralistic and open democracy. Instead of the certainty of progress, associated with 'the Enlightenment project' (of which Marxism is a part), there is now an awareness of contingency and ambivalence. The productiveness of industrial technology which Marx so much admired, and which he hoped to tame by means of Communism, has ceded place to universal consumerism. Puritan asceticism has given way to the pleasure principle." The pluralistic tendencies of

postmodernity are reflected also in art. There are certain features of Postmodern art, says Sarup: "the deletion of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between elite and popular culture; a stylistic eclecticism and the mixing of codes. There is a parody, pastiche, irony and playfulness." Among many examples, Andy Warhol is a very good embodiment of this. The most notable feature is that "Postmodern theory became identified with the critique of universal knowledge and foundationalism."<sup>2</sup>

The rejection of the grand idealizing, universalist theories of modernism, is currently felt to be a more realistic position. But it also leaves a vacuum of dreams and sources of hope. The thoughts of the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard seem to carry a more positive note. Sarup notes: "Lyotard...values the intensity of experience and suggests that if we are always thinking of what we are, we cannot 'let go.' If we are always theorizing about things, we cannot enjoy them for their own sake. In Lyotard's view there should be a shift from the dominance of dry, abstract thinking to a greater appreciation of the emotional...Post-structuralists like Lyotard are saying...that there is more to life than politics. If we are totally immersed in the political, we miss what is going on here and now. Marxists are always criticizing the status quo in the name of an ideal. Militants are so inflexible that they have no time to enjoy life as it is now. Ideals cut us off from the present. Instead of having nostalgia for an unalienated community that may have existed in the past we should celebrate aspects of contemporary life—its anonymity, its fragmentation, its consumptionism."<sup>3</sup>

Whether you agree with the idea of "celebrating anonymity, fragmentation and consumptionism," it seems clear that the loneliness we sometimes feel as artists is not one created by circumstance alone, but by our own conscious detachments, or willing



Appropriated TV image with superimposed text from HCP installation.

subjugation to secularism. Perhaps some kind of spirituality and humility or a celebratory faith in Nature can balance this scale that seems to be thrown wildly out of balance by the visual excesses of the "information age." It may then be that we need not celebrate the age of 40 in our own lonely, little blue hotel rooms.

Hans Staartjes is a photographic artist, of Dutch nationality, living in Houston.

### FOOTNOTES

1 Madan Sarup, *Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1993) p 130

2 *ibid*, p132

3 *ibid* p100

All photographs by Adele Horne

## Controlling Posterity

Imogen Cunningham: Ideas Without End, Edited by Richard Lorenz. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993 and The Enchanted Landscape: Wynn Bullock. New York: Aperture, 1993

David L. Jacobs

When an important artist dies, family and friends often try to assure her or his ongoing legacy. Those who were closest to the deceased often control the estates, and their decisions can be affected not just by the terms of the will, or the express desires of the deceased, but more elusive elements that linger from their relationships with the artist. The eulogizing impulse can sometimes extend for decades after an individual's death. To be sure, it is hard to generalize on such matters, since the management of artists' estates is determined by the nature of the will, to say nothing of the abilities and motives of the executors. One need only think of the very different estate fates of Ansel Adams, Minor White, Diane Arbus, and Brett Weston—to say nothing of Mark Rothko, Georgia O'Keeffe, Joseph Cornell, and Andy Warhol—to glimpse the range of possibilities.

Still, it is generally the case that the first wave of posthumous publications, retrospectives, and symposia attempt to place the artist in a defined niche in history, usually undertaken with the kind of enthusiastic energy that precludes critical questioning. The rhetoric of immortality is intended to serve the memory of the life and work of the deceased, even while it is fed out of the needs of those who were left behind. Such efforts are deeply human and, in most cases, deeply felt, but they also are tinged with an unmistakable pathos. We know, on some level, that oblivion is the fate of all but the fewest of us, and that those who are remembered are seen dimly through distorted lenses. I daresay that not a single reader of this essay knows (or cares) which emperor followed Nero. Do you remember the name of Chester Arthur's vice president? or, for that matter, anything about Chester Arthur (was he the 13th? 17th?). Today's household names will, doubtless, rush into oblivion. The histories of art and letters, music and philosophy speak to the current generation's inability to assure or predict which events or people it will be remembered by. The music of Bach was unperformed for several generations before Mendelssohn re-discovered him, and Atget was the proverbial "anonymous" until Berenice Abbot played the midwife. We may not even know the names of the artists through which our epoch will be remembered 200 years hence.

