

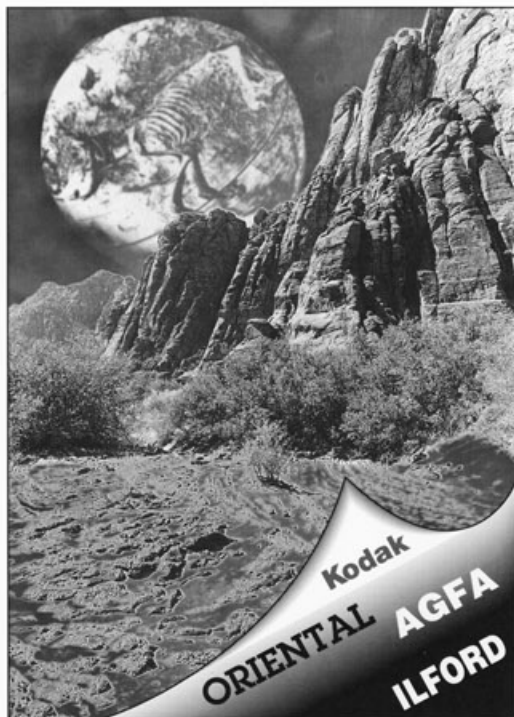
# SPOT

HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY • SUMMER 1994 \$5



Peter Hite

ON SONTAG'S PHOTOGRAPHY • VICKI GOLDBERG  
KEITH CARTER • THE L.A. RIOTS • ALEX LIBERMAN  
PETER HITE • JIM STONE



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SPOT is published triannually by the Houston Center for Photography; subscriptions are \$15 per year in the United States.

SPOT is a journal of independent opinions published by HCP as one of its many services to the photographic community. The ideas expressed do not represent positions of HCP's administration or membership, and are solely the opinions of the writers themselves.

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The Houston Center for Photography is a nonprofit organization that serves the photographic community as a resource for educational exchange through exhibitions, publications, lectures, workshops, and fellowships.

SPOT is sponsored in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Texas Commission on the Arts, and the Cultural Arts Council of Houston.

HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY  
1441 West Alabama  
Houston, Texas 77006  
TELEPHONE  
(713) 529-4755  
FAX  
(713) 529-9248

For details about membership or advertising contact HCP.

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

All things are subject to interpretation—most certainly art. Individual readings of a photograph and its messages (or lack thereof) are often as unique and surprising as the artwork itself. In this summer issue of *SPOT*, we've run the gamut of viewpoints, ranging from the modernist interpretation that a photograph is incapable of containing ideas or information to the assertion that art is capable of healing physical and spiritual maladies.

Terry Doody explores Sontag and the modernist perspective that the depthlessness of a photograph itself often leads to a redefinition of reality in *On First Looking into Sontag's Photography*. He also recounts his introduction to this book and his continued relationship to it as an instructional tool.

At the mid point of the interpretational spectrum, Ed Osowski explores the Baroque tradition in Peter Hite's "Unfinished Legacy" shown at the Houston Center for Photography in *What Religion is This?* Osowski reveals ancestral links that determine male relationships are often hinted at in Hite's work.

At the far end of this spectrum stands those who assert that art possesses the ability to heal psychological and physical ills. In *The Poetic Body* Jennifer Elkins shares the insights of those participating in the Risking Sincerity symposium based on the exhibition "TEXAS/Between Two Worlds" at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston.

Also included in this issue is *New York Times* photography critic Vicki Goldberg's reflection on the unique catalogue created by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston to accompany its Allan Chasanoff Photographic Collection and the ramifications of this unconventional compilation in *A Collection of True Reports of Life's Confusions*.

A sampling of the images from "On Higher Ground," Keith Carter's images of the Mississippi Delta from the show organized by the Houston Center for Photography are highlighted in this issue's centerfold spread along with the words of Suzanne Winckler.

Among the books reviewed in this issue is *Alex: The Life of Alexander Liberman*. Here the impact of this multi-talented man on the worlds of magazine design and photography is explored by Holly Hildebrand in *Creating an Art Form*.

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Cover: Peter Hite, *Untitled*, 1990, gelatin silver print. See story on pg 9.

## ON FIRST LOOKING INTO

Sontag's  
Photography

## Terry Doody

The night I read *On Photography* was very cold, and I sat on the couch, wearing my overcoat and drinking hot coffee, until three or four a.m. It was November 27, 1977, then November 28; Susan Sontag wrote the first date beneath her name when she signed my copy of the book at Brazos Bookstore. I hadn't read the essays when they first appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, so I felt as Keats says he does, on first looking into Chapman's *Homer*, "like some lone watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken." The planet Photography was a whole new world—I didn't know then I also felt like little *Jasmine* in Disney's *Aladdin*—and I didn't even know what I did and didn't know about it.

"Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything," Sontag says right off the bat, "are inexhaustible invitations to deductions, speculation, and fantasy." To be told, with such great authority, that photographs cannot themselves explain anything, that they are not information, much less knowledge, was a great relief to me, because I had always thought they were and could never say to myself what they were knowledge of. One of Weston's voluptuous bell peppers couldn't be just a bell pepper; it had to be of something else. And so did Atget's pictures of urban stonework. Was I intended to feel this desolation? Or was I missing the point of some kind of monumentality? Or was it both: *Ozymandias* at a staircase at Versailles? Images like these did not invite me to deduce, speculate, and fantasize. What I felt was hotter and more urgent. Sontag wrote that photographs say, "This is the surface. Now think—or feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what the reality must be if it looks this way." This is what I felt: the imperative to discover an essence and disclose the code that explained what bell peppers were about, and I couldn't do it. Photographs, art photographs, made me feel as helpless as anybody does when, instead of being told the answer, you are ordered to guess it, as in the old game of What Is Teacher Thinking?

What I knew of photography was limited to family snapshots—cameras go with family life... A family's photograph album is generally about the extended family—and advertising: "Images which idealize (like most fashion and animal photography) are no less aggressive than work which makes a virtue of plainness." But these ad pictures had not been problematic until the summer during college that I got a job as a copy trainee at an advertising agency in Chicago. One of Foote, Cone and

Beldin's accounts was Dial Soap, and the Dial print ads at the time showed the smiling faces of people in the shower, who looked as if they had just swung their heads to shake away the water, above the headline: "Aren't you glad you use Dial Soap? Don't you wish everybody did?" I was told that 400 separate shots were taken to get the one image the agency used in an ad. The models often spent an entire day in the shower, shaking their heads to throw the water away with the smile of deep security they felt from using Dial Soap, though their hands and feet were, by the end, growing as wrinkled as the face of Lillian Hellman. And then I watched an agency art director, with a magnifying glass,

study these hundreds of images on contact sheets to pick the next perfect one. The differences among the photos were indiscernible to me and therefore, I came to realize, more completely seductive. For the beauty of the models in advertising and fashion photographs like those, the perfection of their clothes, the ripeness of the moment caught, usually in some beautiful setting, pulled me very powerfully into a depth I couldn't define. I longed for something I couldn't name, something such as the story that told their essence, and have felt since that this is the closest I have come to feeling what Keats dramatized in the speaker of "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Or, it may be my one experi-

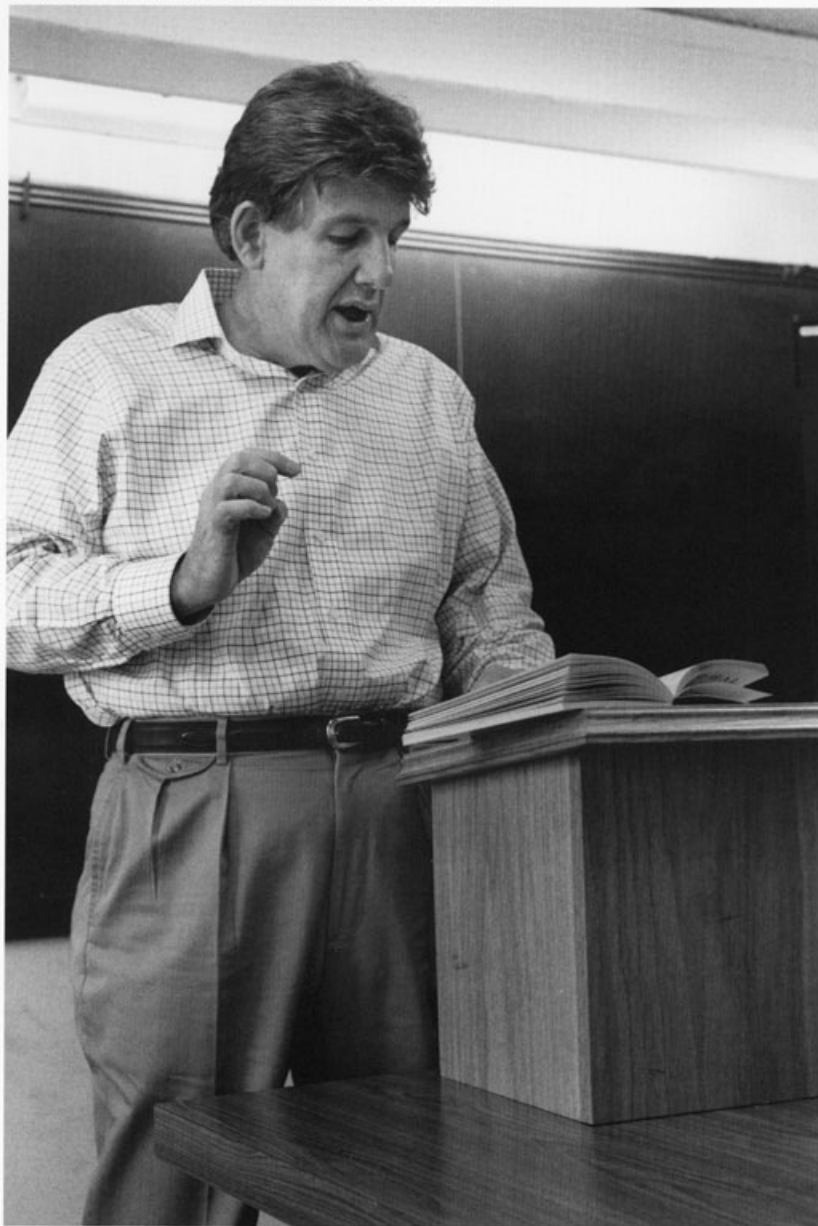
ence of the kind of desire Lacan defined, which is by his definition unappeasable. But it is very strange and very diminishing to realize you have this feeling for advertising photographs rather than for a woman, fame's love, or some irreversible loss.

As I came to those realizations that night, I was not aesthetically naïve, but I was visually illiterate. So, reading *On Photography* was an additional relief as I began to realize that Sontag's essay was not only about photography, but also about the aesthetics of Modernism, and it was as good, as brilliant, as anything I'd read on Modernism, even the first several chapters of *The Pound Era*. The excitement I felt reading also came from her

style: from the kind of "brilliance" that is actually the effect of her ellipsis in which contradictions aren't explained or reconciled, but simply elided; as the speed she maintained intimated that she never experienced a single moment of hesitation or doubt, ever. That kind of certitude can be a lot of fun when it deals with issues at the very heart of twentieth-century art—the status of the object, the correlative status of the subject enjoined to be impersonal, and the nature of the real. "Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire."

By the time I got to page 87 and read, "Instead of just recording reality, photographs have become the norm for the way things appear to us, thereby changing the very idea of reality, and of realism," I felt freed. The secret, I realized, is that there is no secret: the aesthetics of photography is really, like all Modernist aesthetics, a metaphysics, but one absolutely opposed to the classical systems built on the discrepancy between matter and form, existence and essence, appearance and reality, surface and secret depths. Sontag explained, "There is the surface. Now think—or rather feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what the reality must be if it looks this way." This is exactly the sirens' call to a promise, a depth of being and meaning that doesn't exist in a photograph. The appearance is the reality. The essence is of the surface. Weston's voluptuous bell peppers change the idea of bell peppers by making us pay attention to exactly what a bell pepper can look like at the vegetable counter too. And one of Sontag's most important, and for me most liberating, ideas is the work of perception she calls "photographic seeing." It is an attention to the material surface that is very focused but estranging: "intense and cool," she wrote, both "solicitous and detached." These are perfect formulations of my own state of

Rice University Professor Terry Doody, Photograph by Adele Horne, 1994



mind, which I could never have made myself, as I tried to see and understand art photographs, to see and understand what wasn't there, the absence we call depth, which isn't even an absence in the thing itself but an expectation we bring to the thing that it should be more than it is, not merely an object but an idea too, metaphysical exactly.

By the time I got to page 96, I knew exactly where I was: home on the couch, not in the middle of the night, and no longer in Pynchon's phrase "buffaloed under the epistemologies." Sontag continued:

**"A**s painting has become more and more conceptual, poetry (since Apollinaire, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams) has more and more defined itself as concerned with the visual. ("No truth but in things," as Williams declared.) Poetry's commitment to the concreteness and to the autonomy of the poem's language parallels photography's commitment to pure seeing. Both imply discontinuity, disarticulated forms and compensatory unity: wrenching things from their context (to see them in a fresh way), bringing things together elliptically, according to the imperious but often arbitrary demands of subjectivity."

All of this I already knew because I had been teaching these poets in English classes. And I liked, especially, two things in this passage: first, the way Sontag finesses a definition of Modernist "impersonality" as "bringing things together elliptically, according to the imperious but often arbitrary demands of subjectivity," which is as apt a way to think about Flaubert's prose, the verse paragraphs of "The Waste Land," and her own pages as any I'd read; and second, the way she misquotes Williams. In *Paterson*, he actually wrote: "Say it! No ideas but in things." The "Say it" is just as important as the more famous slogan because it can be read as "Say IT." That is, speak the object itself, not words about it. Or "SAY it," which refers poetry to the living vernacular instead of a culture-language like Pound's or the subsequent text of *écriture*. In any case, it's nice to come upon a mistake like this to let you out from under all the grave aplomb.

## II

What I decided to make of that night was a course in Modernist poetry that used *On Photography* as its *Cliff Notes*, but I didn't make the decision that night. The plan needed another element, as I discovered when I found John Szarkowski's anthology of images, *Looking at Photographs*. Quiet, beautiful, and mysterious, every page of that book I still love now as much as I did the summer Saturday afternoon in 1979 I read it for the first time, without the need of an overcoat. Szarkowski's simple, lucid, grounded commentary facing every image seemed like light itself and gave me the idea that assigning a one-page paper about ten or so of these pictures, as they were also reading and writing about T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore, would be at least interesting for my students and, with luck, even valuable. The photo-

graphs and the necessity to say them, as it were, would teach the students, I hoped, the meaninglessness of any fragment or any image outside some kind of discourse; would teach them with Sontag's help that there are no essences that determine the truth; that the thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird could just as well be 113 or 1,300. Words' verbal signs always mean something in a way that visual images don't necessarily have to, and writing about photographs, I hoped, would help explain the ways in which meaning is always made. Finally, nothing in Szarkowski,

interpretation that could occur among a relatively small, homogeneous group of twenty students.

