



spot

HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY

FALL 2005

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Fall 05

Interviews, Expanded Reviews, Projects

2 MANUAL

Anne Tucker leads the discussion with Suzanne Bloom and Ed Hill in their home (at the same kitchen table where she first interviewed them for their 1979 catalogue!) who talk about their history collaborating as artists via their 2004 retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

8 Disembodied Spirit

Alison Ferris conjures the influence of 19th century spirit photography on today's artists in *The Disembodied Spirit* exhibition at the Austin Museum of Art.

12 Mapping Portland

Phil Harris takes us through the Portland Grid Project, a nine-year collaborative photography project of Portland, Oregon.

16 Our Town: Houston Past Present Future

Peter Brown interviews Dave Crossley, Houston's beloved "Stage Manager" and organizer of the exhibition, *Our Town* produced with the Gulf Coast Institute.

20 Revealing Images: Migrant Peruvians Photograph their Lives

Jerome Crowder gives cameras, film, and photography advice to Peruvian peasants who share their images and their perception of Western photography.

24 Water and the West

Paul Hester covers the *Water and the West* exhibition at the Williams Tower Gallery.

26 Skimming FotoFest 2004

SPOT asks art critics, curators, and photographers for their impressions of Houston's renowned photography festival—with a wide range of responses from Roy Flukinger, Kelly Klaasmeyer, George Krause, MANUAL (Suzanne Bloom and Ed Hill), Linda Walsh, and Clint Willour.

Exhibitions

29 **Haunted** Cynthia Freeland reviews *Inhabited*, the "spooky" installation by Houston-based artists Michele Grinstead and Nancy O'Connor.

30 **Facing History** Marisa C. Sánchez reviews Will Michels' ambitious photo-history project, *Crew: The Men of the U.S.S. TEXAS*.

Books

31 **The Devil's Playground** Chas Bowie reviews *The Devil's Playground*, a monograph of recent work by the notorious Nan Goldin.

32 **Books Received** Compiled by Fabiola Valencia

33 **In Memoriam: John Coplans** David Brickman reflects on the legacy and loss of renowned photographer John Coplans.

cover
George Krause
from the *Stomato Portrait Series*

detail
Christopher Bucklow
Guest 7:49 pm 17 May 1998, 1998
unique cibachrome photograph
Photograph by Adam Reich

spot

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In this Issue



Many changes have taken place at HCP since I was hired as Editor of SPOT two years ago.

In March of 2005, I was hired as Interim Executive Director; I hired three new staff

members (Anna Julia, Program Director; Jennifer Hennessy, Administrative Assistant; Brenda Mendiola, Finance Administrator), and asked Antonio Manega of Gazer Design Group to redesign SPOT. In addition, last month the members of HCP elected 11 new Board Members and reelected the current Board, now totaling 21 members.

HCP celebrates its 24th year this October—quite a feat considering the tough climate arts organizations have had to endure over the past decade. During the past six months, I have seen this organization revived, energized, and embrace change like no other. The many changes include remaining at our current location and building our Learning Center next door. We hope to complete the Learning Center by December. Stay tuned for more changes—including the redesign of the HCP logo and a new exterior sign for our building!

Like the organization, SPOT magazine is rich with a complex past involving countless art luminaries and important contributors. Its former tabloid scale (11 x 17 inches) and austere black logo reflect the experimental nature that was SPOT (and HCP) since its inception. Past articles and photographs capture a bustling photography scene in Houston narrated by politically charged essays. Notable photographs document early FotoFests, an early HCP Board retreat, and even a Black & White ball! Anne Tucker can be seen sporting a ponytail while judging the first Members' exhibition; a mustached Clint Willour leads the first HCP auction, and Paul Hester serving as the first President of HCP. [Editor's Note: Some of these gems and other fascinating artifacts will be on display at our anniversary party on October 29th, 2005.] These world-class professionals still find time to contribute to HCP and the photography community, despite the frenzied pace of the Houston art scene. It is only fitting that in this issue we include words and images by long-time supporters: Peter Brown, Anne Tucker, Paul Hester, MANUAL, and the first editor of SPOT, Dave Crossley, as well as the former editor, Cynthia Freeland. I look forward to continuing the tradition of marrying text and image as SPOT turns 21 in the 21st century!

Editor and Interim Executive Director



HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY



MANUAL

A Conversation with Ed Hill and Suzanne Bloom

by Anne Tucker

Editor's Note: This discussion was held on May 1 of 2004 on the occasion of the retrospective exhibition, *MANUAL: Two Worlds—the Collaboration of Ed Hill and Suzanne Bloom*, spanning 28 years of work in photography, video, and computer-based media. Originally exhibited and organized by the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York in 2002, an expanded version of *MANUAL: Two Worlds* was on view at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston from February 29 to May 23, 2004.

above:
Broken Frame, 1996
Chromogenic photograph
Courtesy of René Wallace
© MANUAL

right:
Worldmaker, from the series *Two Worlds*
1992, Chromogenic photograph
Courtesy of Moody Gallery, Houston, Texas
© MANUAL

Anne Tucker: In 1979, at this very table in your home, the three of us convened to conduct an interview for an exhibition catalog produced by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston on the occasion of your show, *Suzanne Bloom and Ed Hill (MANUAL): Research and Collaboration*. That exhibition was much smaller and focused on three projects: *White Oak Bayou* by Suzanne, *A Phenomenological Study of Life Drawing* by Ed, and *Art in Context* by MANUAL. We jokingly referred to it as a three-person show! In contrast, the retrospective at the MFAH is solely of your collaborative work. One of the issues I'd like to discuss today is the process of assembling a retrospective. In the case of *MANUAL: Two Worlds*, this involved looking at 30 years of work and evaluating individual pieces as well as successive series in terms of a coherent survey. There was the consideration of what could and could not be borrowed for the show because of diverse reasons, ranging from practical considerations of size to economic factors, such as the cost of shipping work from various locations. More importantly, you had to evaluate pieces to be included in terms of central issues in your work—issues with which you began your collaboration—and how they evolved over time. Did the process of putting the show together shift in any way your understanding of your own work?