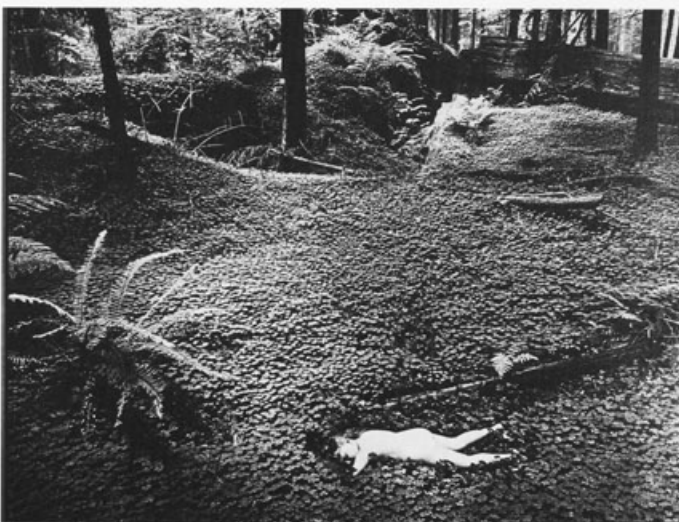
Imogen Cunningham and Wynn Bullock lived for many decades within the San Francisco-Carmel corridor that was the seed bed for the West Coast style of art photography. Although both photographers were strongly influenced by Edward Weston, Cunningham's and Bullock's *œuvres* extend considerably beyond a single aesthetic. For many years Imogen Cunningham was a mainstay in the small art-photography community that fought the good fight for photography's status as a *bona fide* art. But it wasn't until the late 1960s and 70s, when she was adopted by San Francisco's flower children, that she gained her full measure of renown. Imogen's octogenarian hipness served as a reminder that the much-discussed "generation gap" wasn't inevitable. Cunningham was a sprightly presence,



Imogen Cunningham, *Unmade Bed*, 1957

whose *joie de vivre* shone through both in her photography and in her nimble wit. She photographed until the very end of her life, and the years only seemed to heighten her appeal.

Wynn Bullock was no less enamored of photography, though he lived a quieter life in Carmel, within earshot of the fabled Point Lobos. While his two best-known images were among the most successful in Steichen's "Family of Man" exhibition, Bullock was mainly a photographer's photographer who appealed to a relatively narrow but influential audience through a puristic dedication to the medium. He worked closely throughout his career with his wife Edna and their daughter Barbara, who was the model in many of his figure studies, and, later, the author of *Wynn Bullock: Photography—A Way of Life*, (1973). During the 1960s Bullock struggled in lectures and writings to articulate what he referred to as the "time-space" components of photography. These efforts, driven by extensive readings in various disciplines, were both compelling and frustrating to him.



Wynn Bullock, *Child in the Forest*, 1951

Although Imogen Cunningham and Wynn Bullock are still well-known figures, there has been noteworthy slippage in their reputations in recent years. Cunningham was the subject of a notable *festschrift*, *Imogen Cunningham: A Portrait*, in 1979,

and, more recently, a thin volume published by the Clio Press. In 1984 Bullock was the subject of two book-length treatments: a highly forgettable scholarly analysis (Clyde Dille, *The Photography and Philosophy of Wynn Bullock*) and a short book on his work with the nude, written by his daughter Barbara (Wynn Bullock: *Photographing the Nude*). Both photographers were only sporadically included in major surveys like *On the Art of Fixing a Shadow*, *Photography and Art* and *The New Vision*. In recent years their one-person shows have been small exhibitions centered in or around the West Coast.

Their images are seen by the new generation of photographers as late modernist work born in a different, if not very distant, age. Their highly crafted, formally sophisticated, single frame, black-and-white images are not of utmost importance to contemporary photographers or curators, who look to color, installations, mixed media, assemblage, and digital imaging for formal models. Moreover, the full-throated idealism of Cunningham and Bullock may ring hollow in some Postmodern ears. The attitude that

Bullock's major monograph—*Photography: A Way of Life*—applies to very few prominent art photographers of our day.

Cunningham and Bullock, despite the range of their work and their restless experimentation, in the main have been relegated to the dust bin of comfortable historical niches. Each is known for a handful of signature images that assure their place in history while lessening their appeal to practicing photographers. These two books provide the opportunity for presenting these photographers in a new light that could enhance their relevance to contemporary photography.

In *Imogen Cunningham: Ideas Without End*, Richard Lorenz has assembled nearly 200 photographs that attest to an artist who was constantly experimenting with the medium. The book includes virtually all of the signature images that had defined the popular perception of her output—early male nudes of her husband and sons, pictorialist-influenced vignettes, flowers, studies in abstraction, and portraits of artists and friends. But the plates extend considerably beyond her most familiar images to give an expanded sense of Cunningham's versatility. Richard Lorenz's text conveys a good deal of information while shedding light on various elements of her work. As a co-trustee of the Cunningham estate he knows this territory thoroughly, but he refrains from becoming an overt advocate. Instead, he wisely lets the selection of photographs and his straightforward analysis make the case. There is fine, terse writing on the mutual influences that Cunningham enjoyed with a wide circle of friends, including Edward Weston, Man Ray, Minor White, Lisette Model, and Dorothea Lange. Lorenz ably contextualizes Cunningham's work within a given period. Regarding her nudes early in the century, he writes:

*She readily accepted the nude as a subject, a natural outcome of her liberal family upbringing, years of life drawing, and probably exposure to Die Brücke artists who were painting and exhibiting in Dresden during Cunningham's stay there. The Brücke theme of the nude in the landscape, of nudist bathing and recreation, was an expression of the original and pristine Being as well as a way of overcoming social restraints. Man and woman became integral parts of nature,*

liberated and guided by Eros, and physically released from the confinement of hypocritical bourgeois morality.

*Imogen Cunningham: Ideas Without End* moves beyond the eulogistic tone of *Cunningham: A Portrait*, a book undertaken soon after her death by friends, family, and colleagues. (Interestingly, I find no reference to *Cunningham: A Portrait* in Lorenz's text, even though the earlier book contains a good deal of first-hand reminiscences.) The two books represent a positive and necessary shift of focus in evaluating deceased artists: the first, an outpouring of reminiscence and anecdotes, driven by respect, love and grief; the second a more neutral, and more seasoned, presentation of her work and its contexts.

*Wynn Bullock: The Enchanted Landscape* is a much more predictable affair. The reproductions in the recent monograph are of superior quality, and we should be thankful that these images are once again widely available. However, the book is basically a reshuffle of earlier publications, which is especially regrettable since there are many issues in Bullock's work that bear re-examination. Bullock wanted to investigate the various ways of seeing and being with camerawork. Although he was a masterful craftsman, his first love was for process rather than product. Yet this book is chiefly concerned with the product of his photographic enterprise, and gives scant attention to the processes, visual and mental, that mediated his vision.

Of the eighty-eight photographs included in *Wynn Bullock: The Enchanted Landscape*, fifty-eight appeared in the 1973 monograph, *Wynn Bullock: Photography—a Way of Life*. We are given here chestnuts, presented one-to-a-page, in the familiar Aperture style that was *de rigueur* twenty-five years ago. The book would have been greatly enlivened by inclusion of other work in a more expansive format—one thinks of recent monographs on Lisette Model and Walker Evans, which transcend the master-piece ethos with stunning results. Bullock, for example, spent a fair amount of energy in the 1960s making colored photographs of light projected through prisms. The work was experimental, and as such was consistent with the same urges that led him to do pioneering work in photograms, solarization, and negative photographs. This seldom seen work might have taken the book into more novel and unexplored territory.

Bullock's ideas are interspersed throughout the book, presented in a highly edited and foreshortened way. Set in italic, centered type, amidst goodly amounts of white space, the presentation is precious in the extreme, especially since these excerpts shed considerably less light than the format promises. We might instead have gotten one or two of Bullock's unpublished manuscripts, where he tries to work out his ideas more systematically: a creative mind seeking anchorage. Theorizing photography was a difficult task for Bullock, as it has been for many photographers and analysts of the medium, and these manuscripts bring with them equal measures of illumination and mud. The abridged presentation of Bullock's ideas in epigrammatic, quasi-poetical terms, gives the impression that these ideas had come to rest for him, whereas his struggle with them in fact persisted to the end.

*Imogen Cunningham: Ideas without End* succeeds because it was not produced by those who were closest to her. *The Enchanted Landscape: Wynn Bullock*, on

the other hand, fails to add anything of consequence to Bullock's sagging reputation, in large measure because it replicates earlier publications without extending their terms. The Cunningham book has moved beyond the terms of eulogy and well-intended love; the Bullock book, unfortunately, languishes in the past. Both of these highly engaged photographers were deeply committed to photography *per se*, as well as to the processes of knowing and communication through camerawork. In *Imogen Cunningham: Ideas Without End*, this spirit of inquiry is evident throughout. In *The Enchanted Landscape*, Bullock is presented as a master photographer in a manner that suggests stasis and stolidity instead of process and passion. He deserves better.

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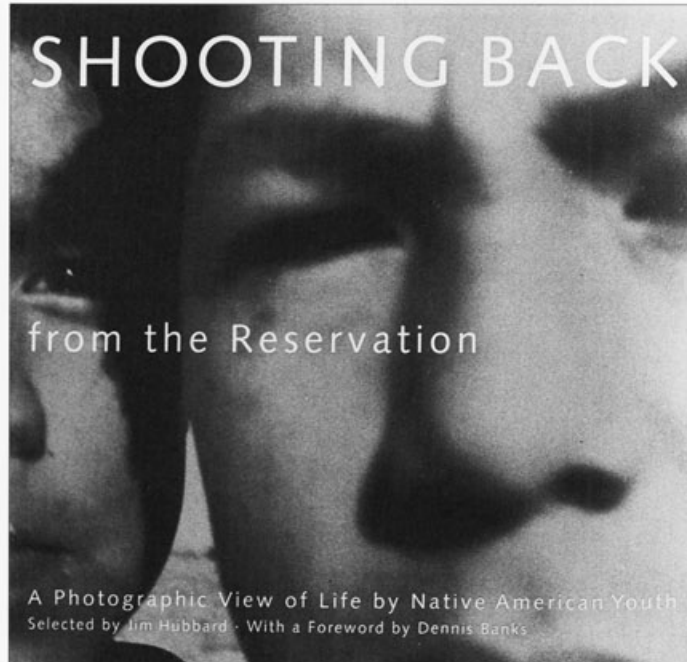
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### Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives



Diana Balmori and Margaret Morton

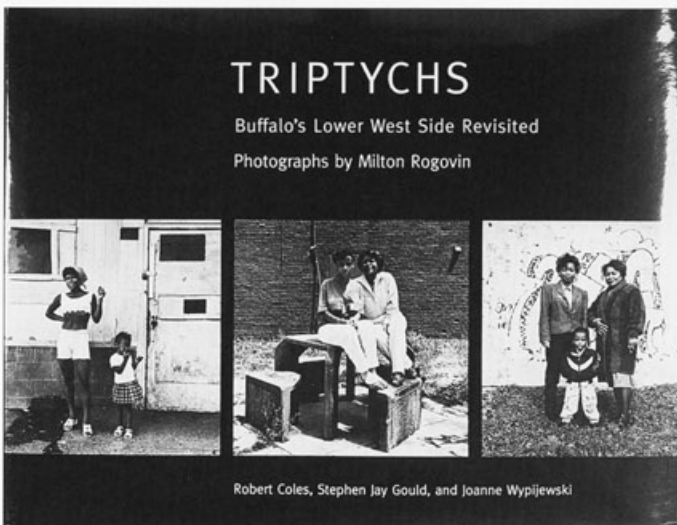
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