I'm happy to say the experiment has always worked. The students come to like the one-page papers with all the rhetorical fat boiled away. The images of the early "Cantos" no longer seem so Eleusinian. Williams' courage and the absolute delicacy of his phrasing and lineation—his typewriter's equivalent of perfect pitch—become apparent. And Marianne Moore, who has nothing to do with photography, remains as outrageous and incomparable as she should be. The aesthetics of photography don't make Modernist poetry any simpler, just apparently more familiar.

The force of his insistence that "neither can be reduced to the other's terms" is especially interesting in the context in which it comes: his great essay on Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. But it is, perhaps, a different thing to write about paintings than photographs because paintings more clearly record and embody the painter's initiating intention. For all of its "momentariness," *Las Meninas* is never perceived as an actual spontaneous record of "that" moment; and however casually ordered Degas' *Place de la Concorde (Comte Lepic and His Daughters)* may seem, we know he worked to achieve the nonchalance that gives the four figures in the foreground such independence of each other. We have a visual focus in the arched gate at the rear center, but the figures have no center



Sally Gall, *Andrea*, 1983, Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

I was quite sure, would inspire in anyone the fear and impotence monuments like "The Waste Land" or the opening "Cantos" inspired, with the history of their meaningfulness written into the footnotes in the textbook. I hoped too that writing about photos would help students learn to write about smaller poems like Williams' "Between Walls," "The Young Housewife," or the "Poem" that begins "As the cat / climbed over / the top of..." without elevating them into allegory.

I asked the students to page through the book without reading Szarkowski's captions and note that first time the image that seemed easiest to write about and the one that seemed the most difficult, in order to save the latter image to write about last. I suggested other topics: a paper about the most narrative picture, the most emotional, the strangest, the most erotic, the most "photographic" as the students came to define for themselves what "photographic" meant; and I photocopied examples of each assignment to put on the reserve shelf, with an eye to showing everyone not only good prose but the vast differences in

## III

In the opening pages of *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault wrote:

**"B**ut the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying. The space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax."

whatsoever and remind me of all the people disconnected by Garry Winogrand's pictures of New York City streets. Intention, like the "depth" of "essence," is an idea easier to write about, to articulate, than the surface and

materiality of any thing, and Winogrand himself has said about the aesthetics and teleology of his work: "I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed." So much for metaphysics.

And we are left with surfaces, not only the look of things, but the look of things photographed, and the look of things as they would look if we could photograph them with the by now "un-naked" eye. Oscar Wilde wrote: "It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible." Sontag quoted this line as an epigraph to her famous essay, now thirty years old, "Against Interpretation,"

which she ends with the ringing call: "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art." This *cri* seems even more *de coeur* now than it did then and, in many ways, less possible, for the kind of erotic address to formal and surface qualities (another of her contradictions) that she calls for and exemplifies in essays like Randall Jarrell's hymn of joy to Whitman, is way out of fashion. But it gives me another idea, to which she herself lends some support in her book's final essay.

There she not only sees the nostalgic fallacies in Walter Benjamin's argument that photographs have no aura, authenticity, or presence, she also exposes the great power photographs have insofar as we regard them, in the confused Modernist way, as primitive. Again Sontag:

"What defines the originality of photography is that, at the very moment in the long, increasingly secular history of painting when secularism is

entirely triumphant, it revives—in wholly secular terms—something like the primitive status of images.

But a photograph is not only like its subject, a homage to the subject. It is part of, an extension of that subject; and a potent means of acquiring it, of gaining control over it.

This primitive notion of the efficacy of images presumes that images possess the qualities of real things, but our inclination is to attribute to real things the qualities of an image."

In Modernist aesthetics, within the logic of Sontag's own discourse, the "primitive" is al-

most always the "erotic" as well because both of them are nonrational and very hard for our conventional systems to articulate without appropriating. So "an erotics of art" would not need and couldn't be a new kind of language or discursive style. Yet, we have an erotics already, if not exactly in the sense she originally intends, in photographs themselves. They are, as she has explained, not information, not certain knowledge, not interpretations which are obvious in their hermeneutic dimension. They are difficult to read because they are mute; tactile as well as visual; unnecessary to utilize; physical and, therefore, time bound and decaying; more in every way like your body than your ideas; and, as such, if asked to be no more, satisfactory. Photographs can love and praise the world in the terms of love and praise that make "the truth" irrelevant.

Writing can't quite do this, and *On Photography* itself is not an erotics; it is, after all, an essay on photography without any pictures, which has outraged two friends of mine, a painter and a photographer, who do not appreciate Sontag's great discursive sweep, her attempt to do photography, as Derrida has done language, as an ontology itself.

"Photographs do more than redefine the stuff of ordinary experience (people, things, events, whatever we see—albeit differently, often inattentively—with natural vision) and add vast amounts of material that we never see at all. Reality as such is redefined..."

Because photographs do the unfathomable mystery of depthlessness.

#### IV

So, there is nothing more to write or say. What I should do is hire Richard Avedon to make a breathtaking portrait of Sontag and then give it to her in thanks.

Terry Doody is a professor of English at Rice University in Houston.

## A COLLECTION OF TRUE REPORTS OF LIFE'S CONFUSIONS



Larry Sultan, *My Father Reading the Newspaper*, 1985, original in color

The Allan Chasanoff Photographic Collection: *Tradition And The Unpredictable, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1994. Specially designed box in three parts: 171 8-x-8-inch cards reproducing photographs included in the MFAH exhibition, a pamphlet of writings and essays, and a book reproducing the 1,050 photograph collection in duotone. \$75.00*

#### Vicki Goldberg

A textbook may have the right to sound anonymous, but a collection ought to have a frame of mind or a philosophy of life. It should hint that behind the choices and com-

binations lies something as interesting as the images themselves. Sam Wagstaff's personality loomed large in his collection. Pierre Apraxine, curator of the Gilman Paper Company collection, has given an individual cast to a corporate collection.

Allan Chasanoff, a photographer who relishes ambiguity in his own work, has an idea about collecting that, so far as I know, has no large-scale precedent. Essentially he says that life is confusing and vision imprecise, and photography that snarls the lines of communication is simply documenting the way things are. "For the sake of this collection," he writes, "[I] assume photography is true to life and perceptual confusion is a direct instance of life itself. Thus this collection

corroborates this primal doubt or rather the problem that the psyche has to deal with."

Chasanoff recently gave 950 photographs to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and loaned them an additional 106. The museum has published a catalogue entirely in keeping with the spirit of his enterprise, *The Allan Chasanoff Collection: Tradition and the Unpredictable*. A nicely designed box holds a slim pamphlet with essays by Charles Traub and Anne W. Tucker and an interview with Chasanoff by Vince Aletti and Tucker; a somewhat larger volume with small images of the entire collection; and 171 duotone or color reproductions of the pictures (replicating a show at the museum this spring), each on a separate 8 x 8 inch card. Those loose cards

are a bit perplexing at first. They do not behave like a book. Which is precisely the point.

The photographs don't act exactly the way photographs are expected to either, though all are made in standard ways, in the camera, without manipulation or double exposure, and most are fairly recent. Some are relatively explicit documents (Hockney, Outerbridge), but most play with mirrors (Jan Groover, Bill Brandt, Barbara Kasten); abstraction (Siskind, Meatyard, Metzker); the unexpected, inexplicable, or dislocated (Joel-Peter Witkin, Michael Kenna, Gordon Matta-Clark); or trompe l'oeil (Zeke Berman, Miro Svolik).

Straight photography then, but not straight information. Some images cannot be fully deciphered even after long study, others have a surprise in store, or a disruption, and many play with the nature of perception. This concentration on unlikely photographic evidence over a period of years arrives just as music television and commercials purposely cut too fast for images to be fully legible, belief in one's own eyes is challenged by the Rodney King and Reginald Denny cases, and computers play havoc with visual experience. Perception is an issue of great currency, as attention shifts from the visual object to the viewer and the ways that images are transmitted and seen, including their different reception by different groups.

Many of the photographers here are little known and some well known names turn in unknown images. By no means will everyone find all the material equally good or interesting, but there are enough conundrums, unsettling moments, improbabilities and optical deliriums to wake up a tired eye—from Winfred Evers' discombobulated chairs to Luis Camnitzer's recumbent face with a little house, tree and animals atop it; from Lee Friedlander's carp swimming in a reflected tree to Arthur Siegel's nude figure, veiled and half-dressed by patterns projected onto her skin.

If it is puzzling to realize that the camera, supposedly the most accurate of reporters, dwells in confusion, well, the world *is* confusing, light and shadow do play tricks, glass buildings and windows and mirrors repeat the environment inaccurately and bewilderingly, wishes and daydreams distort vision,



Weegee (Arthur Fellig), *Split Personality*, 1946

and yes, photographers are very good at catching generally hidden or overlooked moments.

The catalogue cards can be laid out on table or floor, compared, grouped, reshuffled. The reader (or viewer, or whatever) rather than the photographer, collector, or editor, controls the progression and "story" and dictates any message he or she thinks the data will bear. This represents the coming era, already upon us in one place or another, in which information can be called up and shifted about at will. Already hypertext and children's books on CD-ROM offer more than one story line so the reader can affect the outcome. Back in the sixties, before interactive meant anything outside of sociology, a couple of unpaginated novels were published as loose pages in a box; readers could sequence them in various ways (none of them, apparently, very good literature).

This catalogue, which theoretically gives every viewer the power to construct his or her own version of the collection, is one more tiny step in the movement that is taking the authority, production, and creative initiative out of the hands of the few—the TV networks, film producers, curators—and putting it into the hands of the many. Already personal tales course over the Internet from one rather ordinary household to hundreds, even

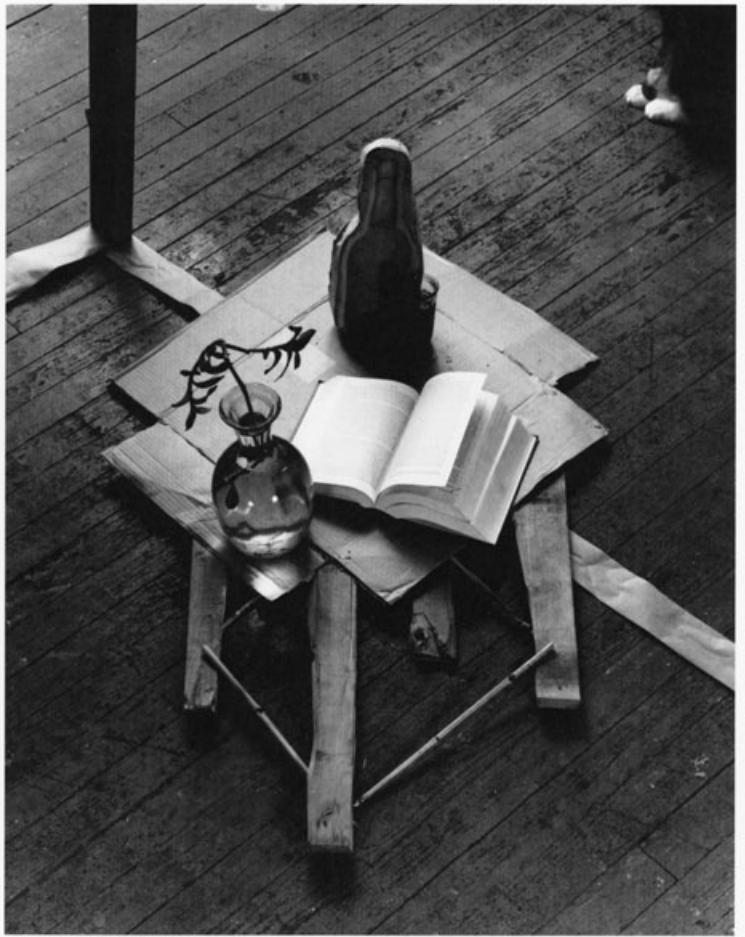
thousands, of others, and the CD-ROM from London's National Gallery lets anyone with the proper equipment rearrange the collection at will.

Chasanoff, who says he is not interested in postmodernist photography, nevertheless considers himself postmodernist by nature: it is "a movement for the receiver," he says, "not for the producer, not for the artist. It is very democratic." The catalogue is an attempt to endow a by now old-fashioned technology with some of the freedoms of a newer one. (Actually, this had an earlier existence with loose reproductions for study in art history courses, but then the freedom stemmed not from an ideology but a lack of textbooks.) Unfortunately, information retrieval is still primitive in this form; try finding an image once you've restacked the cards. (At least the book of small images is alphabetized.) And to truly make your own collection you would have to input your own data rather than Chasanoff's. Some day soon just about anyone will be able to do that on a computer, as the copyright laws fly out the window.

I'm thinking of sending Chasanoff a sign for his door saying, "Things are seldom what they seem."

Vicki Goldberg is a photography critic for *The New York Times*.

Florence Henri, *Portrait Composition*, 1937



Zeke Berman, *Interior*, 1983

George Platt Lynes, *Untitled*, 1941



Wynn Bullock, *Tree Trunk*, 1971



# RISKING SINCERITY: Reconciliation And Healing In Contemporary Art

A symposium held January 22, 1994, at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston and based on the exhibition "TEXAS/ Between Two Worlds" that examined the theme of tension between the worlds of science and spirit.

Jennifer Elkins

The neoplatonic concept of the artist as physician to the individual and the collective psyche has reemerged at the end of this century as a prophetic message of hope for the future of western culture. This idea, interestingly enough, has risen out of the feminist critique.



Hursley Timothy, *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*

Calling for radical changes intended to develop an appropriate paradigm wherein healing of the Cartesian split might reunite the body with the mind, the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston recognized the concept's re-emergence and boldly chose to focus the attention of its annual symposium on a conversation among artists willing to address the inherent possibilities of the direct or indirect healing potential of art. Speakers included Karen Finley, performance artist; Eric Avery, artist/physician; Rev. J. Pittman McGehee, Jungian analyst and director of Houston's Broadacres Center; Liz Ward, artist; Roberto Salas, artist/visiting scholar at University of Houston; James Freed, architect of the Holocaust Museum, Washington, D.C.; and Joseph Havel, artist. In so doing, CAM created an atmosphere wherein the implications of this controversial assertion might become the ground of an ongoing dialogue addressing, as Claire Champ, the director of Education at CAM, expressed it, the healing properties of art as it affects the physical body, the societal body and finally the environmental body.