Ed Hill: It's hard to say whether it shifted, but the process certainly gave us an opportunity for greater clarity. Even though we're constantly re-evaluating our work as we prepare lectures and artists' statements for exhibitions, this retrospective, because of its size, was a chance to really focus on the totality of our work.

Suzanne Bloom: Preparing the work for the show, and especially seeing the early video *Running in Ricker's Field* [1976] with fresh eyes, really did affect us. We viewed it over and over again. This prompted us to think about using that same strategy to get into the landscape again, which led directly to *On the Verge*, our latest series of still images. Only this time we are walking, not *running*, through fields, woods, or on the beach.

The first gallery in the exhibition at the MFAH contains all the basic concepts and approaches we've used and built upon for thirty years. There are four different series which explore three different themes—culture, nature, and technology—and several different stylistic approaches, including both staged and hand-held photography, and still and time-based imagery.

Also, our use of sharp, detailed photography in the earliest work, like the black & white photograph *Lovis Corinth in Vermont* [1974], was reinforced during the period we were preparing the retrospective. We've spent the last six years making photographs with a tripod because the panoramic camera we used throughout the *Arcadia* project is so bulky. And much of the digital time-based work like *Big White Pine* required a tripod in order to maintain exact image framing for the animation process.

Another series in the first gallery, *Thirteen Ways of Coping with Nature* [1980-81], consists of photographs of mixed media, collage, and assemblage pieces—all processes we continue to use heavily, although now we do this through the use of computer programs rather than by hand.

EH: The process of doing the retrospective definitely brought us back to the beginnings of our collaboration. We had to pay close attention to thirty years of work because there were many decisions to be made. Of course, Ed Earle, curator at ICP, played a major part. He had a long list of pieces he wanted to include for which he had his particular reasons. Ed had his own take on our career.

One of the things implied by your question raises another thought: were we to start all over again, is it conceivable we could end up with a different show? I don't believe it would be radically different, but I certainly think differences would emerge and there could be a different take on the whole thing.

SB: For instance, we didn't include any of the photographs from the large series *Northampton/Houston Connector* [1976]. But, stylistically these are more representative of a kind of conceptual street photography, something we haven't done since the mid-70s.



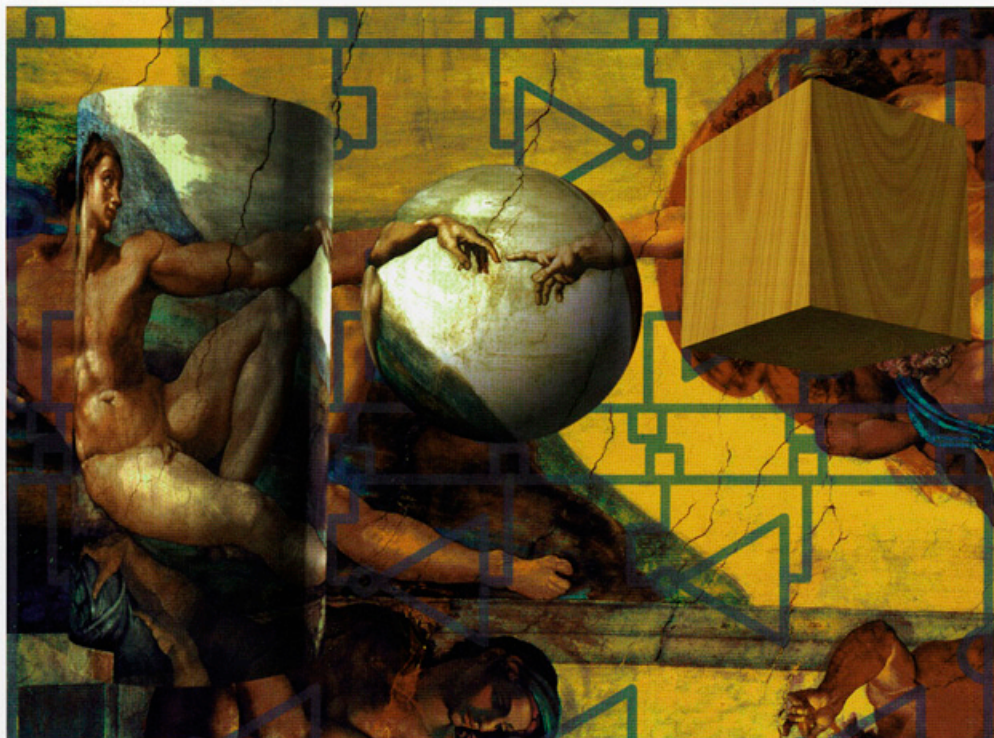
Starting in the late '50s, and well into the '60s, artists, writers, and critics looked at popular culture and its social significance in a different way.

AT: I could argue with that assumption. The phenomenon identified in that series is a geographic comparison between Northampton, Massachusetts, and Houston. Since then you have regularly commuted between Vermont and Houston, and the back and forth between these two residencies is very much a part of your work. One could argue that the *Northampton/Houston Connector* set a precedent in the evolution of your work.

SB: Good point.

AT: You referred briefly to the three themes in the first room. One theme is your commitment to the place of culture in your lives, in your intellectual lives. The *Art in Context* series is so much about revisiting Culture. Another theme is Nature, which relates to your Vermont existence, and the third theme is, as you have referred to it, a love/hate relationship with technology. One other theme has evolved, and I think it's an important one—History. Let's begin with the evolution and understanding of culture in your work. When one mentions culture, one tends to think high art, but you have engaged both high and low culture. Yes, there are pieces in the show referring to paintings by Goya, Velázquez, Rembrandt, and others, but popular culture is also very much a subject in your art.

EH: Starting in the late '50s, and well into the '60s, artists, writers, and critics looked at popular culture and its social significance in a different way. For example, they looked at pervasive television series and how TV encapsulated American life, hopes, and dreams; they looked at advertising, movies of the time, and, and, and so on. Any critical thinkers, for instance Marshall McLuhan, were doing this. It was in the air. I remember a particular occasion in the early '60s where a number of people were meeting regarding the founding of Hampshire College. As they were talking about curricula, I found myself arguing for the importance of popular culture entering into the academic scene. And now I think of the old adage, "be careful what you wish for," because popular culture, as defined then, has become our current hyper-media culture. Media dominates the popular mind-set. Media utilizes culture for its own ends. We're bombarded by popular culture. I really have developed an aversion to it. I'm turned off by most popular music, sitcoms, and especially reality programs. While I still understand their relevance as defining forms, I'm not engaged by them.



God is Wood, (Michelangelo), from the series *Art Through the Ages*, 1996, Chromogenic photograph
 Courtesy of Moody Gallery, Houston, Texas, © MANUAL

SB: But what is your favorite TV program?

EH: I don't have one anymore.

SB: Yes, you do. What about *The Simpsons*?

EH: Suzanne's right! *The Simpsons* are wonderful because they absorb everything and throw it right back at us. They are the one shining light on the scene for me. I know there are some other savvy programs, like *Six Feet Under*, but we don't get cable. And, the assault of commercials on Network TV is really out of control.

SB: When we began our collaboration both of us were very idealistic about photography. We thought of it as a democratic medium, a perfect medium for our '60s frame of mind. We didn't want to be elitists, didn't want to marginalize culture or make things of interest only to a small group of people. This was one of our reasons for dealing with popular culture. Also, at the time we did a lot of reading about the concept of received ideas and strategies for deconstructing them. Ideas, opinions if you will, come to people through their families, peers, and immediate surroundings. It's something most often one doesn't bother to examine. Personally, I sat in front of the television a lot as a child. I took in every single one of those programs from *Lassie* to *Superman*, *Lawrence Welk* to *Dragnet*.

EH: *Bonanza*?

SB: Of course! All of them. So, Ed and I thought we should examine and visually deconstruct various ideas we had "received" in order to reconsider what we really believed and what we thought was culturally worthwhile. In retrospect, however, we were/are probably pretty sentimental about our youthful pop culture experiences.

AT: Was moving from photography to include video, and eventually, working with computers, part of the democratization of your art?

SB: We made a conscious decision to do things with digital technology because that was the direction in which the language of the time was moving and we were going to go with it. I don't think it had to do with democratization *per se*, but more with the pervasive communication systems we could see were coming down the pike.

EH: Well, in terms of form, the answer is McLuhanesque: "The medium is the message." But in terms of content the Internet, which has egalitarianized content, didn't yet exist. If we had come to computers after the development of the Internet, we would say, "Yes, democratization was important to the process." But, although we do use the Internet, it doesn't engage us as a cultural phenomenon as much as it apparently does younger artists. We came to computers more or less to solve a pragmatic problem—putting text onto images. It didn't excite us in the same ways as the camera. The camera was, "Wow!" Cameras had been in our households all our lives, but all of a sudden something triggered an awareness of their image-making potential. In my case, it was seeing the 1967 Antonioni film *Blow Up* and realizing the excitement of photography. We had the same "Wow!" reaction to video. But our response to the computer, at least initially, was "We think this would be useful, but we aren't absolutely sure how useful."

SB: Also, the computer definitely presented something different in terms of learning. It wasn't as simple as picking up the video camera, reading the manual enough to get it working, taking it out and getting immediate results. Even though we also studied the mechanics of cameras thoroughly, we found out that with the computer, one really only gets out of it as much as one puts in, including a willingness to learn the technology.

AT: There's a very important difference here. You are both trained in painting, which has an ancient tradition. When you adopted the camera in the '60s and '70s, it had a tradition of only a hundred and

thirty years, but there were precedents. There were people ahead of you. When you began to use the computer, you had nothing to push against. You were, and have been, in the forefront of this medium as an art form. So, it's a very different kind of engagement.

EH: By the way, we consider ourselves part of the second generation of computer artists. The first generation was mostly bound to institutions or universities or corporations like Xerox or IBM where they worked with mainframes. These artists might have worked at home on a computer that was plugged into the mainframe by a phone line, but they needed the computational power of the mainframe to do their work.

SB: Personally, I find early computer work to be too driven by technology. Sometimes artists were desperately trying to simulate simple things more easily drawn with a pencil. They often wound up writing their own software just to make something appear, to visualize it. We didn't participate in that. We waited until there was software we could use creatively because we weren't really interested in being programmers. Write a program so you can make a specific kind of simulated paint mark? No way!

EH: Anne's point is quite true. This was not an established tradition which we could respond to and build upon.

AT: Even though there was a generation before you, the wealth of imagery produced by computers wasn't anything like what existed in the history of photography and, heaven knows, not what existed in the history of art! You both have the imagery from those two traditions in your heads. Those traditions are very much a part of what you do, but in terms of computers, you didn't have a tradition to call upon.

Before I continue the discussion about computers, I want to bring in one theme that we haven't discussed, which is Nature. I don't know of another instance where artists have maintained such a strong dual commitment to the world of imagery invented by artists and imagery that emerges from the tradition of landscape. Artists tend to be committed to either a landscape genre or they tend to be committed to invented imagery; but you two have kept your internal dialogue with that polarity. Is it largely because of the coexistence in your own lives—living in Texas and in Vermont? What other issues are involved in this commitment?

EH: Well, there absolutely are two passions present in our work. To put it in simple terms, both of us really love art and nature in general. I was taken to museums when I was a kid. My feet would get tired instantly, but I always came away excited. I was stimulated by art. My love of nature may have started out modestly—in the fruit tree grove of my back yard—but it was a very formative experience.

SB: My experience was similar. Our family home bordered on a small farm with a couple of cows and woods with lots of beautiful trees, and I was a devoted landscape painter before going abstract. We both have a long-standing relationship to landscape through the act of trying to interpret and contextualize it. And we both have spent lots and lots of time doing that. It seems our common goal was to get on some level with nature that wasn't superficial. We have an innate fear of the superficial.

EH: The point is, the incorporation of art and nature into our work is not just an intellectual thing. It's not just about critical targets. These are two worlds that really stimulate and invigorate us and always have.

AT: This is the perfect segue into the issue of History. Because, while this show evolved out of a commitment by Ed Earle and it opened at the International Center of Photography in New York City, we changed the show in Houston. That process involved time spent standing over models of the galleries and adjusting the existing show to the MFAH space. In that sense, it is a site-specific installation. Pieces were created or re-created to be in that space. And during this time we often talked about the three themes, nature, culture, and technology. But, since the show opened, we each have recognized issues that relate to history, including art history, broader intellectual histories, the history of popular culture, and even the history of the thirty years during which this work has evolved,

embodied in your work.

Times have changed around us. Being contemporary and staying contemporary has required a commitment to grounding yourselves in your time, but always in relation to what came before you. This is another distinguishing characteristic of you as artists, and therefore, of your art.

EH: I think that's particularly true in the case of the *Arcadian* project. But, first, let me back up. When we talk about Nature, that's a generic term. But in our art we have tried to give discussions of Nature a more specific shape, so it is not just a big, vague term. That is why our project *Arcadia* was more focused than anything we have ever done. *Arcadia* has an extensive history.

AT: When you say that, are you referring to your *Arcadia* project or the concept of *Arcadia*?

EH: Yes, the concept of *Arcadia*. Its history goes back to an actual place called *Arcadia*, but poetic myths took over early on, in fact, with the Greek poet Theocritus. We wanted to reach that far back in order to bring ourselves forward to where we are today in an informed way. We are still enthralled by the mythology of *Arcadia*, but with vastly different tools to manipulate our perceptions of that world. Making art using the computer is just a small instance of humans using computer-based tools to create and re-create the environment.

We made a conscious decision to do things with digital technology because that was the direction in which the language of the time was moving and we were going to go with it.

SB: As artists we have choices in relation to dealing with the subject of Nature and the environment. We could take a more activist roll, and we have occasionally made more issue-driven art. Our show *Forest/Products* at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, in 1991, was fairly didactic in an attempt to make contemporary environmental issues clearer. But since then, we have taken another approach, which has been to use history as a way to get back to the roots of these issues, back to the very beginning of the Western world's relationship with nature. *Arcadia* was structured as a poetic ideal and has firmly stuck in the collective human imagination. People may call it by various names—Eden, Paradise, etc.—but all imagine it as this wonderful place where all the problems of the city are magically resolved in the quietude of the country. People often don't try to understand the connection between these two places in relation to a whole-world environment. Whether or not taking this kind of historically informed, or, "long view" approach in our work is always effective for the audience is less clear to us.

EH: I was just going to add that ultimately the work won't survive as merely a lesson in environmentalism. It has to survive on its own as art.

SB: In relation to my saying that we have a dread of being superficial, I should add that we also are as capable as the next artists of being glib. We love to make images and we can slip into the facile, but we don't want to do just that.

AT: The thought of you two being glib makes me smile. I think your idea of glib is somebody else's idea of serious. If anything, I have always felt that the two of you so mistrust your innate ability to make beautiful art that you have resisted the inclination. In the last rooms of the exhibition there is a kind of mastery that often occurs in the work of artists with long careers. You seem more confident and less inclined to worry about being superficial or too aesthetically pleasing. You are so comfortable now working with the computer. You make these pieces that are just hauntingly beautiful.

On some level, you are more accepting of the fact that an intellectually rigorous component can coexist with an aesthetic beauty; an acceptance you wouldn't have allowed yourselves in earlier decades.

EH: There is a kind of irony that arises as a result.

SB: Throughout the *Arcadia Project* the work is purposefully beautiful and tragic at the same time. The multi-layered content and references are often thoroughly embedded rather than obviously inserted.

AT: The tree that you've chosen as the subject of your lengthy meditation—*Big White Pine* [2002-04]—is a grand old tree. It has reached a great age and has many broken limbs and scarring. One shouldn't just see it as beautiful, which it is, but should also think about the life this giant has led. Talk about embedded! So much history is embedded in that tree. How old is it?

EH: It's hard to say, but at least 100.

SB: The reason it survived is because it's actually a double tree. Loggers do not like that, so it remained untouched.

AT: So there is irony in the tree surviving because it is imperfect?

EH: Early on when we were working on the site where our house now sits, I took down a maple tree that was quite tall and straight. I wanted to give light to a really twisted yellow birch. It has great form to it. Our neighbor came down and asked, "What were you cutting?" I said, "I cut that maple over there." He responded, "So that ugly birch could survive? Really?" It was a contrast in aesthetics. For most of our neighbors, straight trees are the ones you keep because they make good lumber.

We brought in an arborist last year to cut and prune our trees in preparation for building our studio. Arborists work very, very, differently from loggers. Mostly they use the same tool, a chainsaw, but they go about cutting in an entirely different way.

SB: When they thin trees, they use exquisite pruning saws with fine teeth so that they won't hurt the tree as they cut off limbs and branches.

EH: And when they take down a tree, they climb it and take it down in pieces from the top, rather than just cutting it off at the base. It's quite dangerous.

— — —

AT: There is so much information that you've accumulated over years, you don't even consciously think about it. For instance, regarding embedded ideas, your relationship with the site is embedded in the work, as is your understanding of the seasons and their effects on the site. Time is another thing that we haven't talked about. Time as a concept is introduced in the video *Running in Ricker's Field*. And, there's humor in your running through Ricker's Field in the first piece in the exhibition and your walking through Ricker's Field in your last piece in the exhibition.

SB: We're interested in the difference between cyclical time—the movement of time from the harvest, to winter, spring, and then the growing season again—and linear time, which is more about the idea of a certain kind of development and progress.

EH: Right. In 1974, when we completed our tent platform, the first domestic structure on our land, Nixon was being run out of office.

AT: Actually, now that I think about it, the *Superfund* site pictured in *Post-Industrial Landscape, Verso* [2002] in the last gallery is probably contemporary with the life of the white pine.

EH: No, the Ely Copper Mine is older than that. It goes back to the early 1800s.

AT: There are issues that, I think, if people will take the time...

SB: Is there time enough these days for people to get involved in exhibitions of this kind? If they go to a natural history museum, maybe they expect to get immersed in that history and nature. But do they expect to get involved in that way in an art museum? Or, do they just look at form, the *gestalt* of a picture, which they can absorb quickly, and then move on?

AT: No, I think the difference, the big difference, in art museums

I've noticed in my life—the three decades I've been in art museums—is the amount of text on the wall and the acoustic guides that say to people there are issues to be understood if you're willing to take the time to read and to listen. The danger is that people feel that having read two paragraphs of a wall label or having listened to three minutes of a tape provides them all they need to know about the piece. They do not discover the kind of resonance that we're talking about between the pieces in your exhibition. If I could teach people one thing about looking at art in museums, it is to ask themselves why, for example, three paintings are hung together and, using their own observational skills, what are the similarities and differences between those three pieces. How much they would learn without our telling them anything! But that's not something that we teach in museums and certainly not in schools. I think the difficulty for museum audiences is that too many curators don't encourage museum visitors to think on their own. One of the pleasures in your exhibition is that it rewards viewers who take the time to contemplate.

EH: Actually, the *Big White Pine* piece was envisioned to confront the issue of "You've got 6 seconds to catch my attention." The piece is really meant to oblige the viewer to either slow down or move on. It's definitely counter to the hyper tempo of popular culture. Our aversion to today's culture is mostly because it's pumped up. It's adrenaline-driven. It's meant to speed you up and keep you going. We're trying to do exactly the opposite. We want the viewer to slow down and look. Actually, as a projected animation, *Big White Pine* should be installed in a public space where people move through and around it. During a whole day, they would see that it changes and is not the same picture they saw earlier.

SB: The animation cycle goes backwards through the daylight hours, 6 pm back to 7 am, but forward through part of three seasons (September to January), which are much more extreme in Vermont than they are here.

EH: Also, the changes in the piece happen so slowly that if you sit intently you may still not see them occur. That is, the changes are barely perceptible except between the distinct hours which were shot ten to fourteen days apart.

AT: The only way I can see changes occur [in *Big White Pine*] is if I pick out one place that has some sunlight on it. The sunlight moves across the tree limb or the background. Then I can detect the passage of time. Again, it's about observation and the analysis of one's observations. I think there's a certain generosity in your position about your audience's capacity to follow you.

SB: What do you mean?

AT: You invite people.

EH: We try to give people something back for their time.

AT: Audiences might prefer art about people, not Nature.

SB: That may be true. Some people are afraid of Nature.

EH: In the case of *Big White Pine*, we didn't photograph it by simply setting up a camera in the woods using a timer. We were there, whether it was warm and muggy or really, really cold. And the reward, actually, was the solitude of that hour spent out there at the site.

AT: Each segment was an hour long.

EH: And when it was really cold, we traded out at the half-hour point.

SB: We used liner gloves and outer mittens and took off the mittens to release the shutter.

AT: How often did you take a shot?

EH: The first time we did *BWP*, as we call it, it was every twenty seconds. The *BWP* on view at the Museum is the second version and we found it wasn't necessary to shoot frames every twenty seconds, so we took one every sixty seconds.

AT: And, because it's a digital camera, you don't have to stop and change film?

EH: Correct.

AT: All right, is there anything else either of you would like to add to this particular dialogue?

EH: I would like to clarify a little bit my feelings about working with

computers. A positive aspect is that the computer is so powerful. It's really seductive because it can do so many things really well. From a photographer's point of view, one can get inside an image, control color, value, sharpness—all sorts of things. It seems like instant control. And, if you are building a three-dimensional world, as we do, you start with nothing and can create whole new environments.

SB: The computer is the facilitator.

EH: On the negative side, everyone has had their bad days with computers, so they know what I'm referring to. We are hooked into systems that are constantly developing. Although this provides upgrades, it's also a negative, a real downside because of the planned obsolescence factor. It means we have to keep up with the technology. We can't arbitrarily decide, "Well, we'll just stop at this level," because everything will move on—capacities of the hardware/software, and the expectations of the audience.

SB: Operating systems...

EH: Operating systems forever change. So there is a kind of dependency on the industry which is rather daunting at times and can become a major distraction to making art. It grips you by the pocketbook and sometimes by the throat! Frankly, it's not a cost effective way to make art, nor is it an easy way to make art. That's not the attraction. It's the power of the tools and what we can do with them that seduce us.

SB: There are some pictures in the later part of the exhibition in which parts, maybe an inch along the top and bottom, had to be digitally rebuilt. We used the information in another part of the image to repair what was missing, or to even out the image borders, and so on. But this required quite remarkably time-consuming activities, mainly micro-managing an image.


AT: I hear you, but I have had very similar conversations with people in the past when they were working with black-and-white photography and killing themselves in the darkroom. I know photographers who wouldn't reprint a particular black-and-white photograph because it required so much attention in the darkroom. It was just too demanding.

SB: Burning and dodging...quite right.

EH: But you don't have to replace your camera every three years.

AT: However, the materials might get changed on you. Richard Misrach pre-sold a whole series of pictures and had to give the money back because the manufacturer changed the paper and he couldn't do what he used to do.

SB: Here's an example, though, where there has been improvement in making prints because of the computer. We had vintage prints from the series *VIDEOLOGY* that had lost color and contrast, so we didn't want to use them for the exhibition. Instead, we had fifteen of the negatives from the series scanned at Que Imaging [a digital photo lab in Houston] at a very high resolution. Previously, when we printed those same negatives in the darkroom, they were really hard to print. I can remember every single burn and dodge step needed to get something like the A-bomb picture the way we wanted it. The problem was the mushroom cloud. It has a red glow to it, but if one exposed the whole image enough to get the rest of the print just right, then there was too much blue in the cloud. And, there's just so much you can do in the darkroom with two hands. But, after scanning and manipulating the same image in the computer, the final print was perfect. Perfect! It was that way for all fifteen images from the series. Adjusting colors and fixing up problematic areas was a dream compared to the old methods.

AT: In terms of how we began this discussion, I think this last little bit is perfect as an ending because it conveys your relationship with technology, both in terms of your use of it in your art and how we are using it in our lives and in our society, or how it may be using/abusing us. 



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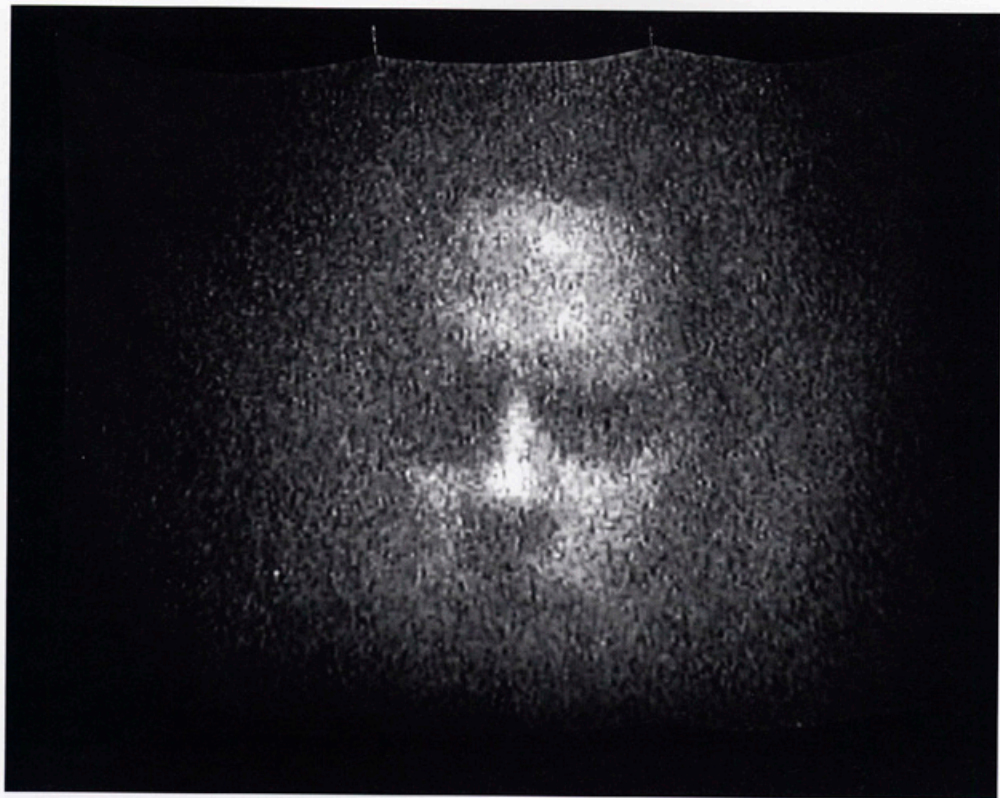
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WHEN ONE IS, FIGURATIVELY SPEAKING, CONFRONTED WITH A ghost, the first question that comes to mind is: What does it mean that a ghost is *here*? Ghosts of all kinds are materializing in the contemporary art world, and *The Disembodied Spirit* investigates why ghosts—representations of ghosts created by contemporary artists—are haunting us now. What is it about this particular time and this particular combination of social and cultural conditions that is bringing out the ghosts? Ghosts frequently indicate that some aspect of life, for better or worse, has shifted or been transformed; the ghosts in contemporary art are beckoning and cajoling us, with some urgency, to look more closely at the current state of human affairs.

Ghosts have haunted cultures around the world and across history. Nearly every discipline in the humanities is faced with ghosts and their metaphors, and each examines them according to its own particular methods and practices. *The Disembodied Spirit* investigates ghosts from a Western perspective, primarily through the lens of photography. Many of the works that will be discussed in this essay make use of media-based technology (photography,

film, video, sound) to represent ghosts and haunting, a fact that at first might seem insignificant given that media-based work is so prevalent today in the contemporary art world. However, that artists are using film-based media to create representations of ghosts at this turn of the century is of great consequence. Even when contemporary artists in the exhibition do not rely on photographic media to evoke the ghostly, their works can be and often are inflected conceptually by the photographic. To this end, it makes sense first to look back to the turn of the previous century—another moment when ghosts proliferated, especially in literature, but also in the now lesser known phenomenon of spirit photography. The works gathered in *The Disembodied Spirit* suggest links between spirit photography and contemporary works deploying the representation of ghosts, though the exhibition does not propose a linear historic progression. Rather, an understanding of spirit photography can inform and perhaps complicate our understanding of the prevalence of the latter-day ghosts with which we began.

Disembodied Spirit

by Alison Ferris

Editor's Note: This essay is an extract from a longer essay by Ferris included in an exhibition catalogue that accompanied *The Disembodied Spirit*. *The Disembodied Spirit* was first shown at Bowdoin College Museum of Art (September 25 – December 7, 2003), then traveled to the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City (March 5 – May 23, 2004), and to the Austin Museum of Art (September 11 – November 28, 2004). Austin Museum of Art, www.amoa.org. September 11 – November 28, 2004

A Boston photographer by the name of William Mumler claimed in 1861 that when he was developing a self-portrait—a photograph he had taken of himself alone in a friend's studio—a second figure appeared on the print. At first, Mumler dismissed the occurrence, explaining that perhaps the photographic plate he used to make the photograph was not clean. But by then, twenty or so years after the invention of photography, themes of Spiritualism had already been folded into popular discourse and photography. Though not a Spiritualist himself, Mumler was convinced by adamant believers that this "extra" appeared from the spirit world. After he was repeatedly able to produce photographs of sitters accompanied by spirits, Mumler opened his own studio in Boston. By 1869, he was so successful that he moved to New York City; and his studio there, according to a number of accounts, came to be frequented by some of the most eminent people in the country.

Spirit photography was a material manifestation of Spiritualism, a popular and controversial mid-nineteenth-century religious movement. Practitioners of Spiritualism believed in the immortality of the soul, and their beliefs were enacted by attempts at establishing communication with the dead through means such as séances, telepathy, and spirit photography. At the same time that Spiritualism was rising in popularity, many radical new technologies came into being: the steam engine, the telegraph, the electric light, the phonograph, and much more. Spiritualists embraced technology and all it had to offer in their attempts to contact the spirit world. Nineteenth-century citizens found the telegraph, which communicated messages over long distances, comparable to human mediums, who communicated between this world and the next, a correspondence that inspired the title of at least one Spiritualist paper, *The Spiritual Telegraph*. Science and religion, too, did not view their tasks as opposed but coincident inasmuch as they shared investigations of the parameters of "reality." Researchers were proving that people were surrounded by invisible forces such as gravity, electricity, and bacteria—all phenomena that seemed no more or less improbable or hypothetical than the spirit world.

Spirit photography directly enters the dialogue between science and spiritualism. Photographs of spirits became a way to make contact with the spirit world and to provide what was perceived as scientific evidence of an afterlife. The camera, a brand new technological invention, was generally regarded as a scientific instrument that produced objective images of reality. Of course, there was more to the production of spirit photographs than met the eye of the general public. The effects of spirit photographs were produced most commonly in a photographer's studio. During photographic sessions, sitters were posed as they would be in standard photographic portraiture of the time. While no spirits were visually evident to the sitters when the photographs were made, mysterious "extras" appear in the final prints: disembodied heads hover in the air above them, transparent faces glow on the sleeves of a jacket, ethereal figures gently place a hand on the shoulder of an unknowing sitter. But it was not simply the obscurity to the general public of the photographic process that led to the kinds of credulity spirit photography enjoyed. The same cultural forces that inspired the Spiritualist movement helped to animate a belief or a desire to believe in the photographic evidence of ghosts.

With an eye cast to the current work now being done on ghosts, we might ask some leading questions about its precursors. How does spirit photography, which has been, for the most part, viewed as an aberration—one of those eccentric and embarrassing photographic practices from the nineteenth century—now function within the history of photography? How have critics to date made sense of spirit photography? Finally, how can an understanding of spirit photography assist us in our understanding of representations of ghosts created by contemporary artists?

In "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny," the first in-depth critical essay on spirit photography, film

historian Tom Gunning can help us find an angle on some of these questions. According to Gunning, there was a constant debate within Spiritualist, Theosophical, and occult circles throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about what supernatural forces actually produced the apparitions in spirit photography. Gunning explains that while spirit photography at first functioned as proof, as records of the appearance of invisible spirits, soon thereafter—reacting in large part to accusations of fraud—spirit photographs were explained as "...products of unknown spiritual forces who used images of the dead as a way of communicating their existence to the living." Spiritualists believed that because the deceased were so dramatically transformed after death, they needed, essentially, to consult existing photographs in order to re-create their worldly selves before they could communicate effectively with the living. As Gunning observes, "We see here that a photograph, rather than providing indexical evidence of the appearance of the spirit, becomes a model for reduplication and the basis of recognition." In this, he writes, "Photography becomes independent of its ordinary indexical references, since supernatural forces use it primarily as a process of reproduction and communication." Spirit photography, according to Gunning, therefore disrupts the notion of the photograph as strictly an index, that is, something that can be traced back to its original. Instead, he writes, spirit photography "...reveals the uncanny aspect of this technological process, as one is confronted with doubles that can be endlessly scrutinized for their recognizable features, but whose origins remain obscure." As a result, what is haunting about these images is "...their very lack of tangible reference, serving even within Spiritualist metaphysics simply as a nostalgic reminder of how things once appeared, a symbolon passed between the living and the dead as a token of recognition."¹

That the photographs were fake is beside the point—what we see rather is the vanishing of a secure and stable index of the authentic, the "real."

Whereas the nineteenth century was characterized by the crisis



above:
Ralph Eugene Meatyard
Untitled, (Arched doorway with ghost)
1966, gelatin silver print © Estate of Ralph Eugene Meatyard

previous page:
Bill Viola
Memoria
2000, DVD playback equipment with DVD projected on silk

of faith that resulted, in part, in the emergence of Spiritualism, the turn of the twenty-first century may well be characterized by the crisis of the index.² With its antecedents residing in Spiritualism, the crisis of the index consists, in part, of the inability to recognize the difference between the "artificial" and the "real." Digitization, prosthetic and cosmetic surgery, cloning, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, virtual reality—this expanding field of activity, writes photography theorist and historian Geoffrey Batchen, "calls into question the presumed distinction between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, real and representation, truth and falsehood."³ These dematerializing technological innovations produce both anxiety and optimism, while simultaneously altering, quite dramatically, received notions of representation and vision. Spiritualism suggested that the human soul or consciousness could exist independently from its material form—a fantasy which found

vivid and uncanny expression in new technologies such as photography and the telegraph. Today, in a manner that recalls Spiritualism, cybernetics and virtual reality offer the fantasy of an ecstatically fragmented subjectivity, one that promises liberation, within fantastic worlds, from the material body and its constraints. Within the cultural space that cybernetics and virtual reality have opened up, we also find the manifestation of ghosts. However, as we will see, rather than simply embracing the promise of liberation, artists use ghosts to disrupt and complicate this fantasy.

Some artists in *The Disembodied Spirit* refer directly to Spiritualism and spirit photography in their works. In *The Poltergeist*, Mike Kelley depicts himself with ectoplasm materializing from his mouth and nose. This white viscous substance—often produced by mediums in the early twentieth century—dematerialized as soon as it was produced and photography was the only way to capture it. Using what Karl Schoonover describes as the "violent corporeality" of ectoplasm photography, Kelley offers an interpretation of the state of adolescence.⁴ A descriptive text that is part of the work attempts to rationalize superstition; however, the rationalization ultimately falls apart, overwhelmed by the substance of adolescence that instead permeates the text.

Portraits by John Baldessari and Ann Hamilton can be seen, too, in relation to ectoplasm photography. In *Strobe Series/Futurist: Girl with Flowers Falling from Her Mouth (For Botticelli) #1* Baldessari depicts a young woman—reminiscent of one of Julia Margaret Cameron's subjects—who quite gracefully expels flowers from her mouth. About the *Strobe* series, Baldessari writes that it is focused on time, "that is, a moment drawn out, extended, perhaps 'timeless' time, an interlude in which magic might occur."⁵ Ann Hamilton describes her photographs as recordings of the trace of the encounter with another.⁶ Hamilton generates her photographs within her body in a manner similar to that of mediums who produced ectoplasm with photographic images on them. She places a film canister punctured with a small hole in her closed mouth which she opens to expose the film, producing the negatives for her images. Kelley, Baldessari, and Hamilton suggest through their work the possibility of breaching fantasy and materiality, the psychic and the physical.

Photography stops and turns back time and also allows for the return of what came before. "Whatever its nominal subject," writes Batchen, "photography was a visual inscription of the passing of time and therefore also an intimation of every viewer's own inevitable passing."⁷ Bill Viola's *Memoria* can be understood, in part, as the way we experience looking at photography, particularly in this context, spirit photography. Filmed in low light with an old black-and-white surveillance camera, *Memoria* is a video projection depicting the pained face of a man which appears and then recedes from the surface of a silk cloth. The man appears to be struggling to communicate something of dire urgency, but just as we are about to discern what that might be, his image disappears again.

It is no coincidence that ideals of a disembodied self in both the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries evolved directly from radical media-technological innovations; these utopian visions offered new possibilities for life and experience within a drastically changing world. However, these utopian ideals were, and continue to be, shot through with anxiety, disturbance, and a kind of melancholy, qualities that are apparent in both spirit photography and, significantly, in much of the contemporary art included in *The Disembodied Spirit*. Clarence John Laughlin and Ralph Eugene Meatyard, for instance, depict the spectral in a manner that evokes the same pathos Barthes finds in photography—an indexical imprint of a "that-has-been" emerging from the presence of something that is no longer present. In fact, as cultural theorist Peggy Phelan points out, Barthes invokes terms such as magic and alchemy in his writing about photography, thereby coming close to "suggesting that photography is a medium, not only in the sense of an art form but also in the sense that it consorts with the spirits."⁸ Laughlