

# SPOT

HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY • WINTER/SPRING 2003 • \$5



JANICE RUBIN • DIGITAL ART AT FOTOFEST 2002 • RUSSIAN PICTORIALISM  
GEORGES ROUSSE • VANESSA BEECROFT • OSCAR MUNOZ • WRIGHT BAKER  
LESLIE FIELD • VIK MUNIZ • ELIOTT ERWITT • STEPHEN DIRADO

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April 19–June 1, 2003

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*Susan Dunkerley: Transmit* (Waco, TX), a three-dimensional installation  
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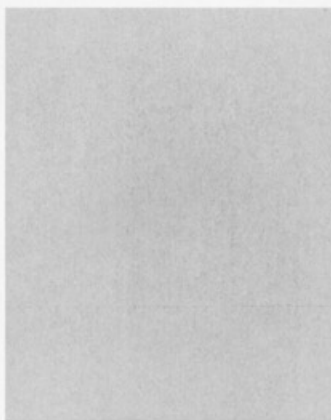
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## SPOT

WINTER/SPRING 2003

VOLUME XXI

NUMBER 1

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SPOT is published by Houston Center for Photography; subscriptions are \$10 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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Houston Center for Photography deepens the appreciation and understanding of the photographic arts and supports emerging and mid-career artists and their audiences.

SPOT is sponsored in part by grants from National Endowment for the Arts, Texas Commission on the Arts, and The City of Houston and TCA through the Cultural Arts Council of Houston and Harris County.

For details about membership or advertising, contact HCP.

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## Re-mediation: Moving towards the Virtual

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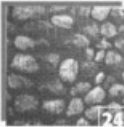
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Cover: Janice Rubin, Untitled, from The Mikvah Project. Original in color



# RE-MEDIATION: MOVING TOWARDS THE VIRTUAL



Oliver Wasow, *Untitled #236*, 1997, Computer-generated Cibachrome print

**KEN GONZALES-DAY**  
*THE BONE-GRASS BOY: THE SECRET BANKS OF THE CONEJOS RIVER*  
CHRISTIANE PAUL  
RE-MEDIA: NET ART PIECES  
VINE STREET STUDIOS  
HOUSTON, TEXAS  
MARCH 1–APRIL 1, 2002

COLLABORATIVE PROJECT 2002: A COLLABORATIVE INSTALLATION BY ARTISTS, ARCHITECTS, DESIGNERS AND CRITICS  
BLUMENTHAL SHEET METAL  
HOUSTON, TEXAS  
MARCH 1–APRIL 1, 2002

FRASER STABLES  
INTERFACES – ANDREAS MÜLLER-POHLE  
TOPEK BUILDING, HOUSTON, TEXAS  
MARCH 1–APRIL 1, 2002

JOHANNES BIRRINGER

When I reviewed digital art shown at FotoFest 2000 (*Breaking the Frame*, SPOT: Volume XIX, Number 1), I criticized the ill-informed curatorial approach to new genres that use digital technology for interactive installations,

real-time media and internet-based art. This year I came away with the impression that the directors of the International Month of Photography made a decision to give considerably more weight to emerging practices by contrasting its major presentations of classical photography with an unprecedented number of mixed media and Internet art installations. Although I missed the rainy opening night performance of the *Video-Truck*, which a group of international artists had conceived as a "moving" installation of videos cruising the downtown streets, I was astonished by the sheer magnitude of media works exhibited at a number of sites, most prominently at Vine Street Studios, Blumenthal Sheet Metal, Topek Building, DiverseWorks, Lawndale, CAM and Rice University. Even in commercial galleries, for example Sicardi Gallery's show of the *Narcisos* series by Oscar Muñoz, it is no longer unusual to see photographic artwork exhibited along with video and mixed media processes that manifest contemporary interests in the ephemerality or instability of the medium. Selec-

tively gathered from the large number of works I saw, a few responses to some of these contemporary issues follow below.

## 1. Entropy

One way to address the critical issue of temporality is to confront photography or the production of images as a system and look for the inevitable pressures towards deterioration, disposal and entropy within systems. Andreas Müller-Pohle *Entropia* is a haunting 12-minute black-and-white video projection of close-ups of an image-shredder. As we watch the dance of the crushed particles, the video loop comments ironically on the "transformation" of discarded photographic materiality.

Also at Topek Building, Müller-Pohle showed *Face Codes*, his recent series of video stills that combine portraits of Japanese people with the underlying digital code now imprinted at the bottom of the stills in Japanese characters. What is conceptually intriguing about this recombination is the reference to the old medium of photography or portraiture now linked, perhaps irreversibly, to the computer's role in coding data, processing information. The implication of course is that all media (daguerrotype, photographs, moving images, sound, graphics, text) can be digitized and become computable. If the photographic image is a surface representation still referring to something "real" in the world, new media objects composed of digital code are numerical representations whose discrete, quantified data is subject to innumerable algorithmic manipulations. Müller-Pohle's work suggests that the "face" as a surface value is imminently replaceable.

Another form of entropy can be found today in video artists' use of the loop. Derived perhaps from earlier experiments in closed-circuit video and

sound feedback (the conceptual media art of the 1970s), the current preference for short, infinitely looped QuickTime movies or digital video projections is not only a reflection of the seamless repetition in the technological structure of sampling, modulating, mixing and re-mixing that characterizes the seemingly endless flow of techno music. It also reflects hardware limitations of storage and real time processing, thus precipitating the particular temporal form. The loop is recursively self-reflexive and points to the semiotic properties of medium and content. Whereas DJs sample their tracks to generate a trance-like rhythmical repetition and a constant reconfiguration of the sound material, visual artists often use the loop form to manipulate the surface of the image or generate a meditative or obsessive-compulsive micro-cinema of hovering stasis that is the opposite of traditional narrative cinematic illusionism but also differs from the sequential, narrative perception we often have of the numerous prints that constitute a photographic exhibition as a whole. Ken Gonzales-Day's series, *The Bone-Grass Boy: The Secret Banks of the Conejos River*, performs a conceptual loop, standing the postmodern distrust of narrative illusionism on its head with its completely fabricated historical "frontier novel" as a digitally constructed illustrated book of events that could have taken place but never did, stills of virtual episodes from the Mexican-American War into which Gonzales-Day inscribes himself, with the subversive humor of camp, as both hero and heroine.

Oliver Wasow's series of Cibachrome prints, on the other hand, creates synthetic landscapes and fantastical architectures that are as patently unreal as they appear meticulously, beautifully composed and rendered (in Photoshop).



Claude Closky, *+1*, 2000, installation/projection



The artist is clearly interested in the garish virtuality of the scenes as "places that don't exist but appear as though they could," as he suggests in his notes on the exhibit. The digital craft of the surface makes the images echo the compositing techniques of advertising, while their content also resonates with Disneyland and science fiction. Wasow's prints speak the language of fake photorealism, commenting on the constructed immediacy and transparency that underlies a long history of realism and perspectival representation. But they also re-mediate the genres of collage and photomontage, thus multiplying the signs of mediation that characterize the contemporary "hypermedicacy" of interface design.<sup>1</sup>

eight-minute loop, thrives on such entropic ironies. The "Vault" piece is a commercial jingle planted into commercial space purporting to parody the logic of the commercial.

The issue of how spatial and temporal montage in loop form can challenge our perception is more interestingly addressed in another installation, Fraser Stables' two-channel DVD projection *Double Garage Scene* of a domestic scene between two men in a garage. The visual architectonic of the parallel loops is fascinating: the images compose two symmetrical halves of a complete picture that consists of a slow circular panning shot around the centrally located car in the garage. Spliced and recombined, the

of pinned-up digital ink jet prints of the same material. The video loops show appropriated porn, with the heavy breathing on the soundtrack intact but the sex partners voided from the scene by digital manipulation that turns the bodies into flat, two-dimensional white-outs. Some viewers may find the thwarted voyeurism of these abstracted scenes funny and entertaining, and the choice of content for the loops surely speaks to the fact that porn and video games dominate the market of this form. But apart from reducing the video-material to the mundane banality of its background wallpaper and furniture, "Buff" is devoid of any conceptual or political point of view.

with the kind of psychedelic energy that VJs Virus and Alec Empire generated in their video footage of DJ Scanner's live mix in an underground club. Unfortunately the club was in London, but the videos framed the entrance, and soon one found oneself surrounded by a curatorial effort to recreate the performance atmosphere of techno as a space for expenditure and the multiplicitous rhythms of all media. Curiously titled *Word*, Jones presented installations and interactive CD-ROMs by 17 artists ranging from DJ Spooky's music-video on virtual architecture to Jennifer Reeder's digital self-manipulation as eroticized android and Gabriel Cyr's equally blurry deconstruction of gay pornography, from Michael Galbinca's aggressive sampling of Hip-Hop lyrics and comics to Jon Cates's appropriation and transcoding of everyday media into low-resolution, nearly dysfunctional graphics.

Several works explored language and text/voice recognition systems, and *Word* also mixed and remixed samples from its own installations into a continuous video/sound projection thrown at a central screen. It thus created the hypermediated and intertextual pandemonium its curator had intended. But his idea of "everything speaking to and about everything" lacks a political analysis of the recombinant architecture that here only pretends to create a live rave or collective being-in-the-body. Rather, it creates a kind of video-arcade in which the continuous flow of sense perception is substituted by isolated consumption of individual stations that are not meaningfully interconnected into a distributed system nor truly interactive.



MANUAL (Hill/Bloom), *Big White Pine*, 2001, from the series "The Protracted Image." Projected computer-generated sequence.

In a separate room of Wasow's exhibition there were actually four computer screens displaying some of his manipulated nature landscapes as screen savers; titled *Still Moving*, Wasow presents them as ambient loops that might be looked at or perhaps just used as a pleasant way to illuminate a room. Either way, they are tautological and become redundantly obvious as digital commodities now, including the little joke in one of them showing a pastoral landscape with blank, white advertising billboards. In the Cibachrome print these blanks remain blank; in the screen saver you see a small-animated loop of a fiery explosion on one of them. Wasow's work is like his site-specific digital animation project *Somewhere Else* (with Nancy Dwyer) first installed in Las Vegas' Freemont Street Vault stretching over four city blocks. Here it is transplanted into a small corner room and running as an

film loops are projected onto two light-boxes in a dark room, and as soon as one enters one is hooked into the strange scene in which a young man in a leather jacket urges his buddy to leave, "let's go now. let's just go ... look at me." His pleading fades in and out of the soundtrack that is dominated by the other man who, seated behind the steering wheel, is blissfully singing an Italian aria. The recorded circumstances of this scene are so strange that it takes a while to comprehend the fictional content of this small movie as well as the spatial construction of its ever-moving circular perspective. Stables succeeds in captivating us with an unresolved narrative tangibly experienced as a slow vortex, the continuous rotation of the camera's point of view.

Nothing quite as sensual or complex was offered in Charles Cohen's *Buff*, an installation of three videos next to a wall

## 2. Hypermedicacy

Exploring the political dimension of today's visual culture, especially the process of collapse or convergence of the media into each other in the digital realm, would have been an unavoidable curatorial task, I think, as the new audiovisual regimes implicate mechanisms of power and knowledge. Art Jones (DiverseWorks) and Christiane Paul. *Re-Media: Net Art Pieces* brought together group shows that examined decentralized social space, the network, and mediated relationships in our technological reality for which the "virtual" is a euphemism. The environments created by these two shows could not have been more different, however. The DiverseWorks gallery was transformed into a rave-like jumble of sounds and sights, a heavy-metal showroom of video monitors and computer screens pulsating

## 3. Interactivity and Real-Time

Claude Closky's elegant white cube installation, *+1*, at Blumenthal Sheet Metal likes to poke irreverent fun at technological presumptions of interactivity, and his arithmetical joke might as well frame this last section. Addition, numeric succession and representation of digital code, interactive behavior, expectations of communication and frustration at the utter lack of content as all these aspects enter onto the equation of the user's experience in this room that houses a white table with a mouse and a computer desktop projection. If you click the small rectangle with *+1*, the number that's already visible in the center of the screen increases by one unit. When I left the room, I had moved 82110 to 82170 and was satisfied. Before entering *Re-Media* at Vine Street, I encountered MANUAL's astoundingly meditative double installation of *The*

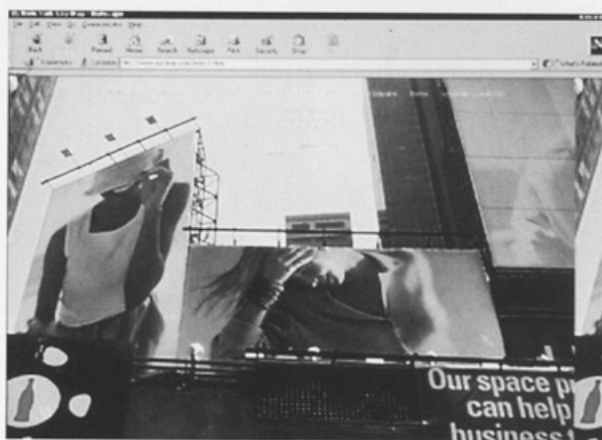


Andreas Müller-Pohle, *Entropia*, 1996, installation view of black-and-white and color video

Protracted Image and found myself spending several hours in front of one of the large-scale digital projections, *Big White Pine*. Ed Hill and Suzanne Bloom, well-known collaborators and explorers of the relations between nature, culture, and technology, here present a programmed still-frame digital animation system that evolves slowly (over nine hours daily) as a real-time sequenced performance, drawing from the large database of over 1,600 digital stills the artists took of this forest over a period of nine weeks. The experience of the extremely slowly, almost imperceptibly morphing images is riveting; the running timecode at the bottom heightens my awareness that this seemingly still image of the natural environment is subject to time as well as the incessant calculations of the computer program. It is a beautiful, disconcerting paradox, because of course the software with its real-time synthesis does not understand temporal change in nature at all. MANUAL offers a profound rumination on "time code" and the mortification of the natural landscape so often rendered fixed and idealized in aesthetic representation.

*Re-Media: Net Art Pieces* pulled me out of my trance: I enter into a quiet library-like room with narrow tables for the interactive workstations (with keyboards, flat screen monitors). I am alone, noticing that all the screens are also plugged into video projectors: the surrounding walls glow with the interface configurations previous visitors had left behind. So I begin the labor of learning the interactive navigation each internet piece requires, and write down the website addresses for each work so I can play with them at leisure from my home computer. Of course it is redundant

to install net art in an exhibition, since their function as on-line distributed "sites" makes them accessible at any time and from any computer with a network connection. Nevertheless, curator Christiane Paul has written an excellent contextualizing essay for the FotoFest catalogue, distinguishing art that uses digital technology as a tool (for the



Marketa Bankova, *NYC Map*, from the group show *Re-Media: Net Art Pieces*

production of more traditional art objects such as video or photography) from that which uses it as a medium with its inherent dynamic and interactive possibilities of real-time data transmission and distribution. Although providing the conditions for real-time on-line performance between remote sites was not within the scope of FotoFest, Paul wanted to demonstrate the ways in which a traditional exhibition can open up physical space to virtual space. She opted for one-to-one relationships in the interfaces (mouse/keyboard/screen), installing seven interactive net art pieces that use hypermedia and databases but are also committed to extending the notion of the photographic medium.

On the most mundane level, this extension happens in Lorie Novak's web site, *Collected Visions* ([www.cvisions.cat.nyu.edu/](http://www.cvisions.cat.nyu.edu/)), which invites the user to submit images to a growing archive of family photographs and create photo stories. A large database is used to let us ponder different modes of capturing the memory of family. In Heath Bunting and Olia Lialina's *Identity Swap Database* ([www.teleportacia.org/swap/](http://www.teleportacia.org/swap/)), you are invited to play with virtual identity exchanges and examine concepts of on-line "physical" identity. This interface is theoretically more interesting than in actuality; the search engine didn't work well and, alas, I didn't bring my digital photo. Jenny Marketou's *SmellBytes* ([www.smellbytes.banff.org](http://www.smellbytes.banff.org)) has a web cam installed, so here the interaction with the site's agent, *Chris.053*, is more promising, as it takes my photo to run it through a complex analysis, breaking down facial structures into bytes that are correlated to a determination of my smell in the Odor Lab. The visual process of the software's analysis is fascinating to watch on the screen/projection, but results are withheld (to be emailed later). The site, despite its humorous appeal, has political overtones

because it parodies a form of invasive data surveillance that may soon be the order of the day.

Mark Napier's *Bots* (<http://potatoland.org/cbots>), reminiscent of digital collage in the tradition of Exquisite Corpse, is a distressingly funny site allowing the user to create strange, cartoon-like corporate creatures out of body parts. Amy Alexander's *The Multicultural Recycler* (<http://recycler.plagiarist.org/>) also uses digital montage, but her sources are altogether different, culled from a number of live web cams in different locations around the world. You can select the cameras on these sites, while the software generates the composite image without you. Interactivity here stops at the door to a process

that might have allowed a different kind of investigation of these location shots and their visual relation to other place-images. The emphasis seems to be, again, on the fun part of being able to do this in real time, and leaving your "artwork" in a "Recycler Gallery." No further critical insight into the operations of such live-captured surveillance images is proffered, but it's implied that these data are cultural objects or ready-mades. The question of how we enter into virtual space and communicate with others is addressed more deeply in Tina LaPorta's "Remote Corp@REALities" ([http://208.17.151.64/exh\\_comart/laporta](http://208.17.151.64/exh_comart/laporta)). Offering a remix of web camera images of people connecting on-line to CU See Me sites, QuickTime movies of interviews with them, and extracts from on-line chat room conversations (text scroll), LaPorta lets me listen to some astonishing statements that might contribute to an ethnographic study of social behavior in virtual environments.

Finally, Marketa Bankova's *NYC Map* ([www.nycmap.com](http://www.nycmap.com)) is a highlight of sorts, impressing us with an extraordinary amount of urban images and impressions of New York City collected in a site that becomes a virtual map. By clicking the arrows on the map you can choose where to walk or spend the night out, and the real-time compositing of layered scenes, soundtracks, and small diary texts written by Bankova betrays a keen sense of the medium's hypertextual fluidity, informational scope and visual intensity. Bankova's site is the most challenging one to navigate and also foregrounds the hybrid nature of a medium that is a multisensory space, each image a link or journey to another story or acoustic experience. Interactive media and on-line art ought not to be reduced to mouse clicking and browsing or watching the program's reactions. The entire set up for this *Re-Media* exhibit was too studious and didactic, the chosen works largely tepid, lacking diversity and the more radical underground edge that net art still has in the global world of corporate-owned media. New technologies do not only remediate older media: a new shared consciousness of the multisensory, dynamic and unpredictable interconnectedness in interactive environments needs to be fostered, and FotoFest's curators may need to develop a greater sensibility for the plasticity of hypermedia.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999. pp. 31-44.

JOHANNES BIRINGER IS A CHOREOGRAPHER/MEDIA ARTIST AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF ALIENATION CO.





# Fluid Legacies

**THE MIKVAH PROJECT**  
GALVESTON ARTS CENTER  
IN CONJUNCTION WITH FOTOFEST 2002  
FEBRUARY 23–MARCH 31, 2002  
SUBSEQUENTLY TRAVELING TO VENUES  
IN SAN ANTONIO, SAN DIEGO, DENVER,  
LOS ANGELES, AND NEW YORK.

## CYNTHIA FREELAND

In *The Mikvah Project*, photographer Janice Rubin and writer Leah Lax have collaborated to depict women's experiences and interpretations of the Jewish ritual of women's immersion or mikvah. For observant Jewish women the mikvah ritual must occur exactly seven days after their menses have ceased to flow; it is also practiced by brides before a wedding.

Rubin and Lax traveled widely and conducted interviews to explore many women's views of this ancient ritual. For some women, the mikvah represents important ties to their heritage and they observe it with prayerful respect. Others have reinvented it as an individual ceremony of psychological healing

and spiritual renewal. The exhibit, accompanied by a beautifully designed catalog by Charles Wiese, is divided into two sections, an "immersion" series and a "portrait" series. The immersion prints are 16" x 24" pigmented giclee prints; they are black-and-white images, except for a few with digitally added color toning. The portraits, accompanied by text, are exhibited in 24" x 36" panels designed by Charles Wiese.

The portraits do not depict recognizable faces and figures but portray each person's unique situation and story. The images resonate with brief texts of quotes culled from the interviews. For the immersion series, Rubin worked with models to evoke the experience itself. Here there is no text, just women's bodies dappled with reflections in water, most taken in a specially built and approved tiled mikvah, a few done outdoors in a river. I will begin by discussing the immersion pictures, because these raise especially interesting issues.

An image of a woman in a bath, especially a mikvah, makes a daunting subject for many reasons. There is the technical challenge of shooting underwater (the petite Rubin had to have a friend hold her down while she was

shooting). Furthermore, mikvah is a ritual loaded with taboos. Referring both to menstruation and to sexuality within marriage, it is a very private affair and easily misunderstood. The subject might



be unsavory for today's liberal audiences, even those used to tackling issues of sexuality and blood in contemporary art. For feminists and/or non-Jewish viewers like myself, the picture of woman's nature behind the mikvah ritual appears outmoded and even repellent, suggesting that women's natural processes make

them "unclean," as the relevant passages in Leviticus are usually translated. Ancient Jewish law regulated behavior in relation to a multitude of phenomena of bodily emissions and discharges. The regulations were (and still are, in certain Orthodox communities today) interpreted as strictly prohibiting not just intercourse but all physical contact during menstruation and seven days afterward: passing dishes, touching hands, sleeping in the same bed. Thus the mikvah ritual seems to reflect sexist and patriarchal values — hardly something for modern women to explore and celebrate!

However, Rubin and Lax explain that they became fascinated with revisiting this obscured part of their heritage so as to improve their own understanding and clarify it for others. They found in mikvah a way both of reclaiming a tradition and connecting with other women. Through one-on-one discussions they gradually uncovered a kind of grass-roots movement among Jewish women, including some Orthodox women, feminists, single and divorced women, battered and abused women, lesbians, all attempting to forge a respectful revision of this ancient ritual. Instead of interpreting the relevant term ("tameh") from Leviticus as signifying that women on their periods are "unclean," Rubin argues in her artist's statement that it can indicate a time when one is "spiritually vulnerable" — something worth periodic acknowledgment. This brings me to the deepest difficulty of such material, the challenge of using either photographs or writings to convey

something as elusive as a spiritual experience. Again, while modern viewers are comfortable with many images of sex in art, when we encounter religion it is more common for artists to be taking potshots rather than celebrating or affirming it. The focus here on spirituality combined with the subject matter of





particularly true of one image shot from above that shows a woman emerging amid bright ripples. Some of the best images capitalize on the unusual lighting effects created by water. One shows a woman radiating waves of light off the top of her head (which is rather startlingly shaved). The reflected light in these pictures connotes a divine presence, or at least a more-than-material one. A few other images are less effective because they are either too literal or slightly *clichéd*; the former is true of some renderings of the physical interior of the mikvah, the latter of a close-up of hands trailing through bubbles of water.

Given that the immersion series was done with models simulating the ritual and not with actual participants, I am tempted to wish that Rubin had been more daring in her depictions of nudity. After all, naked women do typically have female body parts in all the usual places, and it becomes noticeable and even distracting that one is not seeing those parts here. This choice may reflect a too rigid self-imposed editing restriction. When breasts and genitalia are deleted, I worry that women's reproductive parts are still somehow taboo. To be sure, it would be a challenge to include full nudity — remember my point about all those Susannah paintings—and to do so would have made the material problematic for some of the anticipated exhibition venues. But the photographs could venture more to explore the eroticism that some interviewees referred to in speaking of the mikvah experience. As these women expose their naked physical selves before God, they are also prepar-

menstruation might make some viewers squirm.

They need not worry, however, because the work itself is delicate and subtle. One clear aim of the immersion series is to 'subjectify' the female body in the context of a private and intimate experience. I found this better done in some of the photographs than others. To depict a woman bathing or reborn in water has been a passion of artists for centuries. Everyone has seen paintings of Susannah and the Elders or Aphrodite emerging from the waves. A woman being immersed in water and emerging fresh is an ancient theme in art that has its own tradition — one these photos work against, which is to their credit. Historically, male artists injected a strong erotic element into such scenes that is problematic for its voyeurism and the way it objectifies women's bodies. For example, in the Susannah paintings by Rembrandt, Van Dyck, Tintoretto, Ludovico Carracci, Guercino and many others, we see a beautiful naked maiden exposed before spying old lechers. Though they gaze at her from the side or back of the frame, the woman's body is turned front and center, toward us, the viewers. This scene stems from a story in the Biblical apocrypha (Susannah 15-24) of a modest and chaste married woman spied upon by lustful neighbors. After rejecting their advances, Susannah was put on trial for adultery when they retaliated with false accusations; she was saved by the young prophet Daniel. The Susannah theme was undoubtedly popular because it gave male painters the chance to show off a tasty female nude while at the same time assuming a

moralistic stance that condemned lustful gazing.

Going against this weighty art-historical tradition, Rubin has sought to show naked women in a way that blocks voyeurism and inspires respect. Religious restrictions and respect for modesty led the artist not to include any shots showing women's breasts or genitals. These women turn away from us with eyes closed; resisting a relation to the watcher, they interact only with their own reflections on the water surface above. Although we are observers at their intimate moments of immersing, we are not spying like the lewd elders upon Susannah. In some images we witness

moments of beauty and grace. One large side view of a woman with gently relaxed limbs recalls familiar images of fetuses floating silently in the womb. The tinting here that shades from ultramarine in the depths of water to sepia from a glowing light above is unusual and effective. I like several images that show a woman in an indeterminate spatial position, apparently resting her feet against the side of the mikvah, hair adrift. With her body oriented along the horizontal, or even tilted upside-down, this woman is at home in her weightless, immaculate environment. Several photographs convey vibrant energy and dynamism as the woman dives or erupts from the water — this is



ing to resume the intimacy of sexual relations after a period of enforced separation that has intensified desire. Historically, much spiritual experience has been tinged with erotic intensity (think of Bernini's famous sculpture of the mystical ecstasies of St. Teresa). Because the women's awareness of their bodies in mikvah includes the feeling of being specially potent, the images could strive to depict the state that French feminists have called *jouissance*, a woman's joyous pleasure in her own physicality. It might seem offensive to call an experience associated with reverence and prayer "erotic," but Rubin and Lax emphasize that Judaism does not assume the standard Christian dualism of soul and body. Instead, it revels in the spirituality of everyday physical activities, including marital intercourse as well the eating of the Seder meal.

Perhaps more evidently than the



*knew that if either of us told anyone, we'd be sent to Siberia.*

The text from interviews has been culled here to a haiku-like brevity, both poignant and matter-of-fact, effectively capturing spoken rhythms to reveal a diversity of women's experiences. We see,

*was an emotional piece that I just couldn't let go of. I thought mikvah could create a way to help me bridge this difficult period. Mikvah immersion left me feeling washed free of this overlay of guilt and "what if." From that night I could look forward instead of backward.*

Another eloquent shot of a woman doing her toenails describes her surprisingly complex self-scrutiny as she seeks to inventory the moral acts and omissions of each bodily part since her last immersion:

*And my eyes (and I might be removing my makeup), what did I see in people? What did I fail to see? And my feet (and I'd be doing a pedicure), where have my feet been? What did they run to do? It's a sort of private Yom Kippur.*

The Mikvah Project is definitely "serious issue" photography with a "theme" attached. Because many of the women fit into an agenda of celebrating this unique ritual, the work runs the risk of being annoyingly affirming. And some of the photos edge toward sentimentality (particularly ones



immersion series, the portraits convey a reconceptualization of the mikvah ritual that clearly rejects the view that menstruation and sexuality in general "pollute" a woman. Some of the women quoted here speak as if the mikvah enables them to feel God's presence within themselves — a feeling that extends to the men around them, as when one husband commented to his wife upon her return from mikvah "you are so, so holy." The deep significance of retaining tradition is especially moving in cases where older women recount their struggles to observe the ritual despite fierce state persecution:

*Later, the Soviets did close the Leningrad mikvah, but I found an old man with a secret mikvah he'd dug under his kitchen floor. It was winter, and the mikvah was completely dark, with icy, wooden steps and freezing water. Immersing in that was the hardest thing I've ever done, and we both*

for example, the image of a woman outdoors in sunshine and breezes, holding a prayer shawl, conveying exhilaration as she tells how the mikvah helped her realize she was now free after the end of a marriage:

*We had a Jewish divorce, but there*



featuring women with children or infants). But the sweetness and seriousness of some image-text pairs is more than balanced out by the buoyancy and humor of some other images, like the photo of a 76-year-old woman excited about the mikvah party before her wedding. In Rubin's deliberately out-of-focus shot, this lady's eyes glow as she exuberantly squeezes her elderly husband's face (incidentally flashing a huge diamond ring in the foreground). It is also bracing to hear from women who seem more cynical, like the one who says, "At this point, my emotional connection to mikvah is that it's a chore. I look forward to menopause;" or another who bluntly states that although she hoped mikvah would confirm her as a new woman before marriage, it didn't. The mikvah attendant punctured her fantasies by commenting tartly, "You're not such a young bride, are you?"

In the end, a clear enticement to the pleasures of mikvah is strongly conveyed in both the images and text. One woman uses mikvah to heal from a sense of loss about infertility, another to celebrate psychic release from a history of abuse, a third to confirm her coming out as a lesbian to her family. Attracted by such creative and revisionist conceptions of mikvah, my students who heard the artists lecture at the University of Houston began to wonder whether they too could join in this ritual and gain its alleged benefits — even the non-Jewish women and some men. I didn't know enough to answer their question, but I wanted to tell them that mikvah should not be regarded as just an exotic variant on the "rejuvenating" day-spa experience. We live in troubled times: the art world has undergone vicious attacks, gender issues remain controversial in many societies, religion is blamed for wars and violence around the world, and sexuality is still commodified in advertisements for numerous products. Given all this, it is risky but commendable to tackle deep issues about religious heritage, sexuality, and spiritual commitment in the serious way that Leah Lax and Janice Rubin have done in this work.

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# The Superpositional Schemata of GEORGES ROUSSE

MEMORY OF SPACES AND HISTORY  
ALLEN'S LANDING,  
SUNSET COFFEE BUILDING  
HOUSTON, TEXAS  
MARCH 1–APRIL 1, 2002

BARBARA DAVIS GALLERY  
HOUSTON, TEXAS  
FEBRUARY 23–MARCH 23, 2002

## MALCOLM BRODERICK

Things and spaces exist in three dimensions. Photographs of things and spaces exist in two dimensions, but imply three dimensions through visual cues. So strong are these visual cues that we cannot easily see photographic images of real things as two dimensional without isolating fragments and depriving them of their thinginess. But structures and spaces can be manipulated, and cues subverted with the result that objects become ambiguous, lose their discrete identity. Georges Rousse's images do just that.

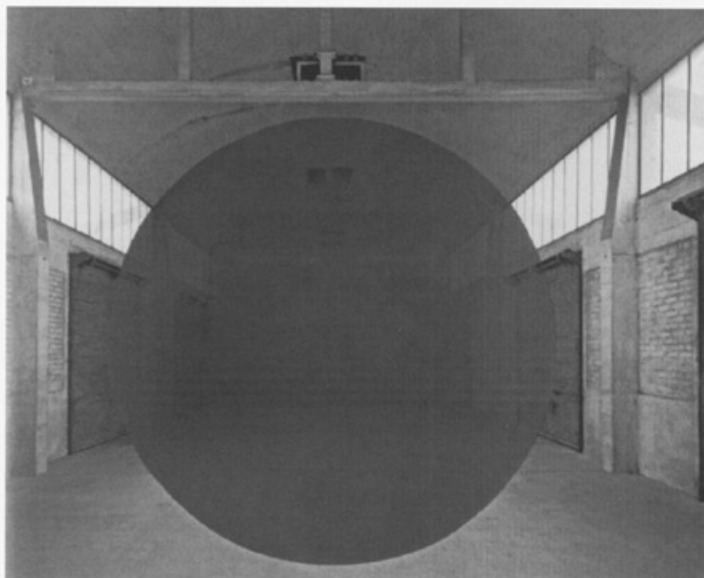
To accomplish this transformation of things and spaces, Rousse uses a manipulation I call the superposition of schemata. In Gombrich's terminology, "schemata" are systems of images or symbols that are somehow logically complete and identifiable. Geometrical figures, maps, words, blueprints, newspapers – these are schemata. Combinations of such schemata can be used for various poetic purposes. The surrealists have long used disparate elements to subvert a comfortable sense of reality and in the process to tap into the subconscious level where the disparate becomes coherent. Collagists, especially Kurt Schwitters, use the textural aspect of these schemata to assemble essentially abstract constructions while still retaining recognizable references. Rousse uses aspects of both approaches.

But first a dilemma. Rousse's works typically involve two creative stages with two independent, but related, products. First there is a construction of some sort with painted images or an image painted directly upon a preexisting architectural interior. And second is the photograph of the construction. The photograph becomes simultaneously a record of the construction and an independent work of art. The first is something like painting or sculpture and is part of that tradition. These structures are embedded in real spaces that we walk in, sampling the multiple views, perhaps even noting the smells. The photograph, on the other hand, is part of a very different tradition. In any case we must address the architectural sites and photographs somewhat

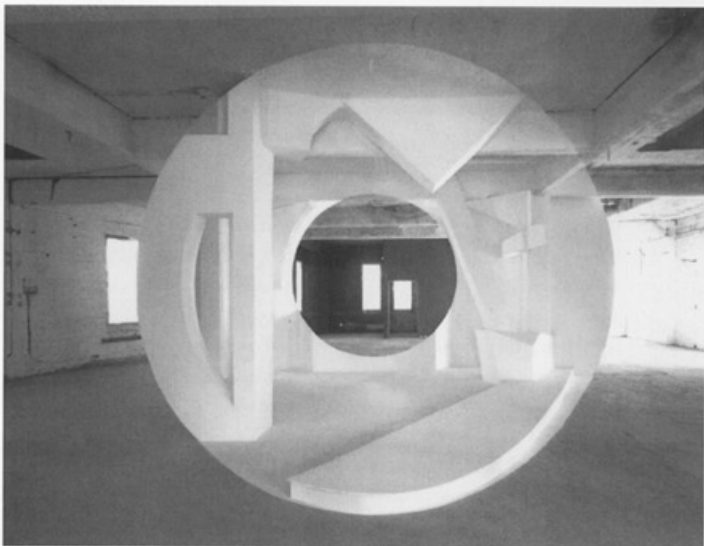
separately. Problems concerned with where aesthetic value resides in the photography of art in general (that is, in the depicted art object or in the photograph) seem not to apply here. Rousse's photographs are clearly independent works and are not simple or even complex representations of existing structures such as, for example, the architectural images of Frederick Evans or Alfred Stieglitz, artistic as these may be. The difference is, I think, that with Evans and Stieglitz the photography of architecture is used to evoke a mood presumably present in the architecture itself and is therefore in some sense representational in intent. In contrast Rousse's images tend to negate the space or at least attenuate its identity with superimposed meanings. The resultant amalgam expresses artistic ideas not present in the images or spaces themselves, but rather in their combination. This kind of image manipulation is more willful. The formal expression of this negating will and its aesthetic potency derives from a number of technical devices.

The most important device, covering the images in the installation at Allen's Landing and the photographs of the installations exhibited in the Barbara Davis Gallery, is the superposition of schemata. By superposition I mean the literal projection of one kind of image upon another with the result that schemata are somewhat foreign to the spaces they inhabit.

Let us consider first the installations at Allen's Landing, *Memory of Spaces and History*. Downstairs we find two paintings of classical architectural elevation drawings (i.e., façades without perspective) in black and white superimposed on the otherwise empty warehouse-like space. But what is seen depends upon where you view it. From a particular privileged site of viewing the image looks a seemingly black-and-white drawing in a rectilinear format. But as you move in the space, the image changes in startling ways. If you approach the base of the architectural drawing, the space diverges in an inverted perspective reminiscent of classical Chinese painting. If you walk at the sides, the straight edges are seen to be wildly bent and even physically interrupted as the image passes over steps and elevations. All this is a consequence of the literal projection of this image against the irregular background of the space. Viewed from the privileged site, our line of sight has a perspective with a fixed convergence point. As soon as we move, this fixed perspective is violated: our new



La Fleche, 1993



Memory of Spaces and History, 2002, at Allen's Landing, Houston, TX



Metz, 1994



perspective is inconsistent with the painted image.

Upstairs is a geometrical white construction that incorporates elements of floor, wall, ceiling and beams. Once again there is a privileged line of sight that produces the image of a centrally located "lifesaver." Through the hole of this donut the dark blue back wall can be seen as a contrasting element. If you walk to the sides, once again the image becomes irregular. In fact if you walk behind the sculptural forms you discover them to be unfinished, hollow structures. Nothing is as seems to be. But there is more. The images are articulated

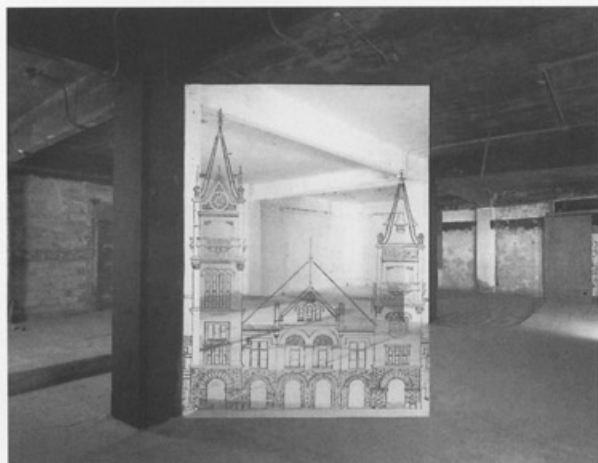
perfection? And why does the image distort and fall apart as we walk around?

Perusal of another image reveals many parallels between the architectural features of the space and features of the construction. Positive and negative spaces are repeated in great complexity in the shapes of the sculptural projections and the various construction beams. The whiteness of the construction fits tonally with the whites of the site. Even the distant windows seem to be part of the overall rhythm. But again, we ask ourselves what is that giant lifesaver doing in the middle of this empty space? The tension created between the

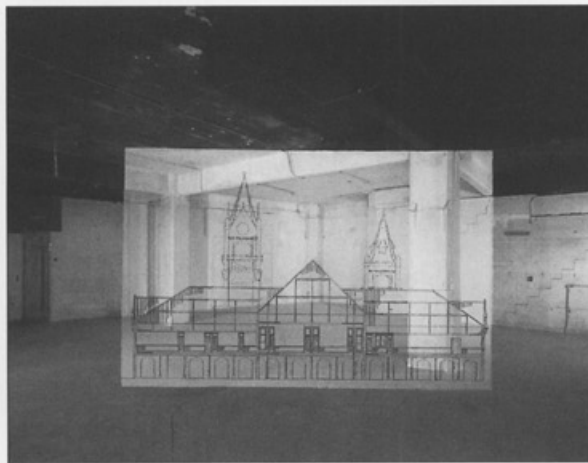
What about the photographs? Well, first of all they present the most ideal confrontation with the image. The geometrical form, most often a rectangle or circle, is shown clearly. The images tend to be strongly centralized and symmetrical in rather large formats. For example, most of the images at the Barbara Davis Gallery are about three to four feet. Moreover, the viewing distance is such that the images must be seen within a space of about ten feet. Often color is a striking element, the geometrical shape being in dramatic contrast to the space, as in the green circle of *Metz*, 1994, or the red circle of *La Fleche*, 1993.

ties. Both the spaces and the photographs seem to operate in an ideal realm of the mind for which human presence would be too much of an intrusion. While portraying the ideal embedded in messy, real spaces, these images also present a perceptual tug-of-war between two-dimensional and three-dimensional representation. It is through the combination of this perceptual tension with the tension resulting from the juxtaposition of the ideal and real, that poetry is ultimately produced.

Clearly, these works must operate on the cerebral cortex before they can tickle our hypothalami.



*Memory of Spaces and History*, 2002, at Allen's Landing, Houston, TX



*Memory of Spaces and History*, 2002, at Allen's Landing, Houston, TX

in their spaces. The steeples correspond to the rectangle defined by the two support pillars of the space. Similarly the roof of the "fore" building corresponds to the pillars. The point is that these images literally fit the spaces; the spaces actually become the framing units of the images. The spaces, but not the photographs are also subject to time of day and the vagaries of lighting. A passing cloud eclipses the sun streaming through the windows, resulting in a radical shift of feeling. Even the ambient atmospheric conditions become part of the piece. But aside from these environmental features, what is really crucial is the superposition of schemata.

A most important feature concerns the contrast of the images as schemata to their spaces. In virtually all of Rousse's works we are confronted with images that don't seem to belong. We ask ourselves what are those images doing displaced in such unlikely venues. The perfection of the two-dimensional architectural drawings of the downstairs contrasts strongly with the dinginess of the physical space. So we ask ourselves, what is classical schematic architecture doing in this abandoned space? Perhaps a memory? Perhaps a surprise of discovered beauty? Perhaps a yearning for

idealized images and their dilapidated, or at least contrasting spaces, is at the heart of these pieces. And indeed the placement of imagery and textures within alien surroundings produces surrealistic overtones. Perhaps we recall some forgotten world or imagine some Platonic geometrical ideal? The unobtrusive contrasts and large scale almost assault the viewer, force our attention. At the very least, they seem to elevate the meaning of the image much as rhyme elevates language.

Most of Rousse's images are embedded in abandoned, empty and even decaying spaces. As such, these images cannot be merely decorative or part of an ongoing economic ambience. No bank sculptures these. Such venues, by default, aestheticize their contained images. These spaces suggest the ravages of time, with all its attendant nihilistic poetry, acting on urban constructions. Indeed, many of the spaces are destined for destruction, making the art works themselves transitory, anti-museum-ish, much as Tibetan sand paintings that are swept away at their completion. And yet the constructions with their superimposed painted images are uplifting in their assertive and positive presentation of pure and ideal values.

And, of course, they are impeccably printed. The initial effect is imposing and confrontational in much the same way as the abstractions of Frank Stella or Kenneth Noland. It seems at first as though a colored lens or painted window was strategically positioned. Continued vigilance reveals the underlying space and its deformation by the painted image. And your mind, in an almost involuntary reflex, begins to unravel the contradictions of form and space, especially if you have visited the actual space. The resulting dialectical process produces a kind of emotional mystery, more than a game, more than merely clever. *Très bien*. Whereas the spaces tend to be transitory, the photographic images constitute an enduring record. Museum-ish. Not only do the photographic images represent a particular line of sight, but also a particular moment, all the more poignant for those that know its fate, since the space and the contained images may no longer exist.

The photographs, though perhaps not the spaces, tend to be devoid of people. And whereas the images tend to represent the icons of civilization: geometrical objects, architecture, elements of language, abstract designs, they do not often represent actual human activi-

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### Georges Rousse

Georges Rousse was born in Paris in 1947. An initial interest in medicine gave way to art and photography culminating in his first exhibition at the Paris Biennale in 1982. His association with the artists of the Figuration Libre led him to investigate the possibilities of painting in architectural spaces. Initial figurative work gradually gave way to more abstract conceptions. In these works he combined photography and painting. Starting in 1984 Rousse embarked on a project to make complex photographic images of buildings destined for destruction. He is the recipient of various awards including: the Villa Medici fellowship in New York in 1983, a Villa Medici fellowship in Rome from 1985-1987, Prix de Rome in 1986, top award from the International Center of Photography in New York in 1988, the Drawing Prize at Montrouge in 1989, the Romain Rolland Fellowship in Calcutta in 1993 and the Grand Prize of La Bibliothèque Nationale de France in 1993.



Aleksandr Grinberg, *Odaliska (Portrait of an Actress)*, 1923

## OUT OF RUSSIA HISTORIC PICTORIAL PHOTOGRAPHY

RUSSIAN PICTORIALISM  
WILLIAMS TOWER GALLERY  
FOTOFEST HEADQUARTERS  
VINE STREET STUDIOS, HOUSTON, TEXAS  
MARCH 1–APRIL 1, 2002

### MARY STARK LOVE

"The past is intrinsically no more or less interesting than the present. Rather, the deepest satisfaction comes from viewing the past through the eyes of the present and contemplating how they are related through time."

Enrico Coen

*Natural History*, May 2002

Much of what we learn about an object, an event or an era depends on how well it is documented. Digital images, for example, whether printed or viewed in electronic format, are being seen worldwide by a vast audience and are well documented for future viewers. Yet, at the beginning of the 21st century the struggle continues to gather the history, the story and evidence of the existence of many photographs and their makers from more than a century ago.

FotoFest's *Russian Pictorialism* show, the cornerstone of its classical photography exhibitions, introduced to the Unit-

ed States vintage works from the 1880s to the 1930s by 15 photographers. When they were made, these images were as fresh and as much the "new, new thing" as is digital photographic art today. The exhibition also includes work by a contemporary artist. Most Russians, however, know very little about this period of creative, artistic photography and it is



Sergey Lobovikov, *Sunset*, 1907–08

almost unknown outside Russia.

Pictorialism was a late 19th and early 20th century worldwide photographic style, which arrived in Russia in the late 1880s through European magazines and Russian photographers who traveled

abroad. Curators Evgeny Berezner and Irina Tchmyreva (of the State Center for Museums and Exhibitions of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation) write in the FotoFest catalog essay that in Russia the movement "blossomed like an amazing flower, quite dissimilar from its Western counterpart." Pictorialism took Russia by storm, bringing about a new way of seeing and recording in a vast land of diverse peoples. Its influence went beyond the scope of photography and it endured long after its popularity faded in other countries. Prior to World War I, it was the dominant trend in Russian photography.

The efforts of pictorialists "to create the perfect work of art æ beautiful and simple in form, harmonious and rich in content æ stimulated a perception of pictorial photography as a visual meta-language" write Berezner and Tchmyreva. For a time, it served as a unifying medium that crossed class, cultural, societal, generational and geographic lines, bringing people together and allowing them to express their aspirations.

Like their peers in other countries, Russian pictorialists shared the creative urge to produce a Work of Art. "But in Russia, the artists themselves and, to a very great extent, their public also saw pictorialism as an absolute value, representing a mode of ethical self-improvement, a way to define beauty and to plumb the depth of the image," according to the curators. Pictorialism also became a means of spiritual growth and fulfillment. For Russian photographers, pictorialism embodied the spirituality of creativity of Russian culture's "Silver Age," a brief 60-year period of qualified freedom between the abolition of serfdom and Stalin's regime.

"Pictorial works remained as unique prints not only because of the destruction of all traces of the Silver Age during the Soviet period, but also because the pictorialists intended to leave behind a well-cleaned studio and one (unique) photo for exhibition."

Members of the first generation of Russian pictorialists in the 1880–1890s came from various social levels. These artists were contemporaries of Chekov and Tolstoy, Kandinsky, Chagall, Lipshitz and Stravinsky. Some, like Aleksey Mazurin, from a wealthy Moscow merchant family, became serious photographers after travel in Europe. Others were self-taught like Sergey Lobovikov, the orphaned son of a rural sexton, who grew up in a foster family of merchants and photographers. Anatoly Trapagny,

whose family, originally from Italy, were bankers and ship owners, studied at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture while holding a day job as a photographer at the prestigious Doré studio. Trapagny was among the first in Russia to photograph nudes, paving the way for, among others, Aleksandr Grinberg.

Mazurin was the first photographer to be well known in European artistic centers. He exhibited in Amsterdam, Berlin, Vienna, Paris and Great Britain and was an honorary member of the French Photographic Society. His funding helped establish the Russian Photographic Society in Moscow in 1894. Recognition of Lobovikov's work beyond Russia æ he won a Bronze Medal for work shown in the Russian section of the World Trade Fair in Paris as was another major achievement. Lobovikov was famous for his artful, compassionate

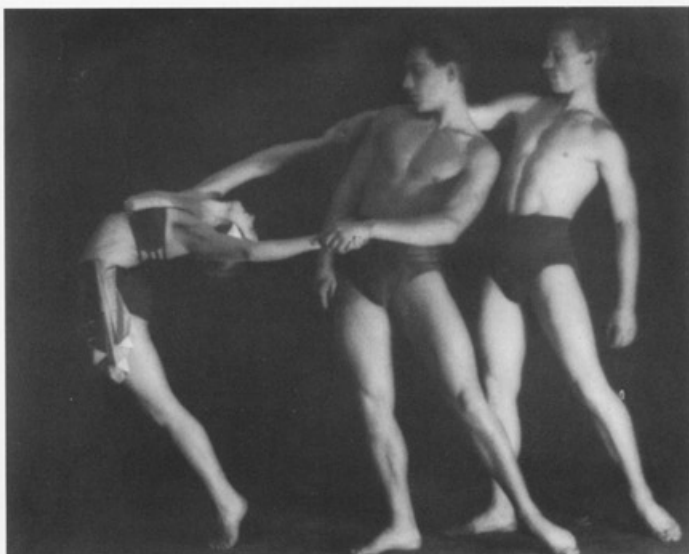


Nikolay Petrov, *The Portrait of E.D. Voronets-Konrad*, 1908

photographs of rural scenes and peasant children, which were printed using gum bichromate and bromoil techniques.

The next generation of pictorialists who began photographing on the eve of World War I expanded the boundaries of pictorialism and created a mass culture for their works. Among them were Nikolay Andreyev, who participated in 63 photo exhibitions in Russian and abroad and won numerous medals; Vasily Ulitin, co-founder of the All-Russian Society of Professional Photographers in 1915; Boris Eliseev and Aleksandr Grinberg.

The last group of pictorialists worked in the 1920s and included Leonid Shokin, who in less turbulent times might have been a splendid landscape photographer, and Sergey Ivanov-Alliluev, renowned for his landscapes and portraits.



Aleksandr Grinberg, *The Castillo Trio*, 1926–1928, silver gelatin toned bromide print

While it was the pictorialists who initially brought the art of revolutionary Russia to the world, the concept of what constituted Soviet art became increasingly rigid. The press began to refer to pictorialism as bourgeois, petty and harmful to new proletarian art. Nevertheless, creativity peaked in the mid-1920s and several leading pictorialists, including Grinberg, worked at Moscow's film studios as photographers and cameramen. By the late 1920s, pictorialist photographic societies were dissolved. The artists continued to meet informally for discussions on the future of photography until 1935, trying to adapt to the

new social and cultural reality and applying their skills where they could.

In the 1935 *Masters of Soviet Photography* exhibition, the work of some pictorialists were awarded certificates of merit, but this was the last occasion that photographs in this style were seen in Russia for more than 50 years. A review in the magazine *Soviet FOTO* acknowledged the "unquestioned mastery and high professional skills" of the pictorialists. What followed this hard-won acclamation was a virtual death sentence for Russian pictorial photography. While no names were mentioned, works were criticized for: "admiration for

pre-Revolutionary culture of the estates of the gentry and architecture of old Moscow," referring to photos of Eryomin, Klepikov, Svishchikov-Paola and Grinberg; "depiction of useless scenes of rural life in the period of socialist restructuring of agriculture," focusing on works by Andreyev, Ulitin and Shokin; and "nude models the working class has no need for" pointing at photos by Grinberg and Eryomin. Soon afterward, Grinberg was convicted of "propaganda of pornography" and Ulitin was tried for calumny of Society power. Both spent years of hard labor in exile.

Imagine, then, the challenge faced by Mikhail Golosovsky, a Russian optical engineer and photographer who searched out, collected and preserved many Russian pictorialist masterpieces at a time when the style was not only artistically unfashionable but out of favor politically. Golosovsky headed the well-known Moscow photo club "Krasnogorsk" where, in the 1970s, he came in contact with Russian pictorialist masters and became interested in their aesthetic ideas, their practice of "art for art's sake" and their depiction of the Russian countryside. He began acquiring works of those masters, buying an archive from a disinterested widow, or finding individual prints in out of the way places. Today, Golosovsky's private collection is at the center of the revival of Russian pictorialism.

The work of by photographers, Sergey Lobovikov (1870–1941) and Leonid Shokin (1896–1962) shown together at the Williams Tower Gallery, point out how differences of style existed between generations of photographers. Lobovikov æ of the first generation æ presents an intimate, tender view of pre-Revolutionary Russian life. His portrait of Akulina, the Sweet, captures the essence of a peasant beauty whose big, lovely smile is as enduring as the day it was photographed in 1940.

Shokin shows a vision more attuned to line and shape in the way workers and environment intertwines. In *Flax Strewing* (1940) gelatin silver-toned bromide print, a curved line of women in a field bend at the waist, gathering strands of flax that they lay to dry in shimmering rows that resemble pale waves lapping a shore. In his photograph, *The Meeting of the Collective Farm* (1931), a work-worn woman addresses the men who oversee her collective. As she raises her hands to plead her case, Shokin captures her frustration, anger, helplessness and grief. The gesture could serve as a metaphor for the decades-long ban of pictorialism and censure of its adherents.

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Nikolay Andreyev, *On the Way To A Hunt*, 1930



Vasily Ulitin, *Pines*, 1925

*Editor's Note: The exhibition Russian Pictorialism, by ROSIZO State Centre for Museums and Exhibitions of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation with FotoFest, presented works by 16 artists. It covered the history of pictorialism in Russia from the 1890s to the present day. Included are works from: the Kirov Regional Art Museum, Mikhail Golosovsky's large private collection in Krasnogorsk, near Moscow, the family collection of Sergey Andreyev, son of the pictorial photographer Nikolay Andreyev, from Pushchino; and works loaned by George Kolosov.*



THE ENDS OF PROCESS  
OSCAR MUÑOZ  
SICARDI GALLERY  
HOUSTON, TEXAS  
MARCH 2-20, 2002

FERNANDO R. CASTRO

In 1998 when Oscar Muñoz's work *Aliento* was part of the group exhibit *Amnesia* at the Bronx Museum of Art, it was translated as *Encouragement*. This translation was not altogether wrong, only partially: it took a secondary meaning as primary. The literal translation of "alien-to" is "breath" as in "mal aliento" meaning "bad breath" ("bad encouragement" is close to being an oxymoron). To translate it as "encouragement" is tantamount to translating 'aire' as "haughtiness" first and not just "air." Muñoz, who thrives on ambiguity, probably meant to name his work both "breath" and "encouragement"; to have chosen the more abstract sense of the word is to misunderstand Muñoz's *modus operandi* and hence his work.

*Aliento* (1998) is a series of works made of circular polished steel mirrors. The perfectly reflective surface of each mirror hides the image of a different victim of political violence or kidnapping. The concealment of the photographic image of the victim is due to the transparent greasy medium Muñoz used to print it on the mirror. As the viewer approaches the mirror, he/she sees his or her own specular image. In cases of political "disappearances," nobody is ever sure whether the vanished person has escaped, gone underground in order to avoid capture, been kidnapped or been killed. The victimizers often deny that the vanished person even existed. Whether victims reappear or not, at some point they become as invisible as the mug shots in Muñoz's *Aliento* mirrors. That is how Muñoz operates: he uses an unusual technique to produce a perceptual effect that leads to an abstract idea.

*Aliento* also deals with an issue that has concerned Muñoz for years, the narcissistic contemplation of self versus concern for others. When the face of the victim is not visible on the mirror, the viewer can contemplate himself or herself without impediment. But as the viewer gets close to the mirror, his or her breath fogs its surface. For as long as the fogging continues, the other's face is visible. As soon as the viewer ceases to give his/her 'breath' to the image (and here "encouragement" is germane), the face of the victim vanishes and the viewer's face reappears. Once the viewer distances himself or herself from the image of the

# THE PROCESSES OF (DE)COMPOSITION



Oscar Muñoz, *Narcissi*

other, the other becomes invisible again.

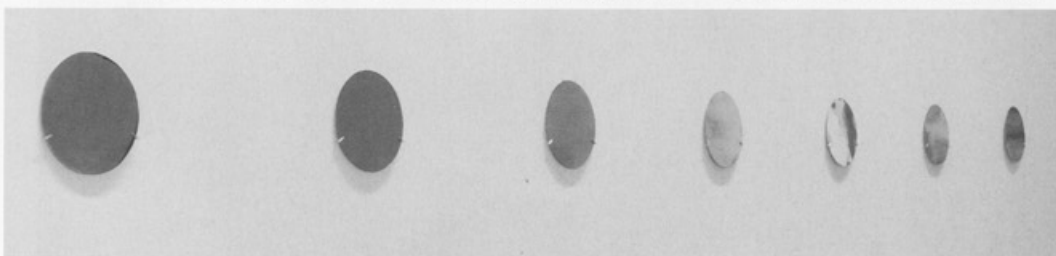
It would not be a digression from the main political message to point out that there is also some reflection here about how photographic images keep alive the memories of their subjects. In other words, their memory subsists not so much because there is an image of them but because somebody thinks about them. A mug shot of an unidentified person is nobody's memory. The title of Pedro Meyer's CD-ROM, *I Photograph to Remember*, about his parents' life, agony and demise makes precisely that point:

photographs are not memories themselves, only mnemonic aides.

Neither of Muñoz's self-portraits are meant to be autobiographical in the sense of depicting episodes from his life. His depictions of himself and others are usually no more than mug shots providing a minimal connection between image and referent. His self-portraits are usually explorations about narcissism and its implications for self and others. The original Greek myth of Narcissus — that we owe mainly to the Roman poet Ovid — is about a youth whose beauty

induced many maidens to fall desperately in love with him. One of these maidens was the nymph Echo, who had been punished by the goddess Hera to never speak except to repeat what was said by others.

Echo was able to follow Narcissus around but could not speak to him. However, once when Narcissus was in the woods he called for his friends thusly: "Is there anyone here?" Echo thought an opportunity had finally arrived to talk to him. "Here, here," she echoed. "Come" he called her. "Come, she repeated com-



Oscar Muñoz, *Aliento*, 1998



Oscar Muñoz, *Narcissi*

ing out of her hiding place to meet him with her arms outstretched. Narcissus shunned her in disgust saying, "I will die before I give you power over me." "I give you power over me," she repeated meekly but he was already gone. Shamed by this rejection, the beautiful Echo sought

over a pool to drink, he saw his own reflection and fell in love with it. "Now I know the pain others have felt loving me, for I burn with love for myself," he cried. "But how can I possess the beauty reflected in the water? I cannot part with it. Only death can free me from this

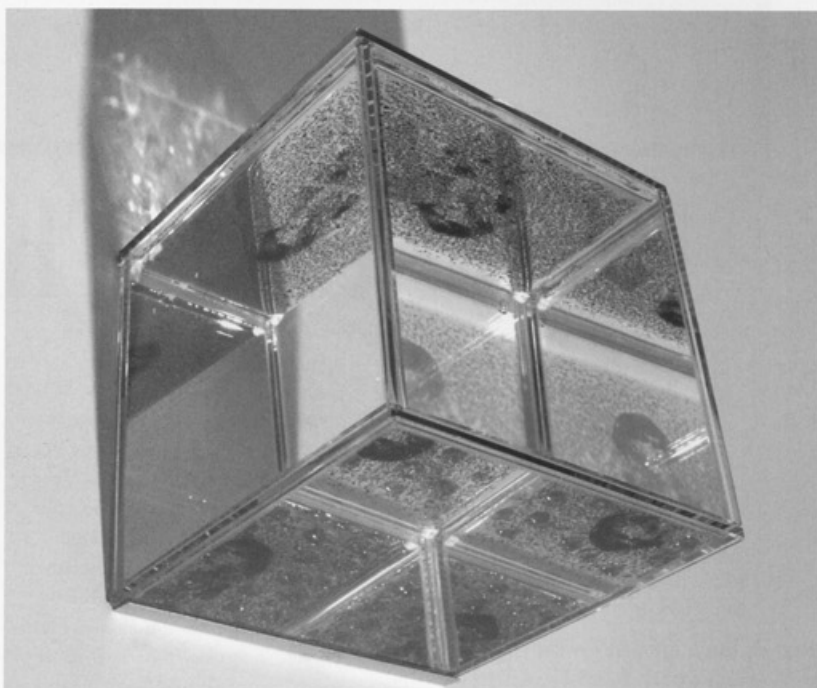
However, he does not continue onto the next step of silkscreen production but instead places the screen over the shallow tray holding water about an inch deep. Once the screen is as close to the liquid surface as possible, Muñoz sprinkles fine charcoal dust over the mesh

so that it goes through it only where it is not blocked by the image on the screen. Thus the charcoal dust "draws" the self-portrait on the surface of the water. The drawing floats on the water and as time, motion, and air movement ravage it, it becomes increasingly distorted. The image continues to change until the water slowly evaporates and the charcoal dust settles on the bottom of the tray where the image is fixed. Muñoz's process of image-making alludes to the biblical myth of creation found in Genesis 3:19-20, "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

for a work titled *Condensation Cube*. Haacke's cube, however, was larger and had very little water in it. The condensing water formed droplets that slowly dripped on each of the four inside faces of the cube "drawing" lines and other patterns on the glass. The droplets in Muñoz's *Lacrimarios* denote tears that stand between the viewer and the floating photographic charcoal image — as if the victim inside the cube were looking at the world outside through a curtain of tears, or as if the viewer outside were looking at the image inside through tears. A beam of light that shines from below the cube reflects the image on several of its faces and on the wall where the cube hangs. *Lacrimarios* is a series in memoriam of a specific victim: an art student who was killed by one of the many-armed groups in the Pacific coast of Colombia. It is a region with one of the highest indices of humidity and precipitation in the world. Thus the droplets also allude to the environment where this particular act of violence was committed.

Many of Muñoz's works are characterized by an extreme fragility and vulnerability. The viewers who fog the mirrors of *Aliento* with their breaths often end up spitting on them. The mirror cannot be simply wiped clean without affecting the image. *Narcissi* and *Lacrimarios* are fragile because with enough movement the floating image can be totally destroyed. But even this fragility of the works — so troubling for the collector — has a correlate in the interpretation of the work, for it denotes the tenuous relationships between viewers and victims, or between our image and us, between appearance and reality, or between art and reality. Muñoz programs his works to disintegrate, but curiously through that process of decomposition the work fulfills itself and becomes a more conceptual entity.

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Oscar Muñoz, *Lacrimarios*

solace in a cave and hid. Narcissus's cruelty was punished by Nemesis, goddess of righteous anger, who determined that "he who does not love others will love only himself." One day, as Narcissus bent

overpowering love." To no avail the nymphs who had loved him looked for his body to give him a proper burial, for he had turned into the lovely flower which has born his name ever since.

Muñoz's series *Narcissi* deliberately revisits this myth and so does *Aliento*; but while in the latter the reflective pool of water is a mirror, in the former it is the process of decomposition of the image he concocted.

Muñoz's *Narcissi* are a series of distorted self-portraits drawn on shallow Plexiglas trays. The original image of the self-portrait is photographic, but Muñoz, always attentive to alternative deliveries of photography, transfers it to the mesh of the silkscreen process.

Although all *Narcissi* are made from the same silkscreen, no *Narcissus* is similar to another. In fact, some *Narcissi* resemble faces other than Muñoz's more than they resemble him. The series points not only to the ephemeral nature of the object of narcissistic adulation but — as time makes us all alike — also to the futility of obsessive love for oneself. The beauty that once shone in the mirror fades and all that remains are its traces: "vanity of vanities, all is vanity." (Ecclesiastes 1:2-5).

In *Lacrimarios* (tear containers), Muñoz uses some of the same technical strategies as in the *Narcissi*; i.e., he uses a silkscreen mesh to draw an image in water, although in *Lacrimarios* the water is inside a glass cube filled almost to the top. The glass cube is sealed so that as time passes water condenses on the inside of the top glass forming tear-like droplets. The idea of water condensing inside a glass cube is not new. Hans Haacke built a similar cube circa 1964



Oscar Muñoz, *Aliento*, 1998

PONTI SISTER BY VANESSA BEECROFT  
LAWING GALLERY  
HOUSTON, TEXAS  
MARCH 9–APRIL 13, 2002

LAURA LARK

Her many works, her trademark living tableaux of scantily clad (or unclad) models, have been characterized as being “about” so many issues — from confrontation of the artistic gaze to the role of viewer and artist in classical and post-classical art making — but it is the politics of the group, the revenge of the object multiplied, that has become Vanessa Beecroft’s signature. Its power comes from an anomaly: works that take aim at fashion, consumerism, objectification and visual politics are simultaneously as classical as they are contemporary.

With a new video installation, *Ponti Sister*, Vanessa Beecroft escalates the critical volume with a drastic reduction in the number of subjects and dramatic attention to setting, giving the work an altogether different feel and edge. The two nearly identical works on DVD, projected simultaneously on both sides of a lone screen hanging from the ceiling, individually track the movements of the artist’s own sister and another equally statuesque model of African descent as each reclines and moves stiffly upon a designer couch. The viewer is only permitted to view one screen at a time; this enforced restriction underlines the beauty of the piece while setting the stage for its personal, and very political, ambitions.

With these dual projections, the artist adds a theatrical dimension to her legendary art of control over space and subject matter. *Ponti Sister* is set in a cavernous gallery with Classical architectural mouldings and features that have been painted from ceiling to floor with wide horizontal black and white stripes. In the simultaneously running projec-

tions, each model is positioned on a solitary couch, a minimally designed, black-and-white striped affair, fashioned by the legendary Gio Ponti. The spare quality of this piece of furniture makes it seem more like an ultra-trendy hospital gurney than anything anyone would want to lounge on for long, but that is just what each model does, each done up, Beecroft style, to match the decor. The white model, Beecroft’s sister, is painted, face to feet, in horizontal black stripes to coincide with those of the Ponti sofa. On the opposing screen, the ebony-skinned model is painted in white

**In Beecroft’s work it has always been hard to know whether we should be viewing women as goddesses or prisoners.**

stripes. From a distance — and there is a large one between the viewer and the model in the first half of these 50 minute projections — it is impossible to tell whether the models are wearing anything but their stripes.

In the first half of the projection, it is the character of the gallery and how the model is engulfed by her surroundings that leaves a lasting impression. The whitish-gray floors of this space have been polished to such a brilliance that the reflections of the woman, the couch and the stark black-and-white stripes from the wall are beautiful and mesmerizing. The model appears to be stranded on her raft-like couch amidst the glittering, fluid ripples. The women, instructed only to move a tiny bit at a time in changing from a sitting position to that of full recline, emphasize the quality that in this world time moves at a dreamily slow rate.

# Escalating The

This effect, as in any Vanessa Beecroft performance or video, is no accident. The structure filmed in the work is built in Italian “Fascist Architecture” style. This architectural trend, popular during the 1920s and 1930s and characterized by its grandiose Renaissance style, gained steam from Mussolini’s political strategy

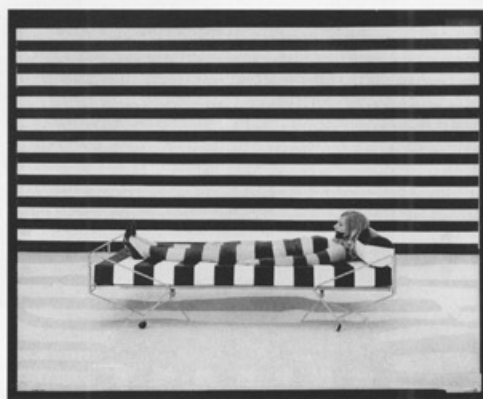
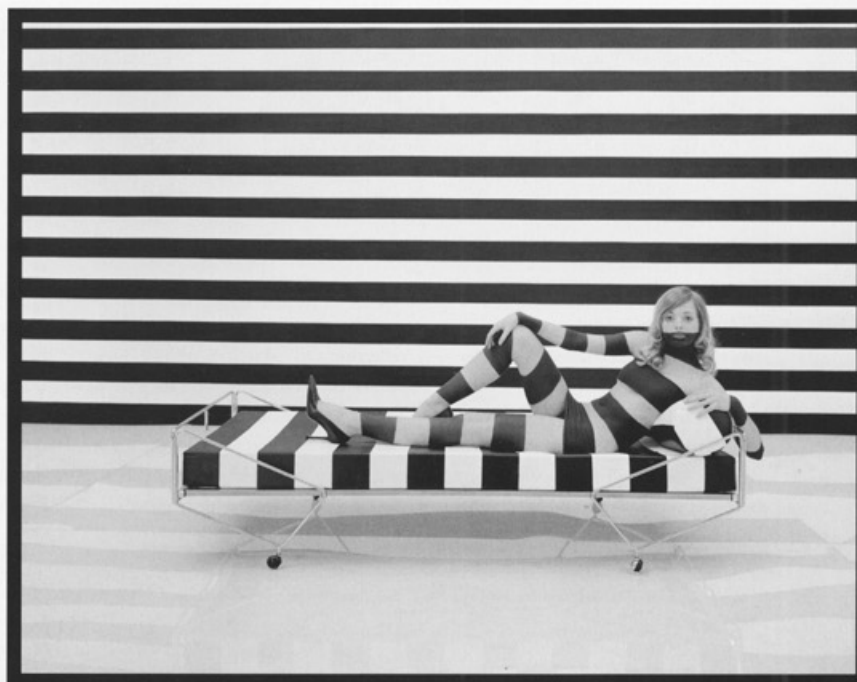
shadow of Leonardo is the basic challenge shared by fellow Milanese artists Beecroft and Ponti. Vanessa Beecroft’s solution to parrying the historical issue of the draftsman’s gaze, of course, has been to poke it in her audience’s and critics’ faces. This notion comes into full play in the second half of *Ponti Sister* when the artist brings the camera up close to focus on the model, couch and immediate striped background. The artist has mentioned that Antonio Canova’s rendering of Paolina Borghese, Napoleon Bonaparte’s sister, inspired this work. It is in this second half of the projection, too, that the hitherto little noticed differences between the two models comes to the fore.

From close range, each figure is intensely, powerfully individual. You are confronted by the projection of a lean, long-legged woman with straight, blonde-ish hair and enormous blue eyes. This is Beecroft’s sister. Remarkably

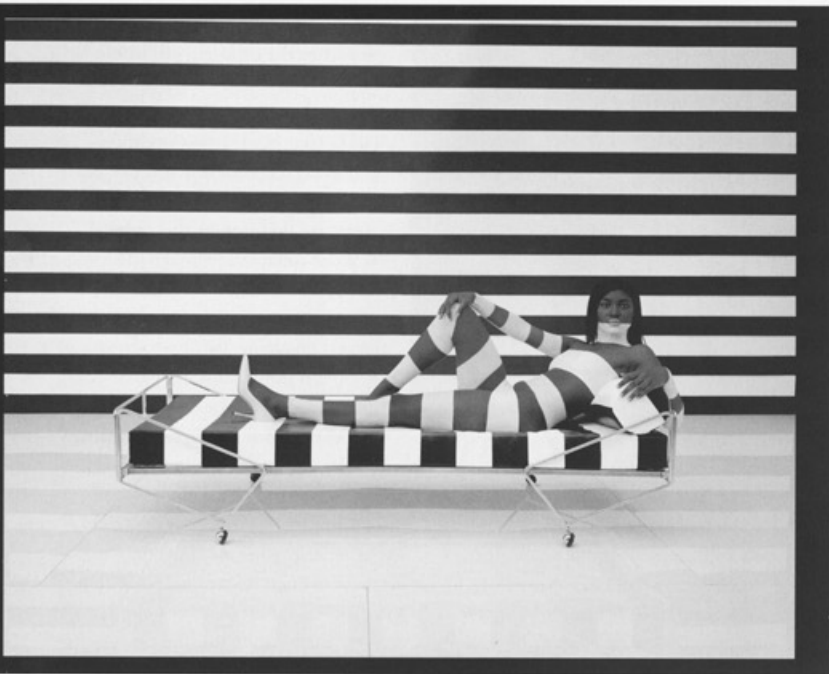
of solidifying Italian nationalism by recreating the grandeur of Rome.

Something altogether different is suggested by the Modern black-and-white stripes and the stylings of Ponti. The clash between contemporary sensibilities and those of Renaissance art making underline the difficulty of creating radically contemporary work in the birthplace of Classical one-point perspective. Interestingly, critic Dave Hickey suggests a connection between the fetish of perspective and the world of fashion: (the) “traditional locus of the innocent gaze in Western art, has always been those subjects most deeply imbued with the iconography of fashion and desire ... the draftsman’s gaze strives to bring these icons closer, to override their status as representations by the immediacy of their presentation.”

To create compelling art in the







# Critical Volume

adept at sitting still for long stretches of time, she just barely moves between appointed intervals. She looks fantastically bored, or rather, removed from it all. The projections are now life-sized, so that when the model peers out, one feels as Manet might have felt, confronting his *Olympia*. The model's ennui and chilly lack of concern about the viewer's presence is startling. After all, the viewer is obviously not Manet or Canova; what one is doing standing there, gazing at such a scene and at such close range, is unnerving for the audience. The power of intimidation that characterized Beecroft's previous performances has found its emblem in the single figure of the artist's sister.

The confrontational issues for which Beecroft is already well known are ratcheted up two notches, however, when one moves to view the flip side of the projected installation, that filled with her sister's black counterpart. Engaging with

this part of *Ponti Sister* demonstrates that Vanessa Beecroft has not lost her razor-sharp edge.

This second model, unlike her white counterpart, is not at all at ease in her role. In contrast to the first model's cool, professional demeanor, the second struggles to remain still. Her chest heaves

**In a *Vogue* interview, Vanessa Beecroft once confessed to being "ashamed of the nude body," which was why she chose to "throw it in the face of people."**

with every drawn breath, and her eyes dart back and forth nervously. Her white painted stripes immediately recall forced incarceration, and when her eyes do address the viewer, her expression is almost pained. Both models shrink the viewer down to size with their gaze, seeming to ask, "What gives you the right to do this?" However, the fidgety gestures of the second woman add a chilling harmonic to the work.

Whether a different type of paint was used on the models or whether the second model's skin type was less accommodating to the medium is unknown; whatever the difference, though, the paint does not adhere to the black woman's skin as successfully as it does to the white's. There is only a small smear beneath Beecroft's sister's right arm, even toward the

end of the projection. In contrast, the white stripes on the black woman smear everywhere: on the *Ponti* sofa, on the unpainted portions of her body. Her restlessness and impatience give these smudges a ritualistic feel. Further, the white spandex bandeaux that cover the second model's chest and pelvic region do not fit her as well as the black bandeaux fit her counterpart. With her agitated movements, the small garments creep up, smear the paint more and seem to exacerbate the woman's discomfort.

Here the much explored terrain of

the gaze in art making yields something new: faced with this second woman's very vibrant and seemingly unwilling presence, one becomes attuned to the absence of her type in Western art. This is not one of Gauguin's calm and willing natives nor is she the comic Hattie McDaniel hovering in the wings of Manet's *Olympia*. She is tense, gorgeous, African-featured, but with shoulder length styled iron-straight hair — and one cannot help but feel that she resents the position she has been put in. Like many of Beecroft's previous projected performances, this one references the contemporary world of fashionable gazing, a world where the African-featured model is rarely the norm. Her close, life-sized presence in this work brings home what this means. Unaccustomed to such a sight, we hardly know what to do with it.

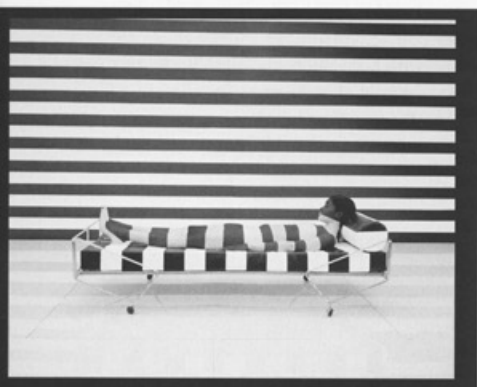
In Beecroft's work it has always been hard to know whether we should be viewing women as goddesses or prisoners. But the introduction of a black model in *Ponti Sister* here raises the stakes of the ambiguity. Only recently has Beecroft included more than one African featured model in her group performances; Beecroft's *VB 48*, 2001, for example, consisted of all black and black-painted women. The addition of race to her already provocative iconography of cultural and political motifs is tantalizing and ambiguous. If there is social commentary here, is it merely that the artist, like many in mid-career, simply wants to alter her palette a bit?

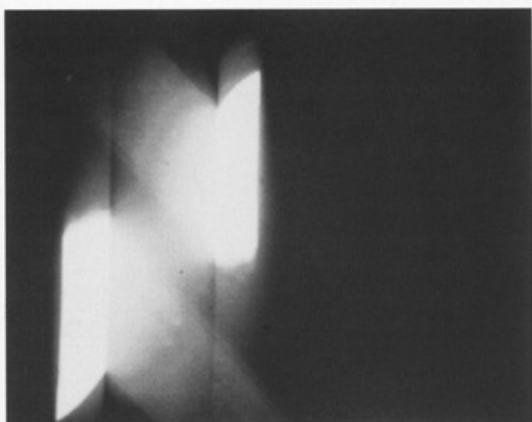
Perhaps this gesture, like the one she made in *VB 39*, the *US Navy*, in 1999, is simply a kind of experiment to see how a different type will react in a standard Beecroft staging. Or maybe the choice is at bottom visual, indicating just how confident and powerful an artist Beecroft has become. A white woman utilizing black women in her own art is rare and daring move. It could be that Beecroft's visual voice has become strong enough to endure the sanctions of this social gesture.

In a *Vogue* interview, Vanessa Beecroft once confessed to being "ashamed of the nude body," which was why she chose to "throw it in the face of people." Perhaps, like many of us who are white in the predominantly white worlds of art, fashion, society and politics, Beecroft is addressing yet another area of shame and self-consciousness in order to expose our uneasiness. Or perhaps the black model is just a very good friend of the artist's sister, and Vanessa really likes the way she looks. Whatever the case, *Ponti Sister* is a beautiful and compelling foray into territory that, for Vanessa Beecroft, is simultaneously strange and familiar.

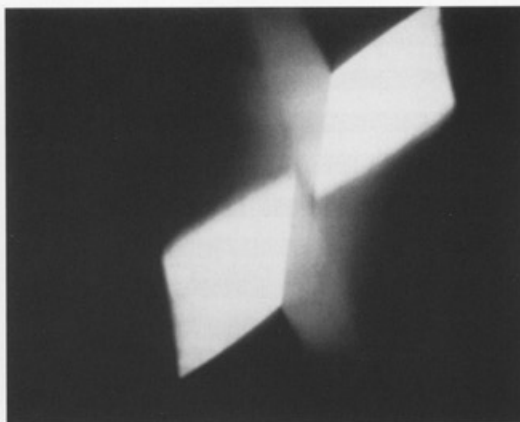
LAURA LARK HAS A BA IN ENGLISH, AN MA IN LITERATURE AND CREATIVE WRITING AND AN MFA IN PAINTING, ALL FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON.

All photographs by Vanessa Beecroft. © 2003  
Courtesy of Deitch Projects, NY





Leslie Field, *Considering the Intention of Light*, 2002. Pigmented ink jet print, wood, pins



Leslie Field, *Considering the Movement of Light*, 2002. Pigmented ink jet print, wood, pins

## Reflections On The Light

HOOKS-EPSTEIN GALLERIES  
HOUSTON, TEXAS

FEBRUARY 23–MARCH 23, 2002

SALLY GILCHRIST

Inspiration, Juan Ramon Jimenez once said, "is like a momentary spark from a more perfect — and, perhaps, more enduring life. It is like a window of the soul open to a possible existence, an equanimous life which exists in theory, and where we could get to in the depths of our spirit." Leslie Field, in her recent body of work, *Considering The Light*, opens a window into an impersonal darkness yet takes us inward to a very personal and private stillness. She hints to us with a glimpse into the threshold of collective imagination that by following the "spark" we might find a doorway to true creativity.

Field is fascinated with the interplay of light and dark, not only externally, but also how the two echo one another from within. If light is illumination, it is essentially illuminating what darkness conceals and it plays a clarifying role. It is the light, however, in her photographs that illuminates and defines the darkness. For her this light within the darkness "symbolizes the emergence and evolution of the human spirit." The darkness is not destructive, but rather constructive, as a void or an absence, which is waiting like the womb to bring about birth.

Field works with internal light in mesmerizing ways leading us back in time yet simultaneously giving the present a very tangible weight. She cuts right to this core in the *Building Block Series* by tactilely uniting figuration and landscape on wooden blocks with a waxen membrane. She looks without judgment at our heritage acknowledging the past in an impersonal way by using photo-

graphs of unknown people. Whether the rays are filtering through the trees of primeval origin or peering out from eyes of long ago she pays homage to the complex matrix of tradition, nature and the birth of our consciousness.

Field says she, "builds upon the past to illuminate the fragments of memory of those who have gone before and are a part of us." In *Kiss You My Child*, the fragment of face, hand and faint horizontal inscription are balanced by the

In the *Moonlight Series*, the city landscape at first feels all too familiar and almost sinister. Then the moon emerges and imparts a sense of virtue pulling us back again towards a primordial luminosity and allowing us a sigh of reprieve. The sigh is tentative, however, since primitive can be disconcerting, and it is a very small moon quivering in an ominous landscape. Eventually, perhaps, even at overwhelming odds, the light from the moon will bathe the land and



Leslie Field, *Kiss You My Child*, 2002. Mixed media

verticality of nature in a warm honey-colored monotone. Even as each photograph is separate there is rhythm and movement, which seduces our eye into seeing them as one. The spaces become the geometric mesh without which there would be no sum. This happens over again in *As A Young Boy*, but with the addition of a delicate and powerful cropping in musical movement the piece goes one step deeper to fuse science with poetry and opera.

illuminate even the darkest corners illustrating the force behind inner strength and the triumph of good over evil. Frances Vaughan said, "I agree with Jung's statement that we do not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. An authentic, vital spiritual life calls for bringing our shadows to light and discovering what they reveal."

Certainly where art is concerned, the struggle that gives rise to challenging

work cannot take place without respecting the good and evil within us. It is of light and dark organic matter of which we are comprised. Field's large black-and-white photographs demonstrate deft skill to illustrate this point. The commanding pieces are almost three-dimensional, as if one could walk through them into another space — another consciousness. Standing in front of the piece, *Considering the Construction of Light*, it feels almost like looking inside oneself. The blurred edges diffuse the margins and, like transparent bandages, cannot contain the inner

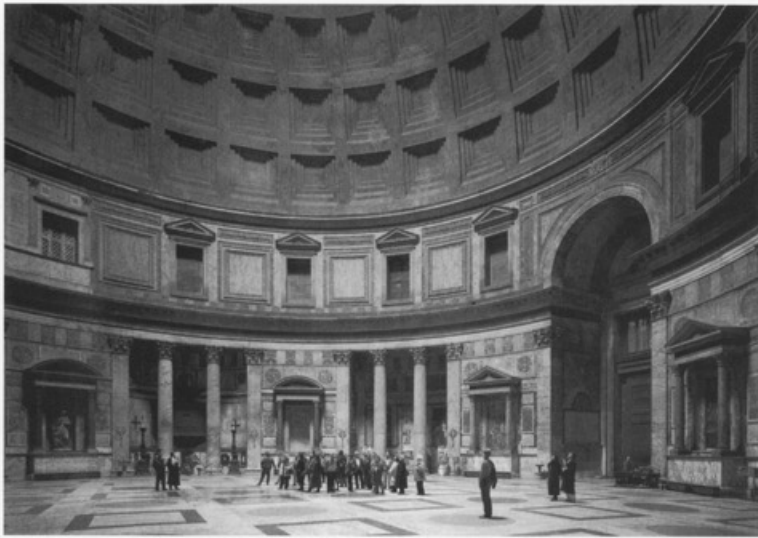
energy welling from beneath. It is a subtle blending our soul. Does she use the words "intersection" and "intention" to define or to question the borders of light and dark? Undoubtedly those boundaries are analogous to the slim division between nature and us. It is nothing one can cut with a knife, lest one cut oneself.

The robust planet "X" in *Considering the Intersection of Light* is spellbinding. Perfectly smudged at the core where the vortex is tightest, it taunts my mind with Mayan and Egyptian symbolism. The thick luminous intersection burns like rays through an opening in solid stone as perhaps channeling light from the cosmos. Like the brilliance of a star or planet the secret of its heart is hidden deep within it. It is pure energy emanating out of sheer inner strength.

Both pieces, *Considering the Movement* and *Intention of Light* move beyond ethereal muscle to an aspect even more transcendent. It is the very flip side of the image that gives the work power and authority. It is our mirror image, the window of the soul, which undoubtedly leads to liberation or bondage. Is she reminding us that the duality our consciousness wrestles with every day defines us? How has she done this?

All of Field's work informs us of the enlightenment waiting in the shadowy wings of our own personal theater. The drama may be subdued, but by yielding to her command of restraint one is quietly seduced by the power of minimalism. Field not only communicates her own inspiration in these works, but she shows us how deep one must go sometimes to find it. This work is an extraordinary, yet subtle invitation to embrace the void of darkness and to allow us a glimpse of our vital interior light.

SALLY GILCHRIST WORKS A PAINTER AND WRITER. SHE IS REPRESENTED BY HARRIS GALLERY, HOUSTON AND SARAH MORTHLAND GALLERY, NEW YORK. GILCHRIST PRINTS UNDER THE NAME STAUNTON GILCHRIST.



Thomas Struth, *Pantheon, Rome*, 1990

## Thomas Struth

THE LUPE MURCHESON CURATOR OF  
CONTEMPORARY ART  
DALLAS, TEXAS  
MAY 12–AUGUST 18, 2002

LEN KOWITZ

Many photography enthusiasts would enjoy the Thomas Struth retrospective at the Dallas Museum of Art. The exhibition, organized Charles Wylie at The Lupe Murcheson Curator of Contemporary Art at the Dallas Museum of Art.

Thomas Struth was born in Geldern, Germany in 1954. He studied at the Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf from 1973–1980. From 1993–1996 he was a professor of photography at Stallichan Hochschule für Gestaltung, Karlsruhe. He was award-



Thomas Struth, *Shibuya Crossing, Tokyo*, 1991

ed Spectrum International Prize for Photography, Stiftung Niedersachsen. He lives in Düsseldorf.

The exhibition is a large retrospective of Struth's oeuvre — with 100 pieces covering a time span from 1977 to the most recent work done in 2001. Struth's work in the exhibition can be divided into four main categories: the urban landscape, the museum series, portraits and the paradise series. The collaboration between Wylie and Struth in the organization and sequencing of the show, the juxtaposing of images helps

the viewer see the true depth and resonance of Struth's art.

There is much to learn by looking at Struth's work. While his background is from academia, he has done commercial work as well. He helps bridge those two seemingly different worlds. The early work is a series of black-and-white street scenes. Struth chose to place the large format camera in the middle of the streets he was looking at. Working early in the morning when the scene was vacant of pedestrian traffic, Struth makes documents that at first glance appear rather ordinary. However, I saw the clear influence of his teachers Bernd and Hilda Becher. The work is tightly composed, the light falling on the scene does nothing more than illuminate the objects, it does not create a mood or

a feeling for the place photographed. These pictures are almost clinical in their appearance.

Wylie sequenced the exhibition in such a way that the viewer doesn't have time to consider the small pieces in their totality. On entering the exhibit this viewer was immediately drawn into the

photograph *Pantheon, Rome*, a large (76 1/4" x 54 1/4") framed (93 1/4" x 72 1/4"), view of the inside of the structure. His thoughtful presentation of the image creates a depth and luminosity that takes the viewer from simply looking at a photograph to actually feeling a part of the picture. The sense of being in the space was very real. Struth has clearly found a way to draw the viewer into the scene he photographs. His use of color and the size of his prints make each one an experience in itself.

The exhibition takes us back and forth between very early work and much

more recent work. The viewer is given an opportunity to compare and contrast the change that has occurred over time. At first we are left wondering what is this artist trying to say with these vastly different pictures. But this is just the prelude to the larger and more complete show we are about to see. When I first began to look at these images, my curiosity was peaked by that very question — What's going on here? Then I turned a corner and came face to face with *Shibuya Crossing, Tokyo*, 1991 (54 1/2" x 77 1/4"). I was there standing right where the camera had been placed, and I was the ultimate voyeur of the scene. People passed back and forth, going about their business and never noticed me or that I was examining every detail of their appearance.



Thomas Struth, *Art Institute of Chicago II, Chicago*, 1990

I turned another corner and I was in the Art Institute of Chicago where the wall label told me "Struth's Museum photographs investigate the role museums play in a culture that has difficulty determining the difference between display and reverence." It wasn't hard for me; I was there in the scene and in awe of the way Thomas Struth was taking me on a journey.

The *Paradise* series was just that — a little slice of heaven. The scale of the photographs and the mounting of the print on plexi creates a depth that almost becomes three dimensional. The scale of the picture, when viewed from across the room, gives this viewer a feeling that with one more step I could cross into the scene.

The portrait series, which are photographs mostly of friends and family, includes a portrait of another of the artist's early influences, the family of Gerhard Richter. Casually composed in the Richter living room, the family is very at ease with my presence and allows me full access to their personal appearance. As a fan of Richter's painting,

I was glad to have the opportunity to visit with him.

Struth takes us on further journeys to many unexpected places. We visited the Yangtze Gorge in China, Tien An Men in Beijing, the Milan Cathedral, Las Vegas, Nevada, and Notre Dame in Paris as well as Times Square, New York.

For most of my adult life I have lived with the assumption that "size doesn't matter." After spending the better part of two hours at the Dallas museum looking at Thomas Struth's photographs, it has become clear to me that I have been living with a false illusion. The way Struth seduced this observer is with subject, presentation and technical execution. Struth has taken rather traditional photography to an entirely new level. He has photographed subjects many of us take for granted; and through the use of scale and color, Struth has made the viewer a part of the photograph in a way I have never seen before. Consequently I have

to conclude that in the case of Thomas Struth, size does indeed matter.

I would like to recommend the beautifully produced catalogue sponsored by the Neuberger Berman Foundation. The catalogue contains excellent essays on Struth's work by Charles Wylie, Maria

Morris Hambourg, Douglas Eklund and Anne Goldstein. The catalogue is available from the Dallas Museum of Art and is published by Yale University Press. I also recommend the article in the May 2002 issue of *Art Forum* magazine by editor Daniel Birnham and the interview in the June 2002 issue of *Art in America* with Bernd and Hilla Becher conducted by Ulf Erdmarm Ziegler. The interview helped me gain a greater understanding of an important early influence on Struth and added to my enjoyment of his work.

After Dallas, the show travels to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

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# Pop's Camera

CLARK G. BAKER

This work-in-progress is a melding of Wright Baker's family photography and interview text by family members. The photographs from Wright G. Baker (Pop) are accompanied by interview text from children Beverly Rowden, Joyce Brekke and my father, Bill Baker. Velma is Wright's wife. A selection of images and interview text from the project is being presented to illustrate characteristics of family photography and to provide an understanding of family life in and around Oklahoma primarily in the 1920s, 30s and 40s.

The photographs contained in Pop's Camera illustrate the characteristic of the family photographer to value content over technique that can be seen by the inclusion of technically flawed photographs in the family album. Subjects bleed off the edges of the frame, the photographer's shadow intrudes into the image and blurred photographs find stature in the family album.

## Ambitious Aesthetic Sense in Family Imagery

Having suggested a lack of compositional awareness on the part of the family photographer, one must also note the family photographer is capable of making images that exhibit a highly ambitious aesthetic sense. Wright Baker's photograph of Velma, Joyce and Beverly taken in the Arbuckle Mountains is one such photograph. Velma's hand is placed delicately on the wind-blown tree and her gaze is away from the camera. Joyce's stance is away from the camera but her head is turned slightly towards the camera. The wind blows their hair, and Velma's hair especially resembles the wind-blown tree she is holding.

Another image taken by Wright Baker is a subtly posed image of Joyce sitting on a park bench. She is reading a book seemingly unaware of the camera. Happy, the family dog, is at her feet. The vertical composition accentuates the surrounding trees and contributes to the quiet feel of the scene. Both images show that the photographer is in control of his composition, lighting and exposure.

## Variety of Subject Matter

Halla Beloff, among others, has suggested that family imagery is limited because it does not include areas of family life such as work. Yet, Pop made photographs in his work environment. These photographs give the viewer insight into a variety of construction projects.

## Divergent and Convergent Dialogue

Certain photographs prompt responses that seem to diverge from the manifest meaning of the photograph. Pop's image of a naked and sunburned Gib is one such photograph. Originally made to be humorous, the image prompted Bill and Joyce to describe the circumstances surrounding the photograph and they added poignancy to the image by connecting that photograph to Gib's later death from melanoma.

Joyce recalled, "There's Gibby. You know, I think so much of that, because



Wright G. Baker, *Friend Photographing Children*, 1934



Wright G. Baker, *Joyce with Happy*, 1948

of Gib's later melanoma. When you see how brown he was. No one was safe from Pop's camera."

Bill stated, "There's Gib, one summer after we worked in summer jobs in Okmulgee on the farms. He wore shorts and got a tan that impressed even Pop. Pop took a picture of Gib out in the backyard facing towards the house so he wasn't facing out toward the back for the neighbors to see. We kids all had to stay away from any windows. We were cloistered in the front, because Pop was going to photograph Gib in the back. The contrast. There he is. This photograph is so poignant because Gib later died of melanoma."

Other photographs converge well with the dialog about them. One image shows Bill and Gib side by side. Gib is relaxed and smiling. Bill appears serious

and ill at ease. A sense of responsibility is visible on Bill's face, and this sense of responsibility is confirmed through the dialog of all three children. Joyce Brekke describes a weight on Bill's shoulders and Bill confirms that observation by describing himself as the more serious of the kids saying, "If I think something isn't quite right, I take it too seriously."

Family photographers make photographs of a variety of activities including

the humorous ones. Wright Baker's photograph of Bill sitting on a box of explosives is one such photograph. Family photographers,



Wright G. Baker, *Wright's Shadow*, 1934



Wright G. Baker, *Velma, Beverly and Joyce, Arbuckle Mountains, OK*, 1939

because they are insiders, are privy to, and sometimes help to create, the significant moment captured on film. Joyce recalled, "Pop bought all of

these shoes in one day, and he had them all lined up. Gib and Bill had the boots and look at Mom's platform shoes. Pop already has the shoe forms in his. There was a family called Brown that had a shoe store on Main Street and that is where we went for shoes."

"Now, here's a man who wore his hat. The shadow of the photographer. There was a specific time of the year that you took on your straw hat. I believe it was Memorial Day, which used to be called Decoration Day, when you would decorate the graves of your family. You put it on them, and kept the straw hat until Labor Day, and then off it went for the felt fedora."

Bill recalled one photograph that was made during his senior year of high school after the traditional junior-senior fight. He said, "I didn't know anything about a junior-senior fight. I certainly didn't want to take any part in it. But I went down there. A couple guys and I were just standing around the fringes. We didn't want to have any dealings. But some guy came up who was in the boxing club. He said, 'All right. It's you and me.' Whap. So we got fighting each other. It was dark and hard to see. So, we took a number of blows back and forth. I was considered the victor, although the photo doesn't look much like it. We had beaten the bejabbers out of each other. Well, of course I didn't realize that there was blood all around me. Black eye, cut over the eye, hands beaten up. The next morning, I came home, went to bed, got up, looked terrible. So Pop was there with the camera."

Beverly Rowden's response to the image confirmed the event and gave a further insight into the event. She said, "I always looked up to Bill. I just thought he was Mr. Perfect. I don't remember if Bill was a junior or senior, but he had a fight with Harold Higdan. And Harold came into the dentist while I was there, and I can remember just hating him because I knew he hit my brother, and gave Bill black eyes."

## Contributions of Pop's Camera

Taken as a whole, the photographs and interview text presented as Pop's Camera contribute to the historical record by shedding light on family life in Oklahoma. It speaks to the cohesiveness and resiliency of family members, the value of education as a means of improving one's life conditions, the changes that occur to families over time (including births, deaths, loss of job and loss of wealth), the importance of the extended family, the variety of social activities pursued by both young and old. Family photography contributes an intimate insider's view to the historical record and is a useful adjunct to other forms of photography as document. The inclusion of interview text from the participants in family photography allows for the establishing of context and detail and the expression of abstract thought not supplied by the images themselves.

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# The Dinner Table Series

STEPHEN DIRADO  
HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY  
HOUSTON, TEXAS  
SEPTEMBER 13–OCTOBER 26, 2002

## SIMON JAMES

Many writers have remarked upon the differences and similarities of England and America: one of the best known being that coined by the playwright George Bernard Shaw who famously described England and America as "two countries divided by a common language." In the United Kingdom, of course, notions of Englishness, or things that the average person rarely considers. Because Americans do indeed speak a grossly similar language, we tend to assume they think about things, and values, in a grossly similar manner. And in many cases we couldn't be more wrong.

The United Kingdom, in spite of its ups and downs, has been around in one form or another for close to 2000 years. America by contrast, or at least the United States we recognize today, is a much younger entity. In some ways it might be described as a construct; and America today justly celebrates the achievements of the many thousands of determined men and women that made the perilous journey across the Atlantic and contributed to its construction. People, in many cases persecuted in their homelands, in search of a new beginning and somewhere they could call home. And "home" is useful keyword when looking at "things American."

Americans are indeed very different to those of us who inhabit the "old countries" from which their ancestors are drawn. In the USA this has led to a significant, ongoing and very fruitful genre of photographic practice, as American artists and photographers explore and express their ideas of what it is that makes an American: trying to encapsulate in viewable form a quantifiable notion of "American-ness." For Ansel Adams, the pioneer spirit and strength of natural form were paramount. Modernist photographers, such as Lewis Hine, offered their viewers images of the complexity, strength, mechanization and might of the cities of the Eastern sea board; while Walker Evans concerned himself with notions of what he described as "an American place." Robert Frank, born in Switzerland and emigrating to the USA in the 1950s, was much more concerned with the people, the places they inhabited, the rather differ-



Stephen DiRado, *Eating Lobster*, West Tisbury, MA 2000

ent values they upheld, and the ways they expressed their "American-ness."

We might consider the work of William Eggleston, who effectively introduced the notion of color photography



Stephen DiRado, *Ponderous Thoughts*, Oak Bluffs, MA 2001

as art to this side of the Atlantic. Eggleston's epic photo-essay, *Election Eve*, presented America with an image of the Southern environment at the dawn of the Carter presidency: the first time since the Civil War America trusted the presidency to a gentleman from the South. More recently in the *Journal* we featured Bill Owens, who in the 1960s looked at suburbia on America's west coast, and Kate Schermerhorn's images of *America's Idea of a Good Time*: America determinedly engaged in the leisure it now sees as its God given right. Another artist that should definitely be included in the list is Joel Meyerowitz, whose wooden, 10" x 8", bellows camera recently tried to find sense in the mutilated ruins of the twin towers of Ground Zero, New York.

Today in the same vein in Massachusetts, a man, working in quiet obscurity for the past 20 years, photographs his family and friends having dinner. Stephen DiRado, featured here, respects the great photographers who have worked in the genre discussed above and will be embarrassed to be considered in the same light. Initially when looking at his work it may not be

obvious he is one of them, but the genre splits into two sub-groups: those whose imagery asks the question and those whose photographs go some way towards providing an answer. DiRado



Stephen DiRado, *Virginia*, West Tisbury, MA 1987

fits into category two. While not what would be described as a particularly political animal, he knows exactly what it is that makes an American. Family, home and a spirit of place are the fundamentals upon which DiRado's art is based. He lives in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he teaches at Clarke University, and spends much of his own time on the island of Martha's Vineyard. He works in black and white, mostly in large format although he also uses a Mamiya 7, and wherever he is the wooden 8" x 10" camera isn't far away.

Stephen DiRado's art almost all happens in, or close to, the home: not always his own, but home for all that nonetheless. Not that this means the pictures should be regarded as in the least parochial, for as we see here the expanses of heavens and the Milky Way unfold over familiars to him such as the East Chop Light House, near Edgar Town, or the flimsy cottage in Tisbury, where he and his wife have spent so many weekends and vacations. In the summer he photographs Americans on holiday: diving off the American Legion Memorial Bridge or sitting around in

the cottage city, holiday homes now but originally built for Methodist revival meetings in the 1840s.

DiRado's work might in some ways be described as "local," individuals frequently recur within the pictures and their lives are woven into the narratives played out in the *Dinner Table* pictures. But the individual lives of the figures that so often appear in the images are secondary, and as a result of recent events suddenly almost incidental, to the more "universal" structure of the work as a whole. For as an outsider, resident in London and detached from the immediacy of the United States, it seems to me they have a much greater, and entirely political, message. I keep thinking back to another famous cliché about America's values being based around mom and apple pie. And in the *Dinner Table Series*, in presenting, and then representing, again the life and growth of a single, ordinary, American family, DiRado, the artist, clearly, concisely, affectionately and unrelentingly illuminates the strength of the rock upon which his nation is founded. Begun in 1985, DiRado's *Dinner Table* pictures started out as an attempt to record, in precise 8" x 10" large format detail, the minutiae of these family occasions.

But the *Dinner Table Series* isn't "documentary" in the traditional sense. The family members and friends gathered around the tables are "real," as are the dinners; but the characters are positioned by the photographer prior to the pressing of the shutter release. The *Dinner Table* series, depicting half a generation of meals with family and friends, also charts his life-long walk through the history of fine art painting: researching, reading, understanding the allegories and coming to terms with the way in which painting over the centuries has addressed the challenges of representing the great issues. And over the course of the series the great issues: birth, life, love and death, all take their seat at the dinner table. They telegraph a powerful truth. For, in their examination of the minutiae of this single unassuming family, they become an allegory about America and the real fundamentals of what it means to be American: the pride and the celebrations, the scraps and misunderstandings, the caring, consideration, and confusion, the struggles and sacrifices, the determination, the belief and the trust; the adhesion, growth and triumph of the family unit through thick and thin. And the family moves forward.

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# Pictures of Maquettes

VIK MUNIZ'S MODEL PICTURES  
MENIL COLLECTION, HOUSTON, TEXAS  
FEBRUARY 21-JUNE 9, 2002

JACINDA RUSSELL

Vik Muniz challenges his audience's perceptions with his photographs of drawings, sculptures and found objects. His aim is to "make the worst possible illusion that will still fool the eyes of the average person."<sup>1</sup> His previous work incorporated materials as diverse as chocolate, thread, sugar, dirt, cayenne pepper and the contents of ashtrays. Drawn to process and working with his hands (Muniz was a sculptor before discovering he was more attracted to the photographs of his work rather than the sculpture itself), he painstakingly removed or built up material to create *trompe l'oeil* representations referencing art history, mass media and memory. *The Last Supper*, drawn carefully with Bosco syrup, was quickly photographed before the photo lamps melted the chocolate into an unrecognizable blob. In *Pictures of Dirt*, Muniz used miniature vacuums to remove layers of soil on top of a light box, which slowly revealed a self-portrait as the light beneath appeared. Traces of decomposed leaves and pebbles form the background.

The Menil Collection commissioned Muniz to create a piece specifically for FotoFest 2002 based on artwork in the collection. Muniz discovered the Menil model on a site visit and was immediately drawn to the exact rendering of every sculpture, painting and icon in the museum's collection. Unlike many institutions who use the color copier to reproduce artwork, the pieces in the Menil model were hand crafted by Mark Flood, Doug Laguarda and David Warren. Each room is represented in miniature proportion; it is a fascinating object borne of meticulous execution, used to visualize exhibitions before installation. It is no wonder that Muniz was drawn to its scale and detailed craft.

After photographing a number of the maquettes, Muniz decided to narrow the field and use only Surrealist art works. Because the Menil is famous for its Surrealism collection, this was a logical decision. In an interview with Matthew Drutt, Muniz also revealed that he selected well-known Surrealist images because it is easier to deceive the viewers who enter the exhibition with preconceived ideas about the original work of art.<sup>2</sup> The majority of the objects in



Vik Muniz, *Model Pictures (Man Ray, Portrait imaginaire de D.A.F. de Sade, 1938)*

Model Pictures are reproductions of the work of René Magritte and Man Ray, with token representations from Max Ernst, Pablo Picasso, Gustave Doré, Alberto Giacometti, Odilon Redon and Giorgio de Chirico. The resulting exhibition includes 20 maquettes photographically enlarged to the scale of the original paintings. A section of the original model resides in the center of the installation.



Gallery model, Menil Museum

The rephotographed reproductions are hardly accurate renditions of the original artwork. Detail is lost in the process thus creating a quality similar to a Xerox of a Xerox of a Xerox. The inherent imperfections are magnified, emphasizing the dings, smudges and unblended shifts in color. Magritte's *Le chant des sirènes* looks as if it was rendered in crayon as a rubbing over pavement to create the texture of the background sky. There is a subtle clash in surfaces as the smooth, nonreflective photographic paper contrasts with the textured quality, which is heightened in the reproductive process. The photographs also incorporate the original and sometimes overly elaborate frames,

creating a false illusion of depth on a two-dimensional plane.

Muniz's inclusion of the gallery model leaves no conceptual stone unturned. The original maquettes are arranged inside, replicating the precise position of the reproductions on the walls. As Muniz states, "The model gives everything and nothing to the viewer...." We are able to view a portion of the

model, which is usually unavailable to the general public, along with the original maquettes. Continuing Muniz's consistent use of illusion, a hand crafted, mini-model is placed inside, creating an infinite circle of reproductions within reproductions, models within models. Absurdity and humor are essential components in Muniz's work, as witnessed by his earlier painted silhouettes of

bovines on white cows and two portraits of the Mona Lisa, one in peanut butter and the other in jelly. These two elements, along with the artist's laborious process, are absent in the

restoration of the 19TH century estate of Henry Clay Frick. The resulting series, *Clayton Days*, reconstructs the time period with elaborately staged still life and genre scenes combined with original photographs from the era. Muniz used 19TH century equipment, costumes and props – shallow depth of field and low perspective expose Muniz's photographs as those taken in the 21ST century. *Clayton Days* is a successful combination of the reproduction and original, an illusion taken one step further through the simple act of staging a situation, rather than documenting an existing one.

For *The Things Themselves: Pictures of Dust*, Muniz collected feathers, hair, cobwebs, paint chips, pencil shavings, soot, sand and gravel from the floors of the Whitney Museum and created drawings based on their collection of Minimalist and Post-Minimalist art. The large photographs of Carl Andre, Richard Serra and Barry Le Va pieces implement the same process used to create *Pictures of Chocolate* or *Pictures of Dirt*. The monolithic sculptures, however, were transformed, no longer constructed of impenetrable material but lightweight detritus that were destroyed after they were photographed.

Vik Muniz is at his best when he is in absolute control of his subject matter, with his fingernails encrusted in dirt, his hands covered in chocolate and his studio buried in thousands of yards of thread. In *Failure in 20TH Century Painting*, James Elkins describes five strategies for taking *trompe l'oeil* into the 21ST century. The fifth approach is particularly relevant for *Model Pictures* "... try to make the genre into a Postmodern play on illusion rather than an example of illusion."<sup>4</sup> All of Muniz's previous works "played on" the element of illusion, causing the viewer to think twice about the concept and the process. Unfortunately, *Model Pictures* falls short; the model itself and the original reproductions are ultimately more engaging than the end product.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Vik Muniz, *Seeing is Believing*, Arena Editions, 1998. Dialogue with Charles Ashley Stainback.
2. Vik Muniz, *Model Pictures*, The Menil Collection, 2002.
3. Ibid.
4. James Elkins, *Failure in 20th Century Painting*, (unpublished manuscript), 2001.

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# Taken by Design

TAKEN BY DESIGN: PHOTOGRAPHS FROM  
THE INSTITUTE OF DESIGN, 1937–1971  
EDITED BY DAVID TRAVIS AND  
ELIZABETH SIEGEL

ANITA DOUTHAT

In the foreword to the catalogue for the exhibition *Taken by Design: Photographs from the Institute of Design, 1937–*, James N. Wood, director and president of The Art Institute of Chicago, states: "Ask nearly any American photographer today whom he or she trained with, and you will likely be able to trace his or her education back to the Institute of Design." In all fairness, I must begin this review by admitting that this statement includes me. I received an undergraduate degree in design with an emphasis on photography from the Institute of Design (ID), studied art history at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and later pursued an M.F.A. at the University of New Mexico. Seeking a warmer climate and a different photographic point of view in Albuquerque, I found myself studying with Thomas Barrow, an ID graduate, and Betty Hahn who trained with Henry Holmes Smith at Indiana University. Smith, in turn, taught at the New Bauhaus with Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.

The reach of the Institute of Design is broad indeed, leaving generations of its photographic progeny with a firm foundation to work from and, in some cases, a set of principles to rebel against. In the world of academic photographic training, you can leave Chicago, but you can never get away!

The Art Institute of Chicago presented its extraordinarily elegant version of the exhibition *Taken by Design* from March 2 through May 12, 2002. It traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (July 20–October 20, 2002) and The Philadelphia Museum of Art (December 7, 2002–March 2, 2003).

Even if you are familiar with the work of key figures such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Gyorgy Kepes, Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind and their numerous well-known students, startling surprises abound. The project includes 200 images by 75 photographers. One of the highlights of *Taken by Design* is its highly egalitarian nature. Each section of the exhibition and accompanying catalogue includes photographers who have never received the attention they deserve along-side the most established figures. For instance, Arthur Siegel, whose on-again, off-again relationship with the ID spanned 40 years and whose work was



Kenneth Josephson, *Matthew*, 1963

never easy to categorize, is featured prominently. Due to this breadth, the viewer gets a more complex picture of an extremely fertile program.

Because the exhibition is not traveling to the Houston area, this article emphasizes the accompanying catalogue. Just as the exhibition is visually stunning, the publication, edited by David Travis and Elizabeth Siegel, respectively curator and assistant curator of photography at The Art Institute of Chicago, is a major contribution to the field of photographic scholarship. It marks the culmination of five years of research and

Arthur Siegel, *Nude (Hand shadow over breasts)*, 1940



nology in 1955. In encyclopedic detail, essays by Lloyd C. Englebrecht, Keith F. Davis and John Grimes recount the various stages of the school's founding, the rise to prominence of its photography department, and the department's inevitable decline. Further perspective is added by Hattula Moholy-Nagy's affectionate tribute to her father, Larry Viskochil's essay on the larger photographic scene in Chicago during the years 1937–1971, and Elizabeth Siegel's article on the interrelationship between film and photography at the ID.

Third, the project may act as a catalyst for further exploration. The exhibition and catalogue cover a tremendous amount of ground, but they suggest many avenues for more detailed research.

Visually, the catalogue is quite handsome. The exhibition's images, chosen by David Travis, are beautifully sequenced and reproduced. They are nicely interspersed, in roughly chronological order, between the essays and other visual ephemera such as reproductions of school catalogue covers, illustrations of ID assignments and photographs of people involved in the institution.

The publication's frontispiece boldly quotes Laszlo Moholy-Nagy from *Vision in Motion*: "The enemy of photography is the convention ... the salvation of photography is the experiment." The initial section of the catalogue covers the years 1936–1946, from the founding of the New Bauhaus through the untimely death of Moholy-Nagy. It commences with a rich selection of experimental images such as photograms and photomontages, techniques linked to the European and Russian *avant-gardes* of the early 20th century including the original Bauhaus in Dessau, Germany. Transplanting of these ideas and techniques occurred because Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Gyorgy Kepes fled from Germany to the United States via London just before the outbreak of World War II. They brought with them their utopian idealism, their fascination with light and their multi-disciplinary approaches. They found American photographic allies in Arthur Siegel, Nathan Lerner and Henry Holmes Smith at a time when photography in this country was dominated by more traditional approaches.

Kepes' portraits of his wife, such as *Untitled (Juliet with Peacock Feather and Red Leaf)*, provide the biggest surprise in this section. Such sophisticated layering of hand-painting on a photographic surface seems strikingly contemporary. These exquisite portraits date from 1937–



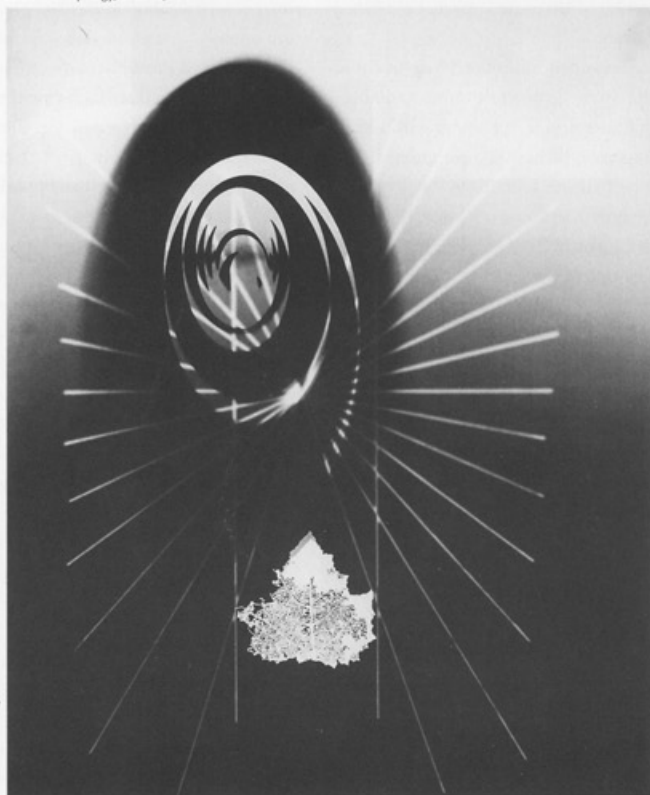
Barbara Crane, *Untitled*, 1969

1938! Kepes later founded the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT.

The second section dates from 1946–1961, the years following World War II, in which the major figures in the photography depart-

ment were the quiet, self-effacing Harry Callahan, who joined the school in 1946, and the gregarious, articulate Aaron Siskind, who was hired in 1951. Their approaches to photography were much more introspective, with an emphasis on what became known as “camera vision.”

László Moholy-Nagy, *Untitled*, 1941



They each developed personal modes of semi- abstraction. Callahan's proto-minimalism focused on his family and the Chicago environment, but with a style that radically departed from traditional portraiture or landscape photography. Siskind's animistic compositions of peeling paint, muscular rock formations and soaring divers were closely associated with Abstract Expressionism. They were prolific artists who were widely exhibited and published.

As Keith Davis explains, for ten years “Harry and Aaron” comprised a superb teaching team whose noted students included Ray Metzker, Joseph Jachna, Art Sinsabaugh, Charles Swedlund, Joseph Sterling and Yasuhiro Ishimoto. This section makes clear that while the sophisticated formalism associated with the Institute of Design flowered during this period, there were also several other strains of photographic activity occurring simultaneously. Siskind's association with the Photo League ended, but he encouraged the social documentary work of his students, including Sterling, Ishimoto, Marvin E. Newman and Wayne Miller. He also encouraged architectural photography best exemplified by Richard Nickel's images of Louis Sullivan buildings.

The ID's graduate program was introduced in 1950 and the first M.S. degrees were awarded in 1952. The students were required to present an exhibition and write a thesis. This was the birth of the now ubiquitous concept of the “body of work” in photography. In 1961, Harry Callahan left the Institute of Design for a position at the Rhode Island School of Design, marking the end of another era in the institution's life.

Throughout the 1960s, Aaron Siskind headed the department mentoring yet another generation of photographers including Thomas Barrow, Barbara Crane, Kenneth Josephson, Linda Connor, Cal Kowal, Eileen Cowin, William Larson and Charles Traub. In this section, as the student body increased, the work began to take on a transitional feeling. Many photographs are self-reflexive, i.e. photographs about photography. Although the initial “experiment” seemed to be losing steam, many threads found in the most contemporary photography made early appearances here including conceptual sequences, multiple imagery, mixed media, family and identity issues.

In the essay describing this time period, John Grimes takes on the daunting task of placing the ID within the context of a general boom in interest in the pho-

tographic medium, not to mention a tumultuous decade in the life of the United States. He closes with the painful story of Aaron Siskind's forced retirement in 1971, surely one of the most distressing cautionary tales in academic history. Siskind left Chicago to join Callahan in RISD, reuniting the legendary teaching team. This departure profoundly impacted the department, and this essay is to be commended for not whitewashing the story.

*Taken By Design* ends with the students who graduated in 1971, but the rich legacy lives on in their teaching and the work they have produced to date. In his epilogue, John Grimes recounts the numerous changes the photography department and the Institute of Design have gone through during the last 21 years. As of next year, the photography will completely dissolve into the design department, which is where it all began in 1937.

One might ask, why this exhibition and catalogue now? There are very good reasons for this current assessment. Although photographs by the most established figures are well known, the more obscure work has reached few audiences outside Chicago. Many of the ID's students who have gone on to celebrated careers as artists and educators are retiring from their teaching posts. This is a good time to view their early work and record their stories. Although there are a few puzzling omissions and occasional glitches in the biographical information, *Taken by Design* is a most impressive publication.

In the history of photography, as in the history of all the arts, the balance in emphasis between form and content tips back and forth, with each period reacting against what immediately precedes it. Postmodern critique of mass-media imagery characteristic of the 1980s and the emphasis on identity politics of the 1990s, weighed heavily on the side of content. In many ways, this work can be seen as the antithesis of the cooler, more formal vision of the ID. Perhaps now that these more contemporary approaches have received considerable recognition, we may look afresh at the Institute of Design and appreciate its innovations.<sup>1</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

1. For a critical analysis of photography from the Institute of Design, see Abigail Solomon Godeau's essay *The Armed Vision Disarmed: Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style*, published in 1991 in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*.

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# Elliott Erwitt Snaps

SIMON JAMES

A tiny dog in an ill fitting sweater stands in the left half of the frame next to a woman's feet, clad in rather better fitting, elegant for their day, shoes. The picture takes me back to one of my first lessons at photography night school when our lecturer explained about the different ways in which the camera can present the world. A dustbin liner we were told, to keep our clothes clean while we lay on the ground, would make an inexpensive and effective addition to our kit. And yet the photograph I'm now looking at could only be an Elliott Erwitt. The irony is that it turns out to have been made nearly 50 years ago in 1946 on his first photography trip to New York.

Elliott Erwitt was born in Paris to Russian parents. He moved to the United States in 1939 when he was 11 years old. He spoke three languages but no English. He says, "We spent our first year in New York City. Then after a family disagreement, my father, who I loved very much, sort of kidnapped me and took me to California.

"My first contact with photography came at about the age of 13 when I bought a four x five glass plate camera. Photography became a real interest when I was on my own at 15 and needed to earn some money to live. I did pictures of neighbors, school events, people's pets: anything that anybody would pay for. From then I graduated to a Rolleiflex and eventually to an old Leica.

"At that time New York was the center of the world or at least the center of America for anything to do with photography, magazines, the visual arts, museums. It seemed the logical place to go to build a life in photography. I met Steichen, Robert Capa and Roy Stryker. These were the three people who helped me.

"My first commercial job was for Roy Stryker who at that time was making a library for Standard Oil Company and from there he went to Pittsburgh. This was in 1951 just before I was drafted into the army. I went with him and two or three other photographers and worked in Pittsburgh for a few months.

"When I went into the army I applied for the signal corps and photography, but apparently didn't qualify for that. I qualified for anti-aircraft gunnery. Luckily for me the positions were closed. My second specialty was the darkroom. After basic training, I was assigned to a dark-



Elliott Erwitt, New York City, 1946

room, and I was sent off to Europe rather than Korea. First I went to Germany which was not to my liking, and then I was assigned to France, first in Verdun which was not much better and then in Orleans, which was terrific with frequent visits to Paris. I had a grand old time in the army.

"While I was in the army I'd won second place in a contest for *Life* magazine. When I got out I also tried to work for *Life* magazine and succeeded to a certain small degree. However, there was a kind of arrogance that I always disliked at *Life* magazine. Anyway I was just starting out and tried to work for them or for anybody that would hire me. I'd also kept in touch with Capa, who lived in Paris most of the time. I was in touch with Magnum and I was promised to be taken in as a member when I left the service,



Elliott Erwitt, Wilmington, North Carolina, 1950

which they did. At the time Magnum was based in Paris but had a small office in New York. My first job for the agency was Bermuda and was published in *Look* magazine. Because of Magnum and because of the attitude that I had, I was always able to retain copyright on my material and the stuff that I shot then still appears in my books now. Does your work belong to the magazine or hiring authority or are they buying the use of it? Of course they're buying the use of it. This has been our eternal fight in the past and it is now even more, with the big companies buying everything but caring very little about pictures and depriving people of a their potential livelihood."

When asked about the huge breadth of his practice, Erwitt comments, "I always thought that photography was a profession. If photography is a profession you've got to be able to do any-

thing that is required of you: that's what being professional means. I think all this compartmentalization is a lot of bullshit. The kind of idiocy where people might hire you to do a close up of somebody because you've done a close up of somebody before is rampant in our business. I always say that a professional is a professional; he or she can do anything. So that's one side of my photographic existence and there's the amateur side. Professionally I've done everything, whether it's fashion, food architecture, under water photography, you name it, because I've been around a long time and I don't think there's any great mystery to solving professional problems. But I've kept my amateur standing quite separate from the beginning. It's my hobby. There I can do whatever I like."

Erwitt's notion of his personal work as his hobby seems in some ways to give clues as to the broader individual. His camera is constantly with him, as is evidenced in his massive new book *Snaps*, although there is very much more to his hobby

than immediately meets the eye. With regard to *Snaps* Erwitt himself is very keen to acknowledge the contribution of his designer, London-based Stuart Smith, who he describes as a "charming, delightful and intelligent person and I'd really like him to know how much I appreciate his work."

"When thinking about this book I went through my contact sheets and made about 3,000 prints. Rather than printing myself these days I tend to supervise. However, I've always had a darkroom and regard it as very important. It is something of a security blanket to me. Stuart came over to New York and looked through the prints. He and I made selections and that's how the book

got put together. There isn't really an idea of chronology or anything — for the most part he made the combinations."

Despite his denials, *Snaps* very definitely provides an insight into the breadth of Erwitt's career. In the field of portraiture for example, over the space of a few pages, we find Nikita Khrushchev and Richard Nixon in the midst of an argument in Moscow; Marilyn Monroe on the set of *The Misfits*; Billy Graham proclaiming his notion of the truth in New York; and Che Guevara in Tehran. Again in New York, Andy Warhol is pictured in the back of a limousine, while immediately below, this time in Tokyo, the author Yukio Mishima contemplates a samurai sword. Mishima was later to commit hari kiri with the exact same sort of weapon. Erwitt, however, is equally happy to address the frivolous or absurd, nudist colonies also feature. In one, a naked bridal party unselfconsciously ties the knot, while in East Hampton six naked artists draw a fully clothed model. Integrity matters to Erwitt, and he confesses he actually set the last shot up.

Erwitt said, "I think it's for other people to judge whether there's any significance in the pictures or not. I just react to certain things. I don't think about it too much. I think I just take pictures." Ironically this statement provides a most apposite way into the pictures for it seems to me that his camera describes the wanderings of the mind. He may indeed not think too much; but his gift is to clearly describe in his pictures what he was thinking about when he pushed the button. Erwitt's *Snaps* offer a rare glimpse into a life spent in picture making. He's articulate, piercing in his observations, intolerant of hypocrisy and detests arrogance. Cognizant, I'm certain, of the power of satyr he tempers the most critical or damning edge of his imagery with his ever present wit.

And his tip for the budding photographer? After a lifetime in photography, much of it spent in the company of man's best friend; self-effacing to the last Erwitt, alleged to be Magnum's highest earning photographer, says, "You often get good pictures when you bark at dogs!"



# Confessions Of A FotoFest Neophyte

PHIL HARRIS

Day One: Cattle call. Moooo. Bright-eyed neophytes, haggard already at dawn. No coffee. Bewildered FotoFest virgins all mixed in with hard-eyed veterans. Everyone dressed better than me. Feel like the only pair of cutoffs in a roomful of Diors. Portfolio cases the size of dining room tables. Their clothes match their portfolios, black on black on black. Wicked. Never saw anything like this back in Omaha.

Nervous shuffling for what seems like hours, then the lottery. All hands clutching reviewer bio listings, mumbling over them like religious tracts on the Titanic, marking and scribbling and crossing out, the way they do with racing forms at the dog track. Numbers booming out over the PA, anxious faces, shuffling through the roped-in labyrinth.

Movie tickets with numbers — now we're numbers without names, shuffling forward under the watchful eyes of the trustees. Johnny Cash, where are you now? One number called over and over — necks crane, but no dice — the mumble rises—he slept through his first pick! General clucking and glad-it's not-meing. At the front of the line, hesitations, last-minute second-guessing, then the



resigned or triumphant commitment. Done! Then, looking back over the shoulder ... was that the right one ...?

First round over, last number spills over into first, second round of picks starts right in. Strategizing. Scanning the Big Board for winners and losers. My number comes around again for the second time. Easier now, the System is becoming familiar, and there are fewer choices. Oh well, guess I'll see the woman from the Murmansk Museum of



Bivalve Culture. Feel myself becoming One with the System.

Various bodily sound effects say it's breakfast time — but no food. A worker ant discovers vending machines in the basement, but there's nothing that can

be called food there either. The crowd parts as a rolling cart of pastries, fruit and the life-affirming aroma of coffee glides by — for the reviewers. Much muttering amid the tottering.

Day Two: Things bound to look up today. Discovered outside food source and brought a bundle

of rations. Pulled a piece of fresh fruit out of a bag and heard someone gasp. Yesterday's reviews just a vague memory. Saw four people, all responded, some positively. Many cards exchanged, resumes absorbed into piles, notes taken, it was a pleasure, a pleasure, a pleasure. Twenty minutes worth of attention and enthusiasm; could be that's that(?).

Lottery very serious today, determination to see the right people. Only two days to go. Some reviewers already folded their tents. Crowd like the trading floor of the Chicago Board of Trade — rumors and opinions matter, moods swing, word on the street says see the man from the Delaware Archive of Visual Arcana — he gives great review. He likes your work, he may publish you in their biannual journal *Glut*.

Making new friends among the fellow-bewildered. J. says one museum reviewer yesterday liked her work so much she asked for a donation of six pieces on the spot. No mention of purchasing said work or even paying the postage. J. said she'd get back to her. L. says his reviewer objected to being shown horizontals and verticals

in the same portfolio. "Too scattered." P. is walking on air because she got the email and cell number of a Big Fish, who wants to use her work to plug a sudden hole in his gallery's prestigious schedule. First brush with a potential Big Break at FotoFest.

We're all becoming veterans now.

After lunch (foraged from afar), I see Reviewer T., a friend, an ally and anchor in the madness. She's racing from one unofficial viewing to another but pauses long enough to tell me about being chased across the parking lot by hungry photographers, like autograph hounds on the scent. She says the crowning incident was being cornered in the ladies' room and having slides pushed over the top of the stall while she attempted to have a private moment. Unable to convey her feelings in words, she stops with a meaningful look. Another reviewer said after a full day of looking at pictures (16 people), a man ran up to her table, no preamble, slapped down a bunch of ad shots, and said "Here y'are!", stood back and folded his arms, waiting. Mon-eymaking Idea: FotoFest Etiquette Academy?



Day Three: Beginning to have *déjà vu* all over again. Events day and night, gallery openings in unseasonably cold weather, saw a fellow first-timer from Chicago last night, hadn't bothered to bring a coat, shivering and gulping wine: "Of course I didn't bring wool — it's Texas, for God's sake." Inside the tiny galleries, more wall-to-wall fur than pre-revolutionary Russia, everyone hustling from door to door, then lingering, chatting, backs to the art, until they warm up. Then, resolutely, on; mine is a stoic tribe.

Next day, notables notably bleary. Some reviewers bowing out, others stepping in. New rounds of speculation among the hoi polloi: who to see now? More and more action off the floor, in the lounges and the cafeteria tables. Cross pollina-

tion, discovering some common threads ("Oh, she trashed your work too?"), more card exchanges. One man showing his colossal kaleidoscopic digital images to anyone who'll hold up the other end of his living room suite-sized portfolio with him.

Saw the last of the top-rung people on my much-battered list. Several asked for donations and said they might show my work in 2008. Now down to showing my work to free-lance curators from Papua, New Guinea, and people who've wandered in off the street, looking for directions to Galveston. Saw a collector,



briefly, who was collecting one of everything in sight until she saw my work — then it was time to plug her meter. Did score an offer to teach a workshop in Papua, New Guinea, if I were willing to pay my way, and donate a print.

Day Four: Participants stroll in two minutes before their number comes up. Frenzy of days past is all but forgotten in the indolent ease and surfeit. Having conquered the System, it's too much trouble to ... finish a sentence. All our work has been scrutinized, criticized, calipered, computed, disputed and refuted. We've all told our stories so many times now, we could go on for Spalding Grey if he had the gripe and couldn't perform.

Weather's warm, sun, grackles are out in force, it's looking more like the South. Many people draped over the furniture lizardlike, leafing through books at the press area, staring off into space. Fest Fatigue, clear cut case. Indications: hot baths and cold turkey, alternating with vice versa. Reviewers plowing on, turning over prints, mm-hmming, asking whether photographer intends to make a career of this. More handshakes, more cards exchanged, more best-of-lucks. Oh, and by the way, we would be willing to accept some of your work, as a donation ... Next!

PHIL HARRIS IS A PORTLAND, OREGON-BASED PHOTOGRAPHER. HE ACTUALLY HAD A DARNED GOOD TIME AT FOTOFEST, WHERE HE DONATED A FEW PRINTS. HAVING LEARNED A THING OR TWO ABOUT SHAMELESS SELF-PROMOTION AT THE FEET OF THE MASTERS, HIS WORK CAN NOW BE VIEWED AT [WWW.PICTUREHEADPRESS.COM](http://WWW.PICTUREHEADPRESS.COM).

THESE PHOTOS BY FRANK ARMSTRONG REPRESENT INFORMAL DISCUSSIONS AND REVIEWS THAT TOOK PLACE IN THE LOBBY AT MEETING PLACE DURING FOTOFEST. 2002



Installation photo of *Virtual Environment 1* by Joshua Neffsky. Courtesy of McKenzie Fine Art, New York, NY

## 20,000 SPOOLS OF THREAD

MARCH 1 - APRIL 1, 2002

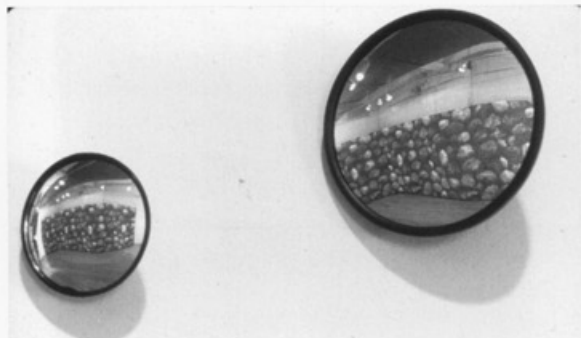
DIVERSEWORKS

HOUSTON, TEXAS

### MELISSA MUDRY

The hype typically generated by FotoFest tends to focus on video installation, interactive computer enhanced works and the latest, greatest digital technique used to fabricate images that can only beg to hold interest. The vast offering of exhibits from the 2002 edition was not different, with the exception of the buzz about a clever installation in the sub-space at Diverseworks.

Upon entering the exhibition *20,000 Spools of Thread*, the viewer became immediately aware of the tight space in which the work was displayed. The drape of 20,000 multi-colored spools of thread (exhibition partially funded by Coats & Clark) instantly rendered a sense of being overwhelmed. With a silent nod to Jan van Eyck, (*The Marriage of the Arnolfini*) as one turns his or her back to the spools, a discovery of a series of small convex mirrors on the reverse wall is made and the image, *Virtual Environment 1*, is revealed.



Installation photograph showing *Virtual Environment 1* in the convex mirrors.

Sperber's image of the three-dimensional stone wall is displayed at its fullest potential at the Diverseworks sub-space. Here, the viewer is compelled by the image found in the mirror to move close in to and away from the actual work, physically demonstrating the mechanism of "focus." Unlike the typical museum and gallery setting in which the viewer is first offered a distant glance of the spool-strung curtain, in the sub-space, one is forced to immediately confront the exploded macro-image in their face.

Devorah Sperber has leapt bounds above the heads of artists who utilize technical savvy in their work. By means of simplifying the very monitors and pixels that are essential to the video, computer and digital artist, she has super-magnified the video or computer monitor. Through a complex weaving of carefully color-matched thread spools, the artist has ingeniously created a unique form of *trompe l'oeil* on a grand scale.

MELISSA MUDRY IS AN ARTIST WHO WORKS AS THE PROGRAM COORDINATOR AT HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY.

## BOOKS RECEIVED AND NOTED

Compiled by Daniela Lozano

Barthelme, Frederick. *Trip*. New York: Powerhouse Books, 1999.

Photographs by Susan Lipper taken throughout the United States accompanied by text by Frederick Barthelme provide a visual essay documenting life on the road.

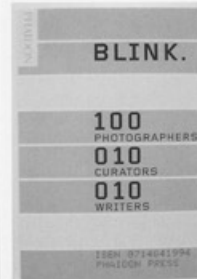
Birringer, Johannes. *Performance on the Edge: Transformations of Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: The Athlone Press, 2000, 285 pages.

This book seeks to map out the new territory of contemporary theatre, dance, media arts and activism. It addresses the politics of community-oriented and reconstructive artmaking in an era marked by, among other things, the AIDS crisis, warfare and xenophobia.

Breakey, Kate. *Small Deaths*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 2001, 167 pages. Oversized, hand-colored images of found animal remains from photographer Kate Breakey's ongoing *Small Deaths* series. Breakey's work has been linked to the larger traditions of still-life painting and the postmortem photography of the 19th century.

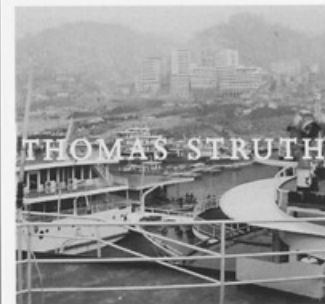
Brodwick, Marilyn Spievak. *Faces of Aging*. Galveston, TX: The University of Texas Medical Branch, 2001, 97 pages.

Marilyn Spievak Brodwick, a geriatric researcher and free-lance photographer, takes black-and-white portraits of elderly people that portray a positive image of aging.



Carver, Antonia. *Blink: 100 Photographers, 010 Curators, 010 Writers*. New York: Phaidon Press, Inc., 2002, 440 pages. This book provides an up-to-the-minute, global overview of contemporary photography from art to

photojournalism, fashion to digital photography. Ten curators chose 10 photographers each who they consider to have emerged and broken new ground in the last five years. Ten writers were also chosen by the curators based on their ability to illustrate the cultural context surrounding the photography.



Eklund, Douglas; Goldstein, Ann; Hambourg, Maria Morris & Wylie, Charles. *Thomas Struth 1977-2002*. Dallas, TX: Dallas Museum of Art, 2002, 189 pages.

Catalogue encompassing Struth's entire body of work dating from the late 1970s to the early 2000s. Engaging essays by well-known photography and art experts chronicle Struth's career.

Greenough, Sarah. *Alfred Stieglitz: the Key Set: the Alfred Stieglitz Collection of Photographs*. Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art; New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002, 1012 pages. The definitive two-volume catalogue of the Alfred Stieglitz Collection of Photographs at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Donated to the National Gallery by Stieglitz's wife, the painter Georgia O'Keeffe, the set consists of more than

1,600 works. The catalogue includes complete in-depth notes on each photograph and establishes a chronology of Stieglitz's art.

Junior, Christiano. *Un País en Transición: Fotografías de Buenos Aires, Cuyo y el Noroeste*. Chile: Fundación Antorchas, 2002, 119 pages. Photographs of Argentina from 1867 to 1883 by photographer Christiano Junior with text by Beatriz Bragoni, Abel Alexander and Luis Priamo. Includes an English translation.

Kellner, Thomas. *Monumente*. Germany: Burkhard Arnold, 2002, 63 pages. Kellner offers unconventional architectural photographs of famous buildings. Includes text in German and English by Gerhard Glüher.

Madigan, Martha. *Vernal Equinox*. New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 2001, 55 pages. Madigan uses her version of a nineteenth-century process originally called "sun-printing" or "heliography" to create photograms of human figures and plant forms.

Manchester, Kate. *The Perfect Wedding Cake*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2001.

A guide for bride and groom on how to choose a wedding cake. Featuring full-color photographs of beautiful wedding cakes by Zeva Oelbaum.

McDaris, Wendy. *Visualizing the Blues*. Memphis, TN: The Dixon Gallery and Gardens, 2000, 159 pages.

This book brings together photographs by world-renowned photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Margaret Bourke-White and Walker Evans, as well as work by emerging artists to create a portrait of the culture of the American South and its rich roots and experiences.

Merritt, Raymond; Barth, Miles. *A Thousand Hounds*. New York: Taschen, 2000, 600 pages. An unusual history of photography told exclusively with images of dogs. Spanning over 150 years, this book chronicles the life and times of man and dog and includes the work of famous photographers and artists such as Picasso, Man Ray, David Salle, Elliot Erwitt and William Wegman.

Renner, Eric. *Pinhole Photography*. Boston: Focal Press, 2000, 189 pages.

An illustrated history and practical how-to guide to pinhole photography.

Sheikh, Fazal. *A Camel for the Son*. Germany: Sheikh, Fazal, 2001, 110 pages.

This book is the first in a series of projects intended to further awareness of international human rights issues. Text and photographs of Somali refugees in Kenya by Sheikh.

Sheikh, Fazal. *Ramadan Moon*. Germany: Sheikh, Fazal, 2001, 59 pages.

The second in a series of projects intended to further awareness of international human rights issues, this book features portraits of a Somali woman refugee in the Netherlands and her story.

Siegfried, Elizabeth. *Life Lines*. Toronto, Ontario: Hathaway Press, 2000.

Elizabeth Siegfried's self-portraits and images of nature provide a visual narrative that is both personal and psychological in nature.

Westmoreland Museum of American Art. *Spirit of a Community: The Photographs of Charles 'Teenie' Harris*. Greensburg, PA: Westmoreland Museum of American Art, 2001, 48 pages. Catalogue for an exhibition of Charles 'Teenie' Harris's photographs. This is a sampling of material from his vast body of work documenting the daily life of African American communities of Pittsburgh.

Zarate, Ernest J. *At the Beach*. Petaluma, CA: Tomelet Press, 1999, 27 pages. Photographs of the renowned California beach culture by California photographer Ernest J. Zarate.



HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY

## 2003 PRINT AUCTION

HCP would like to thank  
the artists, underwriters,  
staff and volunteers for  
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2003 Print Auction. It is  
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nity that we are able to  
continue our mission to  
deepen the appreciation  
and understanding of the  
photographic arts and  
support emerging and  
mid-career artists and  
their audiences.

The auction was held on  
Tuesday, February 11, 2002.  
The next auction will be in  
February 2003.

### Contributing Artists

BILL ARMSTRONG  
JEFFREY BECOM  
RUTH BERNHARD  
WALT BISTLINE  
COLIN BLAKELY  
AMY BLAKEMORE  
GAY BLOCK  
ANDREW BOROWIEC  
DONNA REIDLAND BOURRET  
KENNY BRAUN  
KATE BREAKEY  
TERRI BRIGHT  
JERRY BROWN  
PETER BROWN  
THOMAS BRUMMETT  
DAN BURKHOLDER  
JILL SKUPIN BURKHOLDER  
JENNIFER CADDELL  
LAURA PICKETT CALFEE  
MORRIE CAMHI  
KRISTIN CAPP  
RAY CAROFANO  
RAY CARRINGTON III  
KEITH CARTER  
FRANCOISE & DANIEL CARTIER  
ELINOR CARUCCI  
GAYE CHAN  
ANITA CHERNEWSKI  
VINCENT CIANNI  
CARLOS DIAZ  
DORNITH DOHERTY  
ANITA DOUTHAT  
SUSAN DUNKERLEY  
KATHRYN DUNLEVIE  
DENNIS FAGAN  
SHANNON FAGAN  
GARY FAYE  
JESSECA FERGUSON  
REBECCA FOLEY  
DEBRA FOX  
JANNA FULBRIGHT  
FLOR GARDUNO  
DAVID H. GIBSON  
ELIJAH GOWIN  
SUSAN KAE GRANT  
JOY GREGORY  
KIMBERLY GREMILLION  
MICHELE GRINSTEAD GRIFFITHS  
BETSY HAAS  
BARNABY HALL  
DEBORAH HAMMOND  
PHIL HARRIS  
PAMELA ELLIS HAWKES  
ROBERT HEINECKEN  
CHIP HOOPER  
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ROLFE HORN  
EARLIE HUDNALL, JR.  
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JUN ITO  
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JOHN KIMMICH-JAVIER  
SARA KENDALL  
MICHAEL KENNA

FRAZIER KING  
CAL KOWAL  
LEN KOWITZ  
GERARD LANGE  
WILLIS F. LEE  
JACK LEIGH  
DAVID JULIAN LEONARD  
HERMAN LEONARD  
LES LEVINE  
DAVE LINEMAN  
ELAINE LING  
O. RUFUS LOVETT  
DANNY LYON  
MANUAL  
SUSAN MEISELAS  
HALLE MERRILL  
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DANA SALVO  
BASTIENNE SCHMIDT  
SHARON SELIGMAN  
JEFFERY SILVERTHORNE  
CHIP SIMONE  
DAWN SOUTHWORTH  
CATHY SPENCE  
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MICHAEL STARKMAN  
ANN STAUTBERG  
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