From the symposium's beginning it was clear that the emphasis of the day was the poetics of the body as the complex metaphor from which the artistic images evolved—naked bodies, dead bodies, feeling bodies, diseased bodies, raging bodies, burned bodies, starving bodies, viral bodies, mortal bodies, and male and female bodies. The body remembers and carries the psychic pain not

only of our own woundings but also those of the generations before us. The artist working out of the body, risking sincerity and embracing vulnerability, brings that pain to consciousness and is able to constellate the body's memories in her artwork. The archetypal images of this art, then, evoke feelings and responses serving the possibilities of reconciliation and healing. This movement into the body is also a movement into the feminine. For the feminist critique reclaimed the body from its objectified status within the patriarchy, dignifying it as the seat of feelings and a symbol of wholeness, reconnecting it to its primal sensuality and celebrating its mystery.

It is in this mystery that the veneers of the rational world are stripped away, leaving us to grapple with the chaos, the primordial ooze, the *prima materia*, the excrement of the gods out of which humanity was formed. This chaos confronts us with the reality of our mortality and the intrinsic interconnectedness of the whole and becomes the essence of a new paradigm. As art critic Suzi Gablik describes it in her book *The Reenchantment of Art*, it is "an understanding of the organic and unified character of the universe." For excrement is the equalizer of humanity and as such it contains the potential of reconciliation, individual and collective. Or as the French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard expresses it, "In the depths of matter there grows an obscure vegetation; black flowers bloom in matter's darkness. They already promise a velvety touch, a formula for perfume."

The artist who chooses the images that bring the chaotic into consciousness will inevitably be forced to step into the dungheap of the collective psyche, that place where the unmentionable, the ugly, the "not so niceties" of life are stored until they eventually can no longer remain repressed and are projected out onto the "less fortunate" or "the enemy" of the culture. It is then that this psychic dungheap becomes the reality of discrimination, the AIDS epidemic, the Holocaust or the systematic destruction of our planet. These issues were the focus of the images that gained the most attention at the symposium. The artists

represented by these images were clearly undaunted by the chaos, and dedicated to a mission of healing. Gablik, who was unable to attend the symposium but whose remarks were read to the audience, has described this mission as rising out of a postmodernist deconstructionism in harmony with a reconstructionist philosophy characterized by an aesthetic of inter-connectedness, social responsibility and ecological attunement with healing as its most powerful potential.

Panelist Pittman McGehee, a Jungian analyst, aptly noted that in the discipline of depth psychology "permission to bring the chaotic into consciousness is healing." And thus, we laud "the artists who are willing to express the human experience rather than stereotype for ego ease and pleasure that which keeps us from facing and experiencing life...the more disturbing the art the more important, for that which palliates heals nothing but sustains denial." Then quoting another Jungian analyst, James Hillman, he added, for "The singular nourishment of the soul is experience." Hillman would have continued, "Soul is always subversive—underground. Art is always subversive, sounding the dissonant chord to whatever goes 'correct' in the day world."

Karen Finley, a performance artist tagged by Sen. Jesse Helms as the "Chocolate Woman," was one of the artists whose work was considered in this panel conversation. She spoke of and reacted to the manner in which she believes "women have historically been treated as 'shit' by men." In her piece, *Keep Our Victims Ready*, her ritual enactment of this perceived treatment created for her a place wherein she might experience healing, and therefore justice, because for her "healing is justice." The anger expressed in her work revealed a righteous indignation at the horror of the treatment of feminine values by the patriarchy. Finley made no apologies for her anger as she took on the voice of the perpetrator or the victim in a shamanic incantation. She seemed to delight in the uninhibited contempt her work unleashed at those denying the dark, repressed, or unrecognized aspects within the self.

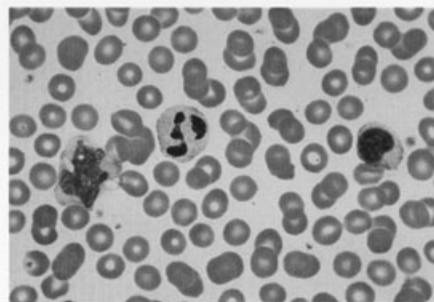
Physician and artist Eric Avery, responding to the injunction, "Physician, heal thyself," makes art that is a result of the personal transformation he experienced as an Amnesty International volunteer in Somalia. Pitching his tent in the excrement of the Somali people and treading through it each day on his way to perform "the violent act of feeding starving children," he abandoned his camera because of the distance it put between him and the artistic process and chose instead the woodcut as his medium of expression. Currently a psychiatrist serving those dying of AIDS, his printmaking reflects a social consciousness speaking from a place not of anger but intense compassion. In Avery's words, "Healing is about transformation, renewing life." His personal psychoanalytic process forces him to continuously confront the chaos within his psyche, consequently providing a healing touch in the images he produces.

James Freed, the architect of the United

States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., stepped up to the podium and within moments moved the audience into the realm of the sublime with his thoughts on the role of art in the healing process. His opening statement made it clear that the connection with the sublime would not come through the transcendental but rather through a visceral bodily reaction to the feelings evoked by the experience. Freed began, "Before we talk about healing we must talk about feelings. Feeling is what we have to do with the body, not the mind. Twentieth-century modern architecture is retinal; but I had to do something physical in this building because the story of the Holocaust cannot just be told through a rational dialogue, but it also must be taught through the feelings of the body." He explained that in order to accomplish this he had subverted his normal way of working because it was impossible to do a building that was neutral. He described the interior of the museum as a metaphor, using descriptive words such as zones of transition, symbolic ruptures, weakness translated into strength, and parabolic paraboloids. He imagines the architect as a storyteller, the conveyer of the culture's mythology. As such, he compared the architectural images of modernism and its message of autonomy with this post-modern design that sets forth a new paradigm, a new mythology of inter-connectedness and inter-subjectivity, relational not autonomous. Thus, he creates a negative window, a limestone pane with a glass frame to represent the boarded windows of Auschwitz which were boarded not to keep those on the inside from looking out but to keep those on the outside from seeing what was happening inside. This architectural device created a dialogue. The coherence is derived from a spiritual or physical or non-intellectual way of approaching it.

Crossing the threshold of the Holocaust Museum, one is grounded in the body and connected to its feelings in order that the aesthetics of beauty are experienced not as a transcendent experience of escape out of this world and its grotesque realities but instead as a manifestation of the capacity for human relatedness evoked through a compassion for ourselves, others and the planet itself.

These were some of the imaginings of the artists that day in January. These are the fantasies of those that dare to dream the dreams of another millennium. Gablik would concur as she observed that "Care and compassion are the tools of the soul, but they are often ridiculed by our society, which has been weak in the empathic mode. Empathy welcomes back the full range of feminine values—feeling, relatedness and soul-consciousness—that have been virtually driven out of our culture by our patriarchal mentality."



Eric Avery, *The Stuff of Life*, 1993, original in color

It was apparent to those present at the end of that day that CAM had created a sacred space in risking its own authenticity by addressing this provocative subject of the potentially healing and reconciling properties of

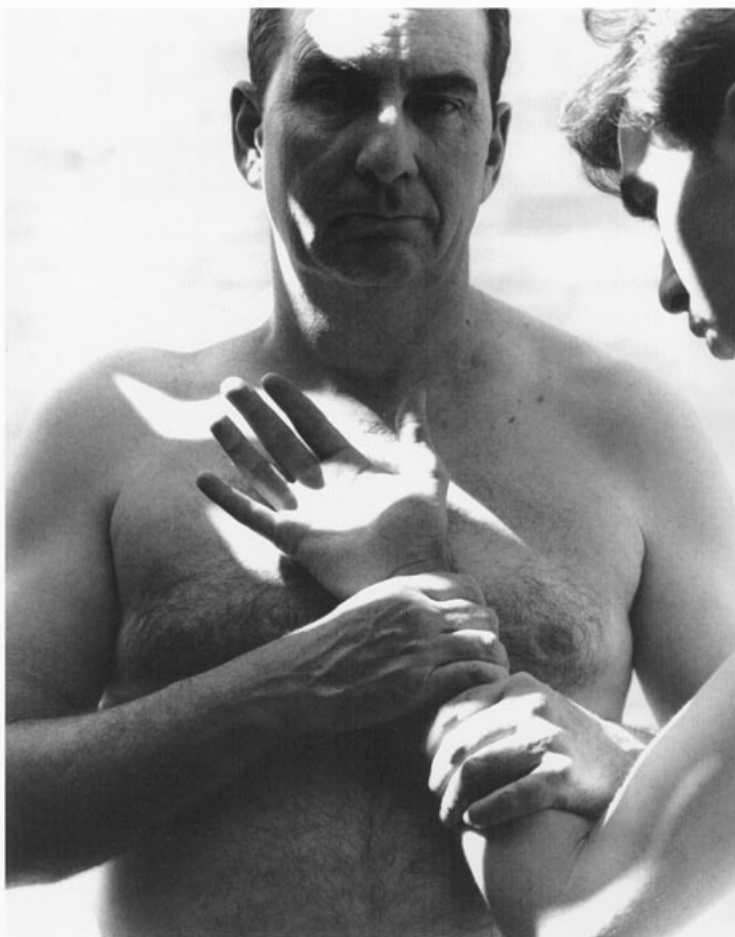
art. It was a response to the feminist critique which has had to violently call forth a paradigm capable of sustaining and nurturing the human species in an evolution of consciousness.

Jennifer Elkins is a writer living in Houston.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Bachelard, Gaston. *Water and Dreams*. Dallas: The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1983.
2. Hillman, James. *Suicide and the Soul*. Dallas: Spring Publications, 1964.



Peter Hite, *Untitled*

## Through The Body

Passages from an Unfinished Legacy  
by Peter Hite. Houston Center for Photography  
January 7-February 20, 1994

Ed Osowski

As I write this review, I am looking at an illustration of Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa* in Rome's Sta. Maria della Vittoria. What I always notice about Bernini's sculpture is how it combines and compresses religious and sexual ecstasy into one majestic and highly disturbing piece.

Whenever I see the Bernini, I feel as if I have intruded on a very private moment. The saint, her head thrown back, her left arm and leg limp, waits passively, openly, for her lover. Her face records both pleasure and pain. An angel, its face lit by an impish grin, prepares to pierce her with an arrow. To our eyes the saint's ecstasy is physical. In iconographic terms, the angel is Cupid ready to do the work of the pagan god who sent him.

Working within a concrete religious vocabulary, Bernini's was a rhetoric highly charged by the theological struggles that animated the Catholic Counter-Reformation. His saint's emotional and physical ecstasy become a visual analogue for the spiritual ecstasy that occurs when divine love pierces her soul—when the believer and God become one—when she receives on her body the stigmata, the wounds where, according to religious traditions, the body of Christ was pierced by nails before his death.

The Baroque vocabulary of Bernini's sculptural piece—the way it struggles to convey a spiritual message through the metaphor of the body—comes to mind in considering Peter Hite's installation of nineteen photographs, "Passages from an Unfinished Legacy." His photographs ostensibly explore the dynamics of father and son relationships. But they do so by alluding indirectly and subtly to certain motifs, certain events that recall passages from both the Old and New

Testaments and from the legends of the saints. These are not photographs that "illustrate" biblical scenes such as F. Holland Day's images of the crucifixion. But they are imbued with something approaching religious sensibility as they present scenes from a privately held and practiced religion.

Consider Hite's ninth image: Its pose and lighting recall images from the Baroque tradition. Hite offers his right hand to his father who firmly holds the arm. Hite's hand pushes awkwardly into his father's chest. Here I am reminded of Bernini: The son's hand is lit dramatically by a beam of light, a beam that also edges the left side of his face. In his pose the son suggests that he himself is about to receive the stigmata. He appears bewildered, confused, a sheep being led to its slaughter, Isaac about to be sacrificed by his father Abraham. Hite's father, his massive body practically filling the entire image, confronts the viewer directly.

It would be a relatively easy task to read Hite's images autobiographically, as photographs representing various stops along the (male) road to maturity. In his gallery note, Hite encourages one to approach the works in this manner. He writes, "To better understand my psychological inheritance I decided to photographically explore the realm of male relationships I have in my family." Hite's image of father, son, and grandfather, their arms linked as they raise over their heads the image of a male ancestor, hints at a private ritual during which a sacred icon or relic is revealed to its worshippers.

But the ambiguities of how generations relate or fail to relate seem the least interesting aspect of Hite's work. His self-portrait in his grandfather's closet, naked, shoulders bent, hemmed in by the old man's suits, presents the subject as either unwilling or unable to put on his grandfather's clothes and, metaphorically, to accept the life of responsibilities and respectability, a life that will eventually lead him to be one with his father and grandfather.

The uncertainty of Hite's response to the pressure of his ancestors is better represented by the sixth image in the exhibition. Originally titled *The Blessing* and now, like all other works in the installation, untitled, it places the photographer at the center of the image, naked, his head held tightly, as if in a vise, by two male arms, his father's and grandfather's, pushing against him. The pressure coming at him from two directions appears enormous. But Hite appears almost serene, almost lost in a trance. What holds one's attention, however, and what rescues the photograph from being merely "illustrative," are the men's wrist-watches. They "date" the image, plant it firmly in the present, and provide the viewer with clues in what would otherwise have been a photograph with nothing to anchor it in the present.

Hite's nakedness, finally, separates him from the other two men. Never do we see them stripped below their waists. But Hite appears fully unclothed in a number of the images. On a symbolic level, it is absolutely appropriate that his vulnerability before these two figures of male authority be shown in this manner. Nakedness can be the great leveler; it removes all pretenses. In Hite's patriarchal

universe, the son has not yet won the right to wear clothing.

In five of the photographs Hite fondles, maneuvers, and manipulates his father's head. What private ritual, one asks, is being enacted here? What scene, one wonders, better left private is being made public? These are disturbing images because their narrative scheme is so deliberately jarring. As Hite pushes on his father's head, as he holds the head against a table, and, then, as he caresses the head, one senses a transference of power. What one also senses is how these photographs call to mind Salome's erotic request for the head of John the Baptist.

Hite's images explore, with an ambiguity that seems quite deliberate, the area where the spiritual and the psychological combine. The sexually-charged nature of many of his images returns us to Bernini's sculpture. Hite's photographs frame a central belief of Christian theology—that one comes to God through the body. Hite shows his sensitivity to the belief that the body functions as metaphorical territory on which spiritual and psychological sagas are enacted, depicted, and repeated.

Hite's photographs tease and evade, refuse to reveal their meanings, are indirect, and are unforgettable. His knowledge of and use of traditions of Baroque religious painting—arranging the subjects in highly dramatic situations, lighting them with care and deliberation, posing them oddly—are the tools he uses to hint at the meanings of his images.

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

Peter Hite, *Untitled*Peter Hite, *Untitled*

## MISS TOT

HER NAME IS ALMETER but people call her Tot, Miss Tot, or Tee Tot. Her brothers call her Lonnie. She also has a succession of surnames, McKinny, Lofton, Cole, the last two the names of husbands, a subject on which she is vague. Miss Tot is not versed in matters of the Constitution but she has an inborn sense of her right to privacy. She did allow that the most recent husband "got the hot feet." If she once harbored hard feelings about his departure, she doesn't now.

She keeps a photograph of him, hanging high on the wall near the ceiling. You have to climb on a chair to look at him. He was good-looking and slight—a bantamweight—which suggests he probably was quick and light on his feet. In the photograph, he leans in a jaunty pose against a fine, shiny car.

Tot herself is small and agile. Black people never look as old as they are. Tot is seventy-four. It's not so much that she looks fifteen or twenty years younger than her real age but that she looks ageless. This does not mean she had led a life of leisure or that she has not been sick or near the point of death.

She was born and raised in the Hills, the rolling, wooded section of Mississippi to the east of the Delta. She came here in 1951, with her two boys but without Evert Lofton, her first husband. She lives in a tenant's shack at the bend of a gravel road that snakes west from Highway 61 off toward the backwaters of the Mississippi. Her house is in Tunica County, up in the north end of the Delta. Tunica County is a case of poverty raised to a higher power. In the poorest region of the country, it is the poorest county. Roughly 7,000 people live in Tunica County—the population continues to dwindle—80 percent of them black. The white minority of Tunica County is particularly defensive on the subject of poverty.

There are fewer and fewer shacks like Tot's lining Delta roads. With the mass migration begun during World War I, of rural blacks from the South to urban centers of the North, their abodes, hardly built for the ages, have fallen down, enveloped by vines, razed, or burned. Scattered around the Delta you can see squarish piles of rubble and blackened earth that have an eerie resemblance to scorch marks left by the rockets of departed spaceships. Tot lives here with her bachelor son, whose name is William Henry but who goes by Jim or Jim Tot. Her other son lives with his family in Texas. The house and yard are tidy and decorative, though its flourishes—like the plastic pelican in the front yard—and the accretion of items of potential value are outlandish and cluttered by the standards of white suburban America. In the back is a hen house, a bin for collecting aluminum cans (the earnings go to support her church), a woodpile, a shed, an old Thunderbird rusting next to a now abandoned sky-blue shotgun house, and Tot's vegetable garden fortified against the chickens by a crude fence.

This island of domesticity sits in a sea of cultivation. The field to the east has just been leveled and compacted for the cultivation of rice. It is so flat and packed that it looks like a parking lot. No trees obstruct the view. You can sit on her porch and watch toy-sized cars and trucks plying Highway 61 half a mile away.

This is the center of Tot's universe. She knows the site of every pecan tree in a five-mile radius. She collects the nuts in the fall to sell. Her church, which she organized and maintains, is a quarter mile up the road. She is a samaritan, caring for the sick and afflicted in the vicinity. News consists of local events—a Mexican migrant worker stabbed by a black fellow; a couple asphyxiated by a leaky gas stove—and she is a proficient bearer of the news she deems important. On the other hand, she has no opinion on the appointment of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court because she has never heard of him. The most important vote she casts is for road commissioner because that is the person who keeps her gravel road in passable condition. Though she is a beneficiary of the achievements of Civil Rights worker Fannie Lou Hamer, who was born and died forty miles away, Tot does not recognize the name. "Was she a church lady?" she wonders.

The only document she seems capable of or interested in reading is the Bible. There is a Bible on the dashboard of her car. Bibles lie open on several of the beds in her house, and on the window sill behind the dilapidated couch on her screened-in back porch.

## WHAT IS THE DELTA?

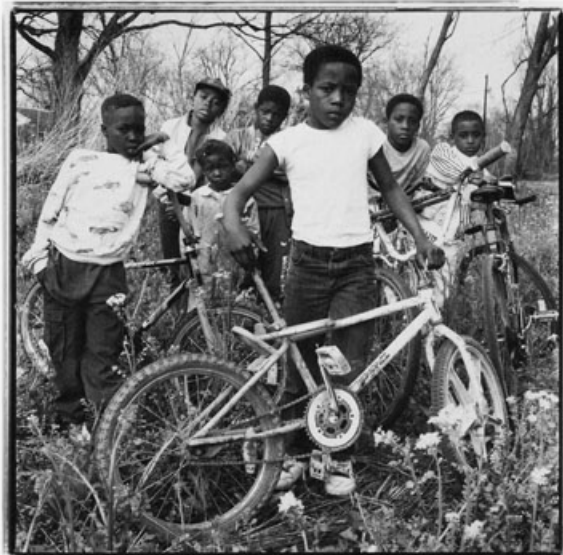
THE DELTA IS A GEOLOGICAL MISNOMER. It is an alluvial plain, not a delta, ten thousand years of sand and silt and detritus carried in the dervish currents of the Mississippi and finally dropped by the river, for lack of energy, into a huge, ancient, gaping embayment, with its uvula about where Cairo, Illinois, stands today and its mouth puckered up against the Gulf of Mexico, down around New Orleans. It's maw filled in with dirt of the richest sort. Starting slowly in the early years of the nineteenth century and accelerating after the Civil War, settlers began to unravel the spectacular cape of vegetation—a weave of canebrakes and briars and towering bottom-land forests—that covered the alluvial plain. They farmed; their successors are still farming.

Despite a flawed application of nomenclature, in a textbook sense the Delta is a great continental discharge of dirt stretching from Cairo to New Orleans. But in an idiomatic, sociological sense, when most people talk about the Delta, they are referring to a subset of this larger terrain. In the minds of most people who live in these parts or who have had occasion to visit or to think much about this place, the Delta is that upturned, outstretched hand of land that stretches from Memphis to Vicksburg. Here, everything that is problematic and wonderful about the larger terrain is amplified. Some of the most harrowing and courageous events of the Civil Rights Movement took place here, but segregation remained the tacit rule. The soil is richest here but the poverty the deepest, and here is where poverty is a conspicuous emblem of one's race. From here, the poorest place in America, came the blues.

# ON HIGHER

## Photographs of the

The following passages were excerpted from the collaborative project *On Higher* the inhabitants of the Mississippi Delta, the effort was funded in part by the D University. Winckler's text, culled from extensive interviews exploring the culmen-mented Carter's forty photographs. Organized by the Houston Center for Photo at HCP from November 5-December 23, 1993 and is now available for travel.



Keith Carter, *Bicycles* 1992



Keith Carter, *Last Chicken*, 1991



Keith Carter, *Open Arms*, 1993

# R GROUND

## Mississippi Delta

und by Keith Carter and Suzanne Winckler. Designed to document the life of  
bea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize of the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke  
religious and folkloric beliefs of the area's people, accompanied and comple-  
by and funded by the Texas Commission on the Arts, the work was exhibited



Keith Carter, *Acolyte*, 1991



Keith Carter, *Dog and Coffin*, 1992



Keith Carter, *Water Jug*, 1991

## NO MEN

**T**HE CHURCH SAT ON A BACK ROAD. It was white. On the horizon it glowed like an oracle; up close it was flimsy, a miscellany of scavenged materials. Its itinerant pastor, who was also a farmer and carpenter, reported that he had spied some lumber at the demolition of a building that would serve to add a washroom onto the church. If it was alright with the congregation, he could secure the materials at a bargain price.

The congregation, meeting as always on the fourth Sunday of every month, was composed of black women. They ranged in age from about ten to seventy-five. The older women, reared in a sedate generation, were dressed in dark, matronly suits and dresses, neat but worn. Some wore wigs; a few wore hats. The mother of the church—the woman in charge of church business—wore a white nurse's uniform, the standard apparel of church mothers. The young women wore bright clothes with short hemlines. Three of these young women, sisters, sat together on one pew. One of them carried an infant boy in her arms. During the service, they passed him back and forth like a gift. Her two sisters were pregnant.

The sermon came from Matthew 20, the first sixteen verses, an inscrutable text about labor and wages in God's vineyard. The sixteenth verse is a passage that would be familiar even to people who don't read the Bible: "So the last shall be first, and the first last: For many be called, but few chosen."

The preacher worked himself into a frenzy. He threw back his head and closed his eyes. He took deeper and deeper inhalations as he talked, which caused the air to rattle as it rushed down his windpipe.

"So the last shall be first, and the first last. Many be called but few gonna be chosen. Now think about that verse. Let me make you a parable what I'm sayin. Just look how many in church today and only thing I see is two mens I believe that is in this house right now."

He was referring to himself and the infant boy.

"Everybody else is ladies. And I know that in this little town and where I live there is no more mens walkin' around then gettin' in the church of God. But I'm saying to the ladies just hold out to the end. You got a crown in waitin' for God. But where the mens gonna be when the Lord call the roll?"

The congregation replied, "Amen, amen, amen, amen."

## SHEP

**I**N THE LATE 1960S FARMERS IN THE DELTA, like many other farmers across America, began picking up professional velocity, clearing and draining more land to put into production in a chivalrous, bank-leveraged, government-subsidized effort to feed and clothe the world. In the Delta in particular, where the top soil is so deep that the sacrifice of some could be countenanced, the dirt has to fly. More precisely, the practice of land leveling escalated. Billiard-table-flat land is desirable for a number of reasons: for one, it promotes more efficient drainage of water. But leveling skins the history off the land.

The Delta has a long tradition of being not too uncomfortable a place to eke out an existence. People have made themselves at home on this fertile alluvial plain for at least ten thousand years. They have left ample sign of their presence. In an effort to salvage some fragments of the Delta's history before the farmers scraped it all away, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History opened a branch office in Clarksdale, up in the north end of the Delta.

On Second Street, in a dingy, flat-roofed, fifties-era office, itself an artifact of a more prosperous time, thousands of unearthed specimens sit in closets, storerooms, under tables, and in the hallway. There are potsherds, projectile points, hoes, awls, axes, celts, beads, ear plugs, pendants, and effigies. They were gathered up, cleaned, catalogued, and are now brooded over by John Connaway, state archaeologist, whose intense concentration on the details of prehistory may in some way explain the holes in the heels of his shoes. It is his job to save every scrap of evidence from the lives of the long dead, including the bones of their dogs. Connaway takes more than an academic interest in dogs. He has labeled their boxes: Shep, Bowser, Spot, Sam. When he takes one of these cardboard sarcophagi off the shelf, its contents rattle like a maraca.

Connaway doesn't have a dog of his own—he wouldn't want to leave it in the apartment he is seldom in himself—but he has found his niche in the dog-human continuum. When he is out on a dig, often a lonely pursuit, he befriends the local Delta mongrels. Foregoing their native skittishness, they trot over to where he is digging, curl up, and nap while he sifts through the ancient soil.

## EGGS

**T**HE WOMAN WHO RAISES EGGS TO SELL guards her hens against vandal dogs. "I came home one day, dog had chickens scattered from the yard on out in the field," she said. The woman told the neighbor children to help her catch the dog. Later, they fetched her to the culprit's hiding place.

"I got a rope and I went down there. I put that rope around that dog's neck and I tied it to the back of my car. The children wanted to ride with me. I said I don't care. We got on down the road. They said, 'Miss Tot, that dog ain't dead.' I said, 'Y'all don't need to worry. He be dead when I cross 61 highway.'"

Suzanne Winckler is a writer based in Nebraska.

# THE LOS ANGELES RIOTS:

Daniel P. Younger

In recalling the 1992 Los Angeles riots, images of fiery devastation are among those that are apt to come to mind. Viewers gathering their news from the mainstream media (in particular, network TV and illustrated news magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time*) might tend to associate the riots with California's wildfires of 1993 and earthquake of 1994, not simply because they all occurred in the same city, but because images of fire predominated in the media coverage of all three events. On some level, the visuality of these events, different as they are, is melded. In the midst of the series of wildfires that claimed lives and property in Los Angeles in the fall of 1993, Carolyn See, a California-based novelist acknowledged that people love the sense of terror and elation in a great fire. Indeed, however inappropriate it may have seemed at the time, the press reported that certain victims of the fires who had suffered the partial or complete loss of their homes went so far as to say that their loss had been mitigated by the opportunity to immerse themselves in the sheer danger and magnitude of the blazes.<sup>1</sup> Initial broadcast and print media coverage of recent Los Angeles calamities (including the riots, the wildfires, and most recently, the earthquake) all exploited an unabashed fascination with the spectacle of fire.

As circumstantially different as these events were, what television screens reporting on these tragedies seemed to share most was a familiar staple of "disaster-TV": raging fires in progress that promised to consume whatever stood in their path. With programming that brought a succession of fires—each one indistinguishable from the next—into U.S. living rooms, many networks offered extended coverage of these tragedies. Lending continuity to the studio coverage of news events, generic icons (projected behind anchor persons) are often employed by news programs to cue viewers to topics under discussion (a handgun, for example might accompany a story on inner-city gun violence). During the riots the networks reinforced alarm in their viewership through the instantaneous production and repeated appearance of icons that depicted raging fires or buildings engulfed in flames. Punctuating hour-to-hour and day-to-day programming, these stylized icons—fiery logos of the L.A. riots—served to dramatize and serialize coverage of the cataclysms. At the same time, news magazines presented bold, tabloid-like headlines superimposed on splashy photographs of fires and devastation—bled to the edges of covers and opening pages (a number of these folded out). The result of this journalistic treatment was a kind of "posterization" of catastrophe—usually with an emphasis on visual effects and material damage rather than human loss.<sup>2</sup> Though such sensational reportage is hardly new, this tabloid treatment has been introduced increasingly in recent years in ostensibly middle-brow, non-tabloid venues.

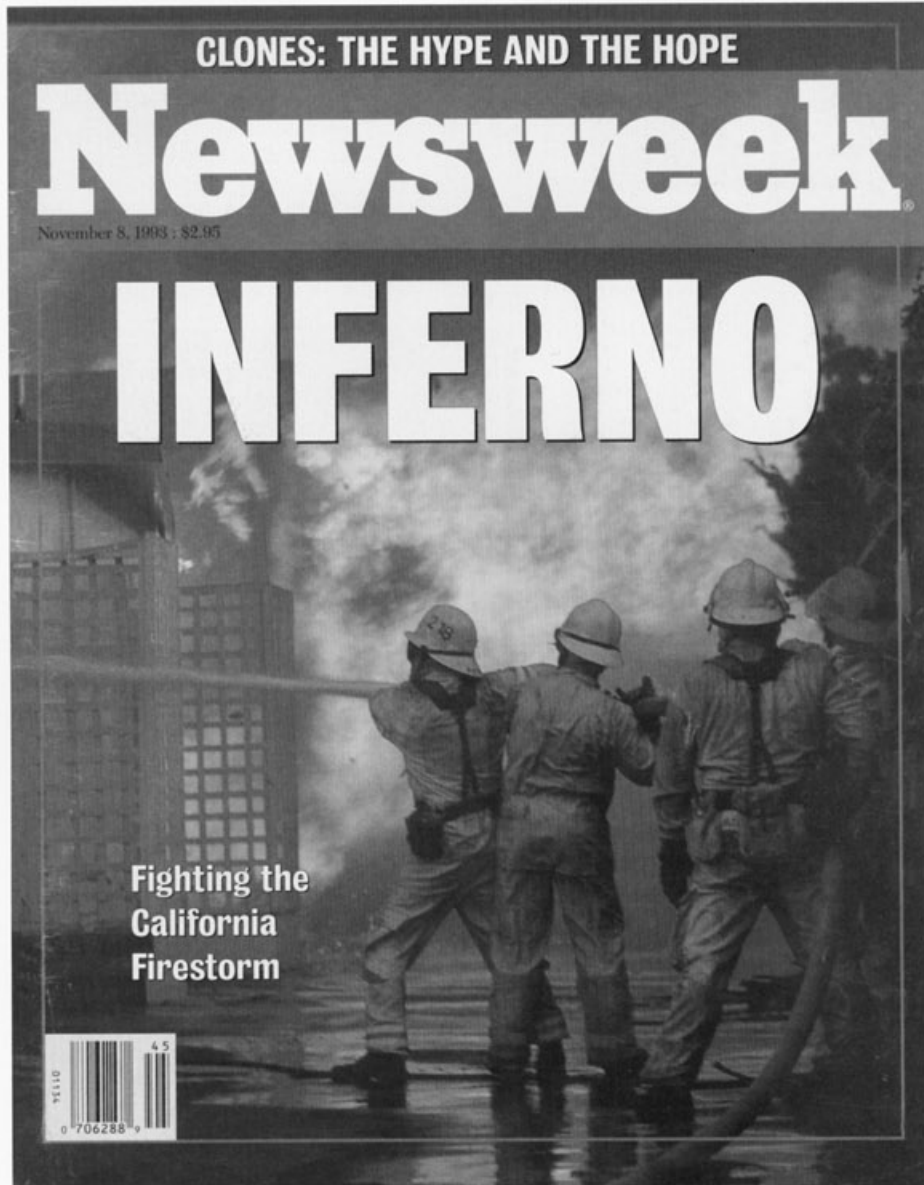
While it may seem an exaggeration to suggest that the disparate disasters besetting California were defined by nothing so much as TV screens and magazine pages subsumed by the familiar orange hue of fires burning out of control, this was primarily what the media offered (and chiefly what viewers saw)—a result of the media's easy agreement in satisfying its audience's appetite for spectacle. To be sure, in the case of riot-torn Los Angeles, these pictures amounted to little more than the temporal effect—rather than the cause—of events of considerable social complexity. I would argue that such sensate coverage fashioned for mostly white, middle- and lower middle-class consumers (the primary demographic group targeted by main-

stream news magazines and network TV news programs), contributed to a national loss of memory (noted in many quarters) and a related acute lack of attention to the root causes and longterm effects of the Los Angeles riots. Among those who have remarked on this case of amnesia is Cornell West, a foremost African-American intellect at Princeton. In his recent book *Race Matters*, he offers an honest assessment of the social and racial cause and effect of the riots missing from most media reportage:

A journalist writing shortly after the Los Angeles riots in 1992, briefly summed up the contingent relationship between the media and news events: "A fire needs oxygen."<sup>4</sup> By suggesting that the taunting omnipresence of television camera crews may have spurred the rage in South Central L.A., the writer affirmed the media's keen pursuit of the sensational. In an era long before television, early photodocumentary reportage—those photographs that qualified as some of the first possessing news value—commonly depicted

sites of tragedies like the L.A. riots on their anniversaries. There is a fascination in the superficial contrasts drawn between "before and after images." Implicit in this exercise is the fact that what the public remembers (and probably understands) in the intervening weeks and months following a disaster, is not what life was like before an event or even immediately following it, but the spectacle that attracted the media in the first place. The public's memory is affected retinally by the impact of astonishing images, yet they tend to float in the mind in a rather disconnected state.

Common or public experience (that shared societally regardless of ultimate differences in perception or conclusion)<sup>5</sup> is parlayed via the written, the visual, and the aural. Of these, it is arguably the visual at this moment in the late twentieth-century that is the most standardized and committed to memory. And (postmodern perspectives notwithstanding) it is the visual that viewers commonly accept as the most important and "objective" element of news production.<sup>6</sup> As TV audiences viewed the conflagration of Los Angeles in 1992, generally missing were the accompanying sounds of raging flames, explosions, shattering glass, gunshots, sirens, and the melee of those participating in the riot. In the absence of these "live" sounds—what we might expect from the technology of television, and what, in fact, characterized television news in its infancy—we were left with



"Inferno," *Newsweek* cover, November 8, 1993 (Photo by Michael Schumann—Saba)

**"For all its ugly, xenophobic resentment, its air of adolescent carnival, and its downright barbaric behavior, it [the riots] signified the sense of powerlessness in America... What we witnessed in Los Angeles was the consequence of a lethal linkage of economic decline, cultural decay, and political lethargy in American life... The astonishing disappearance of the event from public dialogue is testimony to just how painful and distressing a serious engagement with race is."**<sup>3</sup>

sensational subjects such as fire and disaster, and their aftermath. George Barnard's ground-breaking daguerreotype of a factory fire in progress in Oswego, New York, dating from the 1850s; documentation of the devastation of Sherman's fiery march to the sea in the 1860s; and extensive coverage of the ruins of the nineteenth-century Boston and Chicago fires come to mind. In the first part of the twentieth-century, the explosion of the Hindenburg dirigible and the post-World War II icon of the atomic mushroom cloud reside in the collective consciousness. Comparable events in the post-TV era include live images of the Challenger disaster, the Gulf War "smart bomb" video, and the conflagration of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. Today it is increasingly such instantaneously horrific and destructive moments—relayed *live* to mass audiences (and replayed endlessly)—that are likely to be recalled by most.

In a customary rite of passage for the media, it is traditional fare to return to the

the arbitrary and arguably disposable "noise" of studio commentary. Such cursory narration, while intended to color initial reading and perception, would appear to be superfluous in the recall of spectacular imagery. Undifferentiated images of buildings engulfed in flames and of brazen looters dominate our memory of the riots. It has been argued by Jean Baudrillard and others that spectral images like these tend to devolve, in memory, into little more than pure spectacle itself.

In its coverage of the riots, television offered few images depicting social conditions in South Central Los Angeles, and little sense of the despair (and dignity) of affected communities *following* the riots. Camera crews departed soon after the last fires were extinguished, leaving little doubt as to the depth of media coverage. Mike Davis, in a two-part article, "Who Killed L.A.?", has written: "... within weeks, and before a single scorched mini-mall had actually been rebuilt, the second Los Angeles riot, as well as the national urban-racial crisis that it symbolized,

# IMAGES WITHOUT EFFECT

had been virtually erased from political memory banks.”<sup>7</sup> Ironically, George Bush stated the same week of the riots, “We have seen images... we will never forget.”<sup>8</sup>

Notwithstanding his administration’s lack of action and his own apparent amnesia, as well as the disingenuous electioneering of both parties around the plight of Los Angeles,<sup>9</sup> Bush was, in fact, correct. The palpable, though disengaged, images of massive destruction are unlikely to fade from the memory of the generation that witnessed them. However, the ineffectuality of these images is suggested by the emptiness of the political rhetoric and by the stunning inaction and neglect that followed the riots.

Promised aid to Los Angeles appears to have been no more than “smoke and mirrors” from the outset.<sup>10</sup> Following his re-election defeat in November 1992, Bush vetoed the very urban aid bill he had helped to launch as a result of the riots six months earlier. One year after the riots, two thirds of gutted businesses stood mute, social services were still severely diminished, and youth unemployment continued to rise.<sup>11</sup> Appointed by mayor Tom Bradley to head Rebuild L.A. (RLA), Peter Ueberroth, with no federal or state aid forthcoming, dramatically announced a billion dollar corporate commitment. Yet, half of Ueberroth’s impressive list of contributors, when interviewed, denied any such commitment. Ueberroth resigned from his RLA post in May 1993 under harsh community criticism.

More recently, Bernard W. Kinsley, who succeeded Ueberroth as the cochairman of the beleaguered riot recovery effort, stepped down last January. And in the fall 1993 mayoral election, residents of Los Angeles, reflecting an apparent white backlash, elected conservative Richard Riordan. Supported by Ronald Reagan, Riordan, a wealthy venture capitalist, was the first Republican elected mayor of L.A. in 36 years. Criticized for his lack of support for the rebuilding of neighborhoods ravaged by the riots, he made crime the centerpiece of his campaign, vowing to expand the LAPD by forty percent.<sup>12</sup> Writing on local L.A. media in *Inside the L.A. Riots*, Doug Ireland noted:

“...the night of the worst violence, there was a near total absence of voices from the affected communities... Los Angeles television just kept pouring raw footage from remote units onto the screen. Anchors everywhere plied field reporters with Big Picture questions. But that wasn’t their job. Their job was to create a mythical city, a sort of Beirut West, views of which would keep viewers frozen in fear...”

And, similarly, Tom Carson, writing also in *Inside the L.A. Riots*, stated that the rioters themselves remained “wierdly dim figures on TV with not only their motives but their specific actions all but impossible to get a handle on.” One became witness to “endless channel-clicking footage of one fire after another hiding the sky.”<sup>14</sup> These critical on-site accounts of the media treatment of the tragedy of the L.A. riots attest to the effective abstraction and neutralization of the social, a phenomenon theorized by Baudrillard. In an age when information and entertainment

have become synonymous, the media and its audience have come to “idolize any content so long as it resolves itself into a spectacular sequence.”<sup>15</sup> Rather than informing as it purports, the media tends to engage the viewer in a flat, one-dimensional experience, leading to

in the fantastic, in brief, dazzling images for their own sake—results in an implosion of information: pure effect lacking content or meaning, according to Baudrillard. In retrospect, the commodification of spectacle in Los Angeles seems to be a textbook case of a wide-

hegemonic media condition implied by Giroux’s and McLaren’s question. Cover stories that appeared in *Time* and *Newsweek* were titled respectively, “The Fire This Time” and “Fire and Fury.”<sup>18</sup> *Time*’s “The Fire This Time,” was a clear (and curious) appropriation of the title of James Baldwin’s 1963 book, *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin, in *The Fire Next Time*, explicated the despair of the American black, identified and indicted the intransigence of the (white) American power structure, and promised racial apocalypse.<sup>19</sup> *Time* signaled its view of the fecklessness of the L.A. riots in its ironic use of Baldwin’s title. The appropriation of the title recalled the racial unrest of the 1960’s that followed the publication of *The Fire Next Time*, and smugly suggested the ineffectuality of the Civil Rights Movement and Baldwin’s seminal literary contribution to it. Singled out and surrounded by blazing fires, the African-American youths depicted on the opening pages of *Time* and on the cover of *Newsweek* are seen to act largely alone. Implicitly, rioters (participants in a mob) do not act alone; they possess agency—a quality these isolated youths appear to lack. Given the graphic prominence of the fires and their proximity

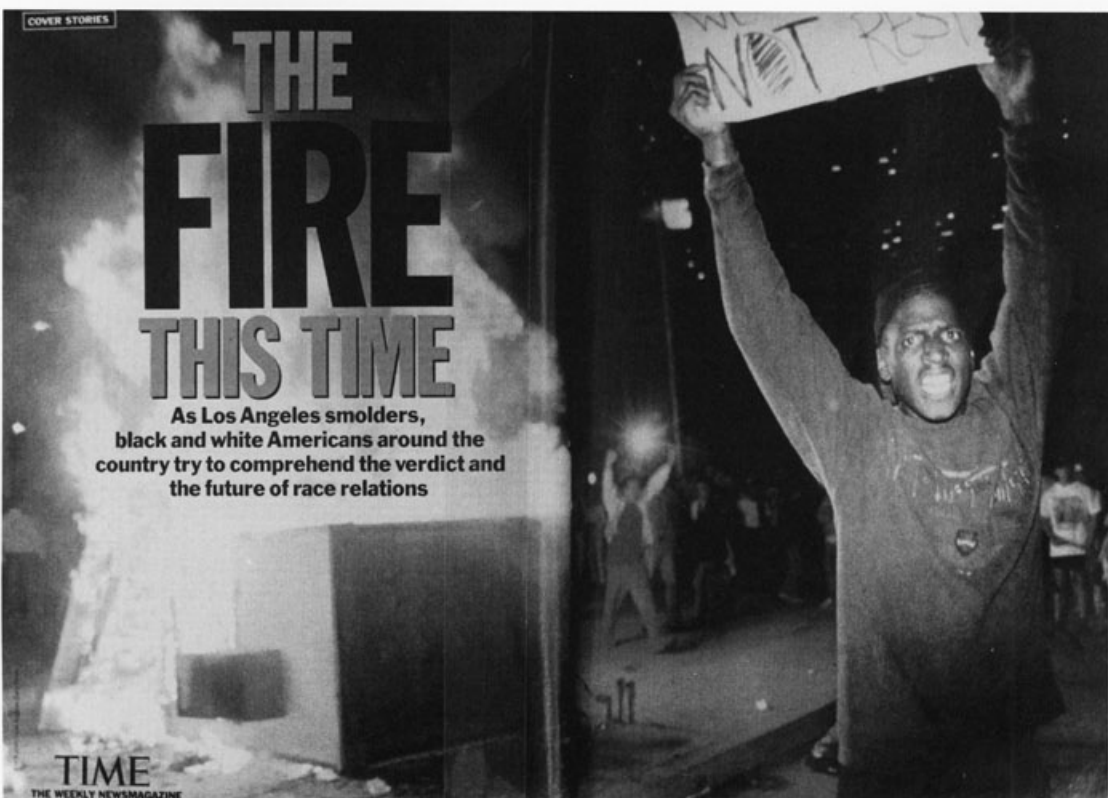


Dawn Guernsey’s 1992 “Men in Suits” is among a series of works by the artist that presents a sympathetic, multi-ethnic representation of urban dwellers coping with the destruction of their neighborhoods. By contrast, media coverage of the L.A. riots overlooked the plight of victims of affected communities and glossed their ethnic diversity.

to the youths, a kind of symbiotic relationship between the figures and the fires is suggested in these images. Consequently, a relationship may be drawn between the *spectacle* and *threat* of the fires, and that of these teenagers—representatives of the young, black urban underclass.

the passive absorption of terrifying images that resist an active processing of meaning. Trapped within the slick TV packaging of on-the-scene kinetic images like those broadcast from Los Angeles, the viewer found it impossible to fathom the social cause and effect residing beneath flames engulfing the screen.

ly acknowledged media condition that in the final analysis too often erases the social while claiming to do just the opposite. In their introduction to *Media Knowledge*, Henry A. Giroux and Peter L. McLaren pose the question, “How are communicational devices able to reinscribe the human subject



“The Fire This Time,” *Time*, May 11, 1992, pp. 18-19. (Photo by Kim Kulish—Los Angeles Daily News)

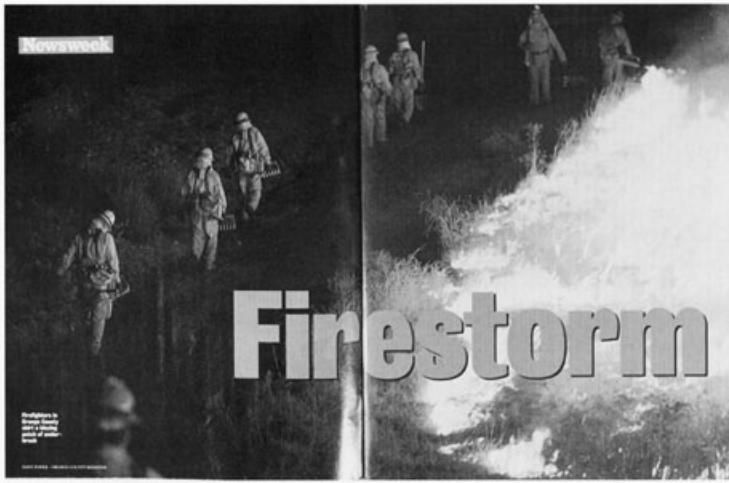
to prevailing social relations so that these relations are seen as conventional and uncontested?”<sup>17</sup> The endorsement of status quo racial relations and the striking similarity of initial news magazine cover stories (and accompanying photographs) on the 1992 Los Angeles riots provide an illustration of the

The youths in *Time* and *Newsweek* appear with open mouths to be shouting and strike aggressive postures. One holds up a hand-scrawled sign high over his head that reads, “We Will Not Rest”; the other gestures threateningly. Race (and blame) are stigmatized in these iconic images that purport to

sum-up the riots fairly and transparently through an unchallenged and all-too familiar visual language of the white mainstream: the pathologically violent urban black. Understanding the decidedly multiracial makeup of those who participated in (and experienced the unfortunate effects of) the riots, the use of these images reveals a bald editorial bias, more pronounced than in any of the various articles that they accompany. Disturbingly, these images tend to ring true (for non-African-American audiences) because they resemble the drugs-and-violence model of media reporting on African-American communities. Writing last year on "Black Life on TV: Realism or Stereotypes?," Isabel Wilkerson concluded about the corporate television ethos in regard to black representation:

**"In the current climate, pathology is truth and truth is pathology."<sup>20</sup>**

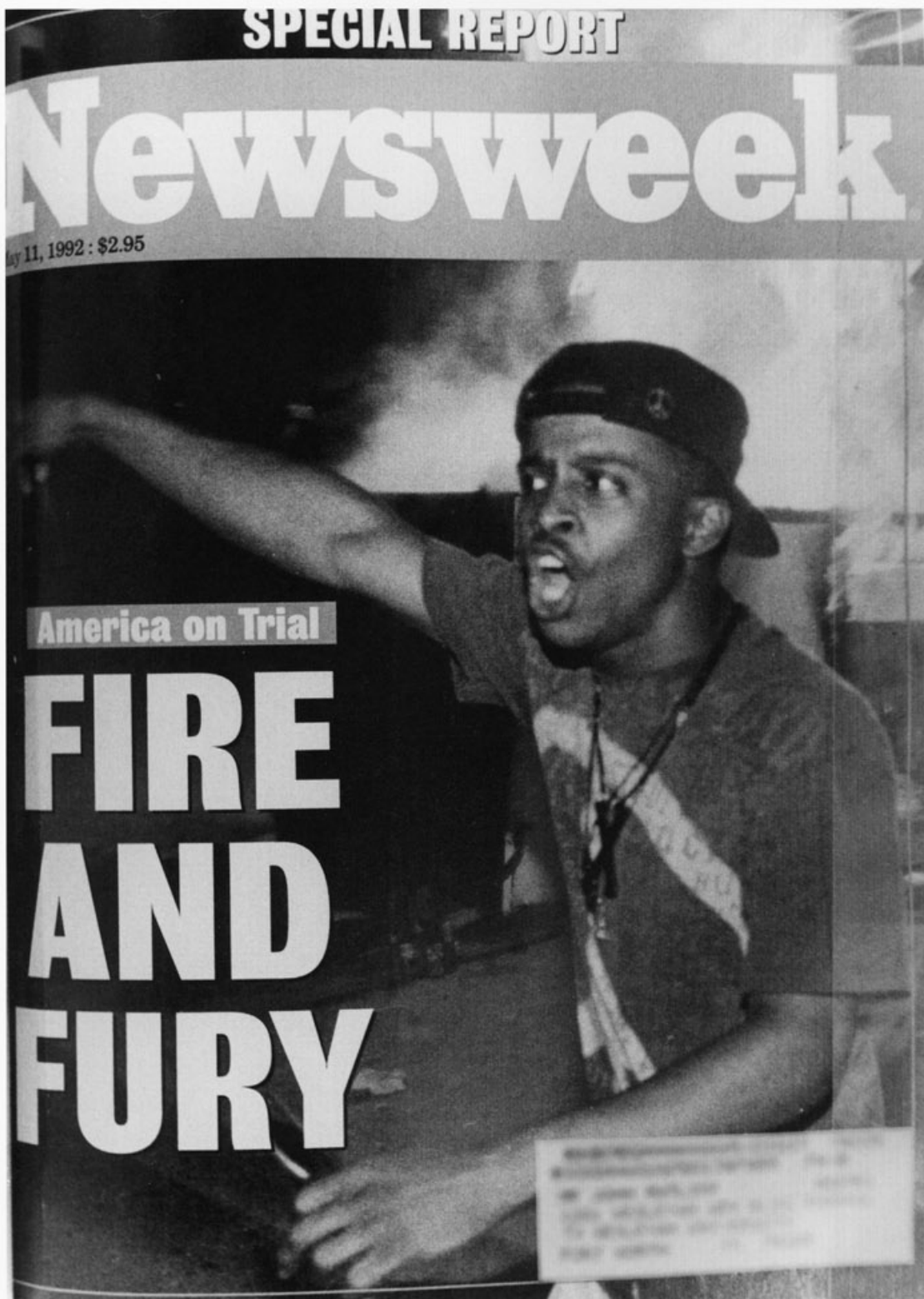
Shot at night, the images in *Time* and *Newsweek* play to the incipient fear of white



"Firestorm," *Newsweek*, November 8, 1993, pp. 26-27 (Photo by Dave Yoder—Orange County Register)

audiences. The black teenagers, drawn in direct relation to the terror and spectacle of fires burning out of control, become the anonymous (and, finally, the fictional) protagonists—the poster boys—of the terrible white fantasy of urban Armageddon.

The appeal of these images, rooted in the status-quo racism of the 1990s, resides in their ability to frighten, and ultimately (like the fires) to embody an erasure of social context, consequence, and action.



"Fire and Fury," *Newsweek* cover, May 11, 1992 (Photo by Paul E. Rodriguez—Orange County Register)

Daniel P. Younger is the former editor of *VIEWS: The Journal of Photography in New England*, published by the Photographic Resource Center. He is a photographer and a freelance writer, editor, and curator.

*Author's Note:* I would like to thank Melissa Dabakis for her assistance in reading early drafts of this essay.

**FOOTNOTES**

1. This report, including comments by Carolyn See, comprised a story on the California wildfires that was aired on the National Public Radio program, "All Things Considered," on November 11, 1993. See's novels chronicle life in the Pacific Rim area of California. A recent novel by See, *Making History* (Houghton Mifflin, 1991) is the story of a family living the L.A. dream of affluent happiness whose sunny world is shattered by the "chaos of living."
2. For earlier examples of this sort of tabloid "posterization" in the mainstream print media, see: "Bracing for the Big One: and The Lessons of San Francisco," *Newsweek*, October 30, 1989; "San Francisco, October 17, 1989," *Time*, October 30, 1989.
3. Cornell West, *Race Matters* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1993): 1-2.
4. Jonathan Alter, "TV and the 'Firebell,'" *Newsweek*, May 11, 1992: 43.
5. An important caveat. Minorities and/or urban dwellers (particularly those in Los Angeles) were likely familiar enough with the despair of the inner city and with essential elements missing from the sensational media version of the riots to ascertain just how problematic the coverage was. On the whole, media programming was produced by and for nonminorities.
6. Written accounts of national and world events are more apt to lack agreement (than visual accounts), and few (with any specificity of verbiage) make it into the lexicon of public awareness. Auditory transmissions on TV usually bear a decidedly secondary relationship to the visual. Aside from some radio (such as National Public Radio), little electronic programming offers a "live" or synchronous audio track accompanying video footage.
7. Mike Davis, "Who Killed L.A.? A Political Autopsy," Part I, *New Left Review*, Jan/Feb 1993, #197:4. Davis goes on to say: "The word 'city'—now color-coded and worrisome to the candidates' common suburban heartland—was expunged from the exchanges. Thus the thousand-pound gorilla of the urban crisis was simply and consensually conjured out of sight."
8. "Fire and Fury," *Newsweek*, May 11, 1992:31
9. See: Davis, "Who Killed L.A.?", Part I, *New Left Review*.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Mike Davis, "Who Killed L.A.," Part II, *New Left Review*, #198:49.
12. Marc Cooper, "Revenge of the 'Burbs," *Village Voice*, June 22, 1993:17.
13. Doug Ireland, "The Verdict," in *Inside the L.A. Riots: What really happened—and why it will happen again* (Institute for Alternative Journalism, 1992):119.
14. Tom Carson, "Do you fear the coming darkness?," in *Inside the L.A. Riots*:115.
15. Douglas Kellner, "Media, Simulations and the End of the Social," in Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1989):60
16. *Ibid.*:60-92
17. Henry A. Giroux and Peter L. McLaren, "Introduction—Media Hegemony: Towards A Critical Pedagogy of Representation," in Schwach, White, Reilly (eds.), *Media Knowledge: Readings in Popular Culture, Pedagogy, and Critical Citizenship* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1992):xxi.
18. See: "The Fire This Time," *Time*, May 11, 1992; "Fire and Fury," *Newsweek*, May 11, 1992.
19. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, Vintage Books, 1993). Reading Baldwin, one is struck with how little has changed in thirty-odd years, and with how prophetic was his (pre-1960s riots) assessment of the seething rage of the African-American community. He wrote (apropos of the 1992 Los Angeles riots and its media representation): "The white man's unadmitted—and apparently, to him, unspeakable—private fears and longings are projected on the Negro." (p.96); "... they could deal with the Negro as a symbol or a victim but had no sense of him as a man" (p. 58); "... the most dangerous creation of any society is that man who has nothing to lose" (p. 76).
20. Isabel Wilkerson, "Black Life on TV: Realism or Stereotypes?," *The New York Times*, Sunday Arts and Leisure, August 15, 1993: 28.

## Creating An Art Form

Alex: The Life of Alexander Liberman.  
By Dodie Kazanjian and Calvin Tomkins  
Alfred A. Knopf, 1993. 385 pp. \$27.50

### Holly Hildebrand

For Alexander Liberman, photography was not an art form. Yet his eye for it and feel for it transformed the pages of *Vogue* and other magazines, and his own photographs led to the development and appreciation of his painting and sculpture.

Still active at eighty-one, Liberman only this spring left his position as editorial director of all Condé Nast publications, a post he held for thirty-two years and which is one of the most influential in the magazine world. He is now deputy chairman for editorial matters, an exalted position that must have seemed far from Liberman's grasp in 1941 when, as a recently arrived Russian refugee, he was fired after a week of working in *Vogue's* art department.

How Liberman turned an employment defeat into editorial victory makes for a fascinating look at the postwar changes in American magazine journalism. No less interesting is his life story, told in great detail but not always with much elegance by Dodie Kazanjian, a *Vogue* writer, and Calvin Tomkins, a contributor to *The New Yorker* and the author of, among other books, *Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. They begin the story vividly, with a smarmy description of Liberman's 80th birthday party, that reads

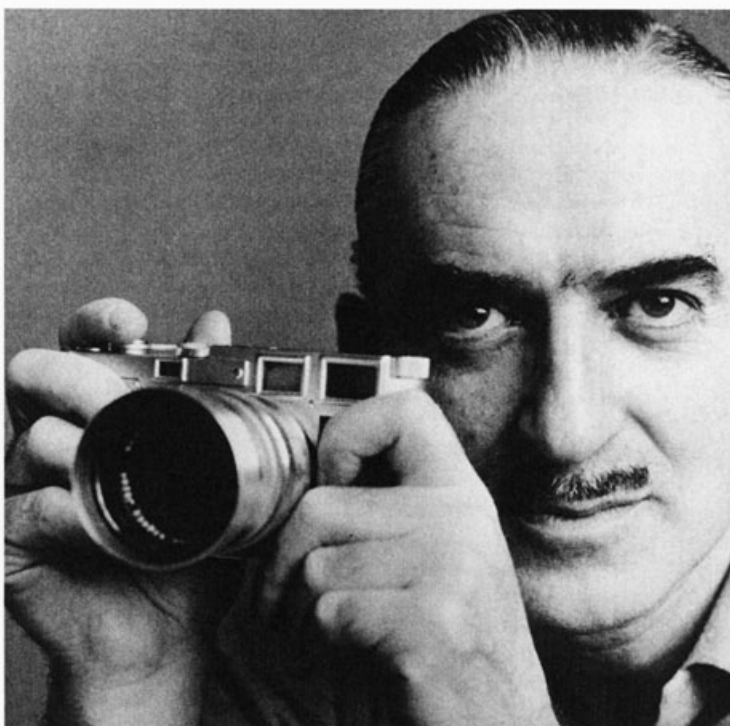


Alexander Liberman, *Tatiana*, 1939

like a guest list culled from the Social Register. But if readers can get past these first pages, they will find themselves swept up into a tale with a varied and fascinating cast.

In the middle of all this stands Liberman, calm and suave in his English-tailored suits, an editor who somehow managed to keep the loyalty of his staff even while asking them to rip up layouts at the last minute in order to "enrich" the design; and an artist whose work was wide-ranging but whose ambitions were tortured by self-doubt. Irony and the force of fortune are never far from his story. He was an art director who believed in "anti-design" and an editor who viewed photography as a form of "documentation" but collaborated on some of its great images; a man who disdained his mother's pushy, embarrassing sermons about becoming an artist while heeding their messages simultaneously.

Born in Russia, he was the only son of a passionate half-Gypsy woman with artistic pretensions and a shrewd businessman who figured in Lenin's government. Liberman's first marriage, to a "blonde goddess" named Hilde Sturm, ended quickly in divorce, but a



Irving Penn, *Alex and Leica*

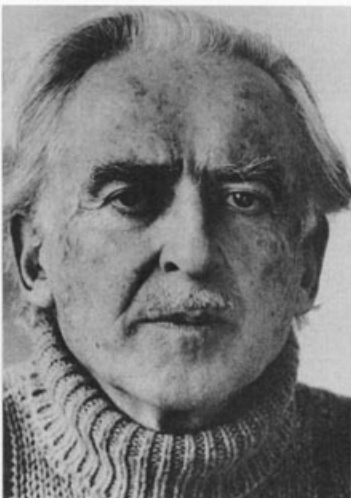
second, to Tatiana, the Countess du Plessix, the Russian niece of one of Liberman's early artistic influences, lasted for fifty years. When France was occupied, the couple fled to New York. His connections to editors in France helped land him a job at *Vogue*, where, despite his initial failure, he quickly won the admiration of founder Condé Nast and rose

to the position of art director within two years. Early on Liberman spotted the talent of Irving Penn and Richard Avedon; he was able to hire Penn, but Avedon, who joined the rival *Harper's Bazaar*, eluded him for years.<sup>1</sup>

With Penn, Liberman established the closest and most successful relationship of his professional life. Penn himself acknowledged his debt to Liberman: "Some of the best work for *Vogue*, though it may bear my signature is in fact ours, the result of a special and

close collaboration," he wrote in 1991. Penn's first works for *Vogue* were still-life photographs, meticulously arranged objects made modern with jarring, discordant notes. This

Irving Penn, *Alexander Liberman*, 1977



sense of imperfection was what Liberman was looking for, especially in the presentation of the magazine's fashion models. Rejecting the ideal of "visions of loveliness" with women posed as ethereal beings, Liberman sought the "real gesture of a real person," which Penn was able to provide—at first by accident, in a shot of model Jean Patchett in Peru—that inspired many other photographers.<sup>2</sup>

Part of Liberman's approach to photography at *Vogue* was what he called "anti-design." He saw an obsession with design at the magazine—with "the use of the material more important than the material itself"—that he wanted to break with a more "journalistic" approach—rougher lettering, no white space, crowded pages, messier layouts. And although Liberman worked with such fine photographers as Penn, Cecil Beaton and Horst, he showed no interest in publishing print portfolios; even Penn's non-fashion work was presented in *Vogue* as an exalted form of illustration. Even so, they are only a part of his tale. The rest lies in the striking and extensive portfolios of the photographers he encouraged, even prodded, to greatness; the poses of fashion models pulled down off the pedestals and into the streets and restaurants of a more workaday glamour; the magazines that he helped change and create, from *Vogue* to *Vanity Fair* to *Condé Nast Traveler*, imbuing them with special personalities that included flash and fun, irony and grittiness, humor and horror. In photography, Liberman found something for everyone, and he sold it to the public, in the process helping to turn Condé Nast into the Newhouse-owned empire it is today. If, to Liberman's own mind, photography was not an art form, he nevertheless made the rest of the world look at it in different lights, to assess its roles and to debate whether it does, after all, belong in the pantheon of things visual. Liberman's justification for this was that he did not view photography as an art form. But he believed in stirring things up, and subsequently hired William Klein, whose witty photographs of fashion models looking like independent street kids or fey sophisticates loosened up the world of fashion photography and paved the way for the acceptance of Helmut Newton and David Bailey in the 1960s.

While Liberman may not have believed in photography as an art form, a personal project

he began in 1948 used the camera to capture the work of the world's great artists. During the summers, Liberman, starting with Georges Braque, began photographing renowned artists and their studios. He sought out the studio of Cézanne, preserved as if its owner were still living, and when Penn saw Liberman's photographs of it, he urged his mentor to publish them in *Vogue*, where they appeared in 1952. After that initial visit, the project—which included visits with Picasso—belonged to the magazine, but Liberman continued to think of his work as only that of a lucky amateur. One of the ironies of his life story is that the man who did not regard photography as art should receive his first recognition as an artist with an exhibit of "The Artist in His Studio" project at the Museum of Modern Art in 1959. A year later, the photographs were published by Viking Press.

But Liberman had also been working on other projects; paintings of minimalist circles, an obsession of his since 1949, were first shown in 1960. The success of "The Artist in His Studio" led to the exhibit, and the circle motif continued in Liberman's painting until 1964, when he began to experiment with freehand splashes and broad streaks of color.

But Liberman did not stop with photographs and paintings. A career in sculpture was his, too—he became one of the most successful public artists of his time with his mastery of large-scale works. Liberman even had the distinction of seeing one of his works, *Adam*, ordered removed by the Nixon White House. (Inside sources pinned the request on H.R. Haldeman.) The work had been on long-term loan to the Corcoran Gallery of Art and visible from the White House when the National Parks Service carted it off. It was later rescued by an art center in New York state.

Several examples of Liberman's sculpture and painting are presented in the book, which is illustrated with eighty-five photographs ranging from family snapshots to portraits of the artist (one is by Penn) and some of Liberman's own photographs, including



Irving Penn, *Tatiana*

examples from *The Artist in His Studio*. There is also a photograph of Tatiana in a striking pose during their early years together. In a way these photographs, in their fascinating variety, are a metaphor for the life of Liberman, documenting, as he might put it himself, the story of this twentieth-century Renaissance man.

Holly Hildebrand, a former newspaper photo editor, is a journalist, playwright and poet.

### FOOTNOTES

1. When Avedon came over to *Vogue*, his secretive working relationship with Diana Vreeland caused problems.

2. The photograph shows the model in profile, elbow on the table holding a pearl necklace to her lips while staring moodily past a man.



BARBARA, PREGNANT: DORCHESTER, MASSACHUSETTS

## Where the Boys Are

*Stranger Than Fiction* by Jim Stone  
Syracuse, New York. Light Work, 1993.  
\$25.00, unpaginated

Daniel P. Younger

With its newsprint dust jacket and cut-and-paste title, *Stranger Than Fiction* by Jim Stone resembles a personal scrapbook, a thumbprint of the photographer's predilections. He has created a kind of artist's book; interspersing photographs with pages of newsprint recounting peculiar talltales, most of the small-town variety. Stone's black-and-white Polaroid Type 55 and medium format photographs taken in the United States and Eastern Europe are carefully printed in duotone, one-to-a-page, including several fold-out pages that allow for multiple pairings of text and image.

Stone is a photographer—an inveterate collector of sorts—in search of offbeat individuals who emerge as heroes of individuality within their own cultural microcosms. He takes as his subject matter those who run against the pack, who identify themselves proudly by their passions—their curious pastimes, avocations, possessions and domiciles. Recording his subjects and their material traces in the world with interest and compassion, they become not a gallery of oddities, but possessors of a sort of eccentric frontier spirit.

With something of the alternately whimsical and bizarre in many of Stone's images, he has sought to construct a counterpart in words to his pictures. He couples his avid act of collecting as a photographer with an apparent interest in tabloid-like reportage recounting unusual and/or violent human behavior. *Stranger Than Fiction* weaves together photographs and odd narratives that include acts or incidents such as: indecent exposure, the explosion of

a menu sign in the drive-through lane of a fast food chain, the severing of a penis (not John Wayne Bobbitt's!), submarine sandwiches found stuffed with marijuana, the microwaving of animals, a French accent obtained inexplicably as a result of an auto accident, and a bank teller held up for a mere lollipop by a boy. While most of the tales selected as examples thus far might be categorized as unusual, ribald, cruel, or criminal, the most consistent strain in the newspaper clippings that Stone collages are incidents even more socially repugnant and destructive, relating to gun

use, accidental and intentional homicide, and suicide. Such incidents include: a teacher who fatally crushed the head of a student in a school gate for tardiness, a son who shot and killed his father (a policeman) as a result of being punished for bad grades, a high school student charged in the hacking and shooting death of his mother who was nevertheless inducted into his community's Youth Hall of Fame.

Although murder and manslaughter may be somewhat more concentrated in the initial newsprint pages of the book, I didn't detect a deliberate scheme in the author's sequence of the varying genres of tall tales. Nor (with the exception of some obvious alliances between text and photographs) does a necessary overall pattern emerge in the relation between text and image. With this in mind—barring any unyielding subtextual codes and possible myopia on my part—I would hazard a few initial conclusions about Stone's act of commingling text and photographs. He proffers few clues but the book's title and the 1974 statement by Garry Winogrand prefacing the book: "There is nothing as mysterious as a fact clearly described." With the book, based then, upon the maxim "truth is stranger than fiction," and Winogrand's truism about the photographic medium, one could more than quibble with the implication that photo-



STEAM TRACTOR AND OWNER: CANANDAIGUA, NEW YORK

graphs "clearly describe" anything, or that they, or newspapers, are synonymous with truth.

Stone, who grapples with cultural indices (again, classified under the rubric, "stranger than fiction"), molds them into yet another constellation of "truth" perhaps no less strange or idiosyncratic—but certainly different—than its constituent parts. Beyond the exotic face value of the photographs and news stories themselves, we (and the author) unavoidably confer additional or other meaning upon their organization. One might query

the subjectivity—the selectivity—in this photographer's choice and sequence of subject matter and news stories. Stone's choices are not givens (simply "the world out there"), but embody bias and cultural significance, making them integral to the project and its meaning. *Stranger Than Fiction* begs for discursive analysis, especially a gendered one. If, as I've already suggested, the stories themselves don't at first suggest any particular patterns—save for some fascination with mishaps, cruelty, violence, and death—the photographs (in concert with the stories) seem to.

As presented in his book, Stone's world is overwhelmingly male. With the exception of a large audience of middle-aged men and women seated at a "Military Appreciation Day" ceremony serving as the primary subject of one photograph and a few pictures of girls, adult females—delineated as primary or prominent subjects—appear in only four pictures of thirty-three depicting human subjects. Roughly

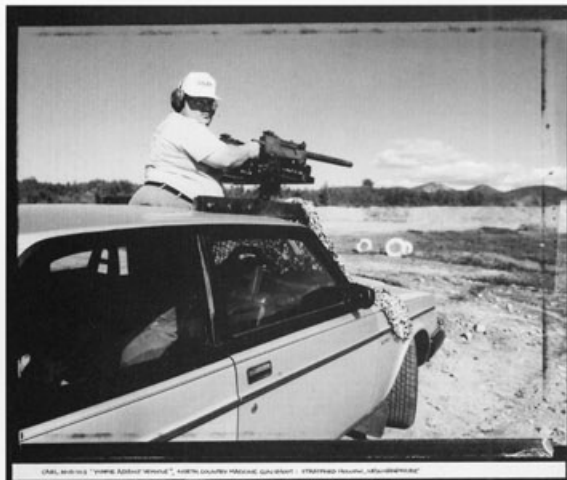
twenty pictures comprise only boys and/or men, and twenty-one portray men with varieties of possessions—four of them with guns. Only four images depict men and women together. As many as thirteen of the photographs picture men as lone agents. Of the eleven photographs in the book that do not depict people, eight either picture weapons or in some way reference armed conflict. A clear majority of the protagonists of the newspaper stories reproduced in *Stranger Than Fiction* are also male.

Against the backdrop of this statistically male universe, Stone foregrounds the book with an opening photograph of a young, pregnant woman, *Barbara, Pregnant: Dorchester, Massachusetts*. The subject, wearing a maternity dress, sits barefoot in a lawn chair facing the camera with her legs spread over the edge of a plastic children's pool (resembling a woman's uterus) filled with water. This fecund photograph is reminiscent of a snapshot genre in which men commonly picture their girlfriends or wives of childbearing age in or near bodies of water. This image obtains an unmistakable hierarchy and importance in the book, given the priority of its placement—in (inverse) relation to its distinct minority status. Much of the rest of the book (the news stories especially) seems to be a deliberate construction in sharp contradistinction to this iconic (I would argue, exalted) female image—a largely male society engaged in puerile, violent, or otherwise socially unacceptable behavior.

Directly opposite *Barbara Pregnant*, and on the following two pages, are highlighted newspaper stories describing a man wearing a diaper who publicly filled a length of garden hose with whipped cream and a couple who attempted to trade in their fourteen-month-old son for a late model Corvette. Skipping to the middle section of the book, Stone assembles several newspaper items that together portray men as violent and/or powerless and misdirected: two elderly men shoot it out in old-West style but miss each other entirely; a right-wing Young Republican group is forced to cancel a turkey

shoot in which they planned to use a photo of Bill Clinton as a target; and two men with a shotgun force their way into their home of a couple and throw a snake on top of the woman. These stories are followed by a portrait of a young soldier—Private Tokarski, drunk and AWOL—sitting idly in front of a statue of Lenin in Poland. Finally (keeping in mind the opening photograph—*Barbara, Pregnant*—and its symbolic significance and force), in the next-to-last image in the book, a group of Pakistani men surround a father solemnly holding the corpse of his daughter who was killed when their mud house collapsed.

Not inappropriately, Stone closes the book with a lyric excerpt from a classic by the 1960s band, The Animals: "Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood." The complex meanings and associations issuing from *Stranger Than Fiction* are multifarious, both within and beyond the ken of the author. If Stone's book posits a frequently dangerous, male-dominated world, its gun-wielding purveyors of domestic and global violence suffer social paralysis and lack authority, power, and will. The book's narratives suggest, among other things, themes such as male infantilization and social-sexual dysfunction, conceit for the felicity and responsibility of home and child-rearing, and (not the least) an overriding



OH, LORD: "OH LORD, PLEASE DON'T LET ME BE MISUNDERSTOOD," THE ANIMALS

passion for popular male symbols of instrumentality—cars and guns. Keeping these conclusions and my earlier statistical analysis of gender in mind, I would argue that *Stranger Than Fiction* suggests, an acute bifurcation of the sexes, one that is well-documented in popular culture. The at once pronounced hierarchy and isolation of the image, *Barbara Pregnant*, seems founded on the essentialist and long-outmoded construction of women as biologically different—the familiar biology-as-destiny argument. Women assume such position *only* in relation to their sexual and instrumental separation from men. In *Stranger Than Fiction*, Jim Stone constructs a fragile, foreboding world bound by both truth and fiction. His contribution seems as much as anything, finally, a desperate plea that we might countenance the unsettling particulars of an isolated and unstable male culture, unwilling and unable to integrate itself fully into society.



## Lifting Albania's Darkness

Albania Opens the Door: Life after Hoxha by Martha Grenon. Pro-Jex Gallery, Austin, TX. March 5-30, 1994

Karen E. Lillis

When I was a student at Pratt Institute, photographer Phil Perkis told my class, "There's no place that photography hasn't been. Photography has gone from the far reaches of the globe to the inside of the human body. There is nothing new to be shown in the sense that this should not be a prime motivation for tackling a photographic subject."

I recalled these words as I took in Martha Grenon's exhibition and I mentally made an exception to his wisdom. For while he may be correct in a stricter sense, Grenon also reminds us of the vital role of the photographer to inform her public in the face of ever-changing world politics. Albania must indeed have been photographed before, but only recently as a new democratic state freed from its twenty-three year atheist government.

Grenon shot the first of these photographs in 1992. The remainder were taken during a



Martha Grenon, *Charging Sheep, Gjirokastër, Albania, 1993*



Martha Grenon, *Illegal Aliens Being Returned to Albania from Corfu, Greece, 1992*

longer stay in Albania in the fall of 1993. The images exhibited cover much ground, reflecting both her actual travels across the land and the range of issues approached. She shows us a boy standing next to a Christian shrine in Shen Vasi; a *Gypsy Vendor* in Fushe Kruja displaying her wares; *Soldiers at Port* in Sarandë; a *Martyr's Cemetery* in Tirana (Albania's capitol) for martyrs of World War II; fragments of an ancient city in *Apollonia*; and three *Illegal Aliens being Shipped Back to Albania from Corfu, Greece*. The variety of the subjects succeeded without sacrificing the series' unity. Each photograph offered a chance to learn more about this long-isolated nation. Grenon interspersed informational captions throughout the show. Hoxha is Enver Hoxha, the leader who began inciting Albanians with his violently anti-religious platform in 1964, and whose atheist regime began in 1967. His death in 1985 was not the end of the regime, as a power struggle ensued. Today no public likenesses of Hoxha remain, and all the existing red stars are now being removed from public places."

Just as Grenon took the opportunity to seek out and photograph this country which was closed to outsiders before 1991, the Albanians she encountered appeared equally eager to observe her—it is interesting to note

that so many of her human subjects returned her camera's gaze. As she poignantly captured human interaction—among political officials, families, school-age friends—in front of her camera, she often harnessed a significant energy between herself and her subjects. In *Charging Sheep, Gjirokastër*, three boys occupy a small but central space in the photograph. The very young boy on the left hides coyly behind his friend, who in turn looks and smiles at the photographer, giddy to be chosen by the camera. The boy to their right is several years older, and though he does not recognize the camera with his gaze, he poses roughly, leaning his arm against a nearby tree in pubescent bravado. In *Andreas and Aleks (Sarandë Hospital)*, two men, one with a bandaged hand, tenderly hold onto each other while gently smiling at the photographer. Grenon confirmed in an interview that her Albanian subjects were receptive to being photographed: "Many people begged me to take their picture—they would come over and pose in front of my camera."

The exhibition is far from a definitive study of the daily lives of Albanians, but it does not profess to be. What Grenon captured, and what Albania seemed to offer, was a wide-eyed curiosity from its citizens as it re-enters a globally-oriented world. Grenon was less interested in scrutinizing this country than discovering it. She was willing to let Albania approach her camera as she was eager to capture on film this newly-accessible nation. In one group of four photos—matted together—a group of Greek-Albanians is depicted after a demonstration for their rights as a struggling minority in a formerly communal economy which now disputes ownership of land. The police retaliated with violence, and in three of the photographs, individuals willingly bare their skin to show

their bruises. The openness of the people in these photographs could be an indication of the rapport she established with her subjects. But it also symbolized an essential aspect of the Albanian awakening—incorporating a people's curiosity toward an entire world that had been kept from them, a bewilderment at new-found freedom, and at times, a hint of remaining powerlessness despite new political developments. According to Grenon, "There were some people who did not want their picture taken—(this country) was coming out of a deep paranoia."



Martha Grenon, *Soldiers at Port, Sarandë, Albania, 1992*

Grenon's sensibilities as the self-consciously curious outsider bring an interesting angle to the often voyeuristic aspect of photography; as she let herself be watched by those she depicted, we wonder how these Albanian eyes will perceive the world as the country comes into global awareness.

Karen E. Lillis is a writer and photographer living in Austin, Texas.

## Exhibition Preview

### Songs of My People

*Songs of My People*, on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, August 28-November 20, 1994, is an exhibition of 150 photographs by 53 prominent African American photographers, including four Pulitzer Prize winners, that capture the experiences and diversity of African Americans and their contributions to American culture. Six works by Houston photographers Geary Broadnax and Morris Richardson are featured.

Photographer/filmmaker Gordon Parks will give a lecture on the exhibition on Thursday, August 25, at 7pm. Tickets are \$5. Geary Broadnax will give an artist's tour of the exhibition on Thursday, November 3, at 7pm. Call the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston at (713) 639-7300 for further information regarding these and other events related to the exhibition.

The exhibition was organized by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and developed for circulation by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. The Houston exhibition is curated by Anne Wilkes Tucker, Gus and Lyndall Wortham curator of photography at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.



Geary Broadnax, *Widow Allison Leland*



Keith Williams, *Black Cowboys, Longview, Texas, 1990*



Ron Ceasar, *Young Muslim Girl, 1990*



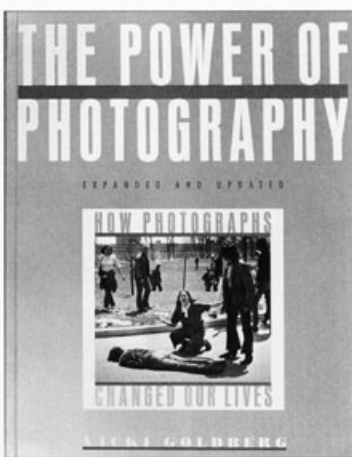
Mark Gail, *Sandra Organ, Houston, Texas*



Morris Richardson, *F.E. Warren Air Force Base, Myra Cross, Cheyenne, Wyoming*

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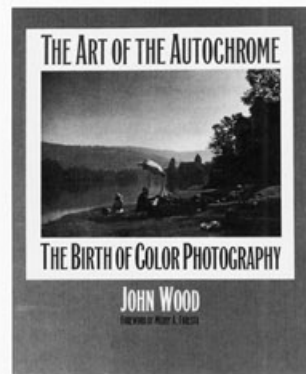
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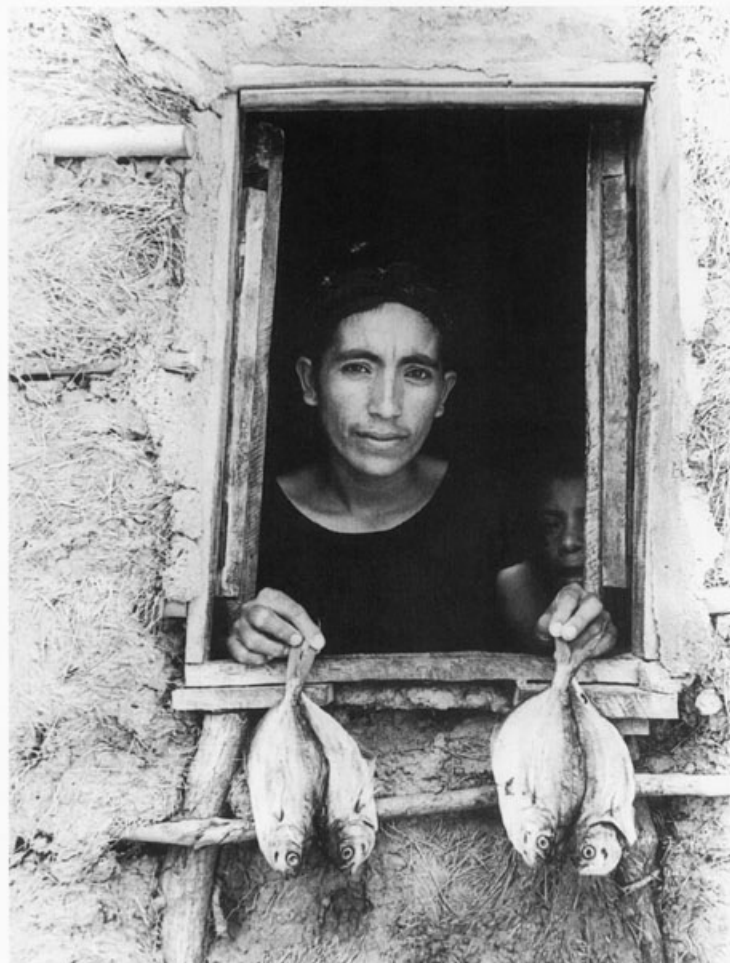
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 Compiled by Juan Garcia

**PARTING SHOTS**



Graciela Iturbide, *Four Little Fish*

**Graciela Iturbide, photographer**

**Fernando Castro**

Graciela Iturbide's name may be hard to pronounce for non-Spanish speakers, but it is familiar in the international world of photography. For the exhibit "Juchitán, town of women" at the Houston Community College System Central College from May 26-June 25, 1994 and sponsored by the college and the Mexican Ministry of Tourism and the Mexican Cultural Institute. Iturbide was awarded the 1988 Grand Prix of Le Mois de la Photo in Paris. Iturbide began this project about a Zapotec Indian village noted for its matriarchal social structure around 1979 and many of the images are featured in her 1989 book bearing the aforementioned title.

No stranger to Texas, in 1991, the Contemporary Arts Museum invited her to Houston for the opening of the Aperture exhibit "Contemporary Latin American Photographers." A year earlier she had photographed—together with Keith Carter, David Crossley, Owena Fogarty and Michael Mohun—the project *The River Pierce Sacrifice II* ritualistic happening. That collaborative work is an interesting point of reflection on commonalities of the Southern United States and Latin American photographic ideosyncracies.

Originally a filmmaker, Iturbide became a still photographer in 1970 and was a disciple and assistant to Manuel Alvarez Bravo for two years. Although her interest in photographing the indigenous peoples of Mexico is part of a long and rich tradition, Iturbide's work stands out for its elegance and mystery. One of her most memorable images, *Mujer ángel* (1980), illustrates the cover of the voluminous and controversial book *El Canto de la Realidad: fotografía latinoamericana 1860-1993* (1993). Iturbide herself has published more books than one can keep track of including: *Sueños de papel* (1985), *Los que viven en la arena* (1980), *Tabasco, una cultura de agua* (1985), *En el nombre del padre* (1993), *Graciela Iturbide* (1993).



Graciela Iturbide, *The Chat*

**PRODUCTION NOTES**

This issue of SPOT was produced on a Macintosh Si using Quark XPress. The photographs were laser scanned on a Howtek Drum Scanner into Adobe Photoshop and film pages were output from an Agfa Select Set 5000 with 150-line halftone screens. It was printed on 60# Productolith on a 40" Roland two-color sheetfed press.

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# SPE

# Regional Conference

## NOVEMBER 10-12, 1994

**PEDRO MEYER**

One of Mexico's premier contemporary photographers, Pedro Meyer, will give the Keynote Address on Thursday night. *Truths & Fictions: A Journey from Documentary to Digital Photography*, a traveling exhibition organized by the California Museum of Photography (UC/Riverside) and circulated by Pilar Perez and Associates, features both photographs and CD-ROM computer discs. It questions the essential truths and myths surrounding the documentary aesthetic, while also examining the transition of the photographic medium from its photochemical origins to electronic imaging. *Truths & Fictions* is scheduled to travel to HCP in Fall 1995. Pedro Meyer lives and works in Los Angeles, California.



### South Central Regional Conference of the Society for Photographic Education

HCP announces the 1994 South-Central Regional Conference of the Society for Photographic Education. The conference, organized by HCP, will be held November 10-12 coinciding with the opening weekend of FotoFest, the Fifth International Festival of Photography at the George R. Brown Convention Center. SPE Events will be scheduled so that participants can also view exhibitions, participate in Meeting Place, or attend the *Across Cultures* symposium, all sponsored by FOTOFEST. Information on the SPE Conference will be mailed to HCP and SPE members in September. For further information, contact HCP at (713) 529-4755.

**KEITH CARTER**

Presenters on Friday will include Keith Carter (Beaumont, TX). Carter has an extensive record of exhibitions, including *On Higher Ground: Photographs of the Mississippi River Delta*, currently being traveled by HCP. Texas Monthly Press published the first of three monographs of Carter's work, *From Uncertain to Blue*. Rice University Press published *The Blue Man*, and *Mojo*, and will issue *The Heaven of Animals* in Fall 1995.



# HOUSTON

**PICTURING ASIA AMERICA**

Saturday will feature a panel discussion on *Picturing Asia America: Communities, Culture, Difference*. The moderator will be Monica Chou (Irvine, CA), curator of the corresponding exhibition at HCP. Panelists include Goye Chan (Kailua, Hawaii), Margo Machida (Brooklyn, NY), and Osamu James Nakagawa (Houston).





# 1994

**Organized by Houston Center for Photography**

## FOTOFEST

FotoFest will sponsor the Fifth International Festival of Photography from November 10-30. The three major exhibitions at the George R. Brown Convention Center are *The Global Environment*, *American Voices: Contemporary Latino Photography in the United States and Fashion, Orthodox and Unorthodox*. Other FotoFest events include International Meeting Place Portfolio Reviews (Nov 10-20), Palm Beach Photographic Workshops (Nov 14-19) and Lectures and Symposia, including *Across Cultures: Latino Photography in the U.S.* (Nov 11-12). For information on FotoFest activities, call (713) 840-9711.

*New*

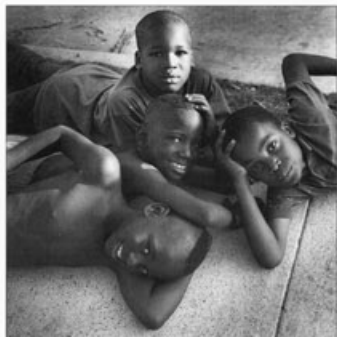
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# PRINT



Joan Myers, *San Juan de la Peña, Spain*, 1988,  
platinum-palladium print

## PROGRAM



Earlie Hudnall, Jr., *Wheels*, 1993,  
gelatin silver print



Sally Gall, *Colombe d'Or*, 1986,  
gelatin silver print



Gay Block, *Zofia Baniecka, Poland/USA*,  
Ektacolor print

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Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled*  
from the *Natural Wonder*, series, 1991, C print



Marion Post Wolcott, *Young Boy on Wagon, Hession Hills School*,  
negative c.1936, contemporary gelatin silver print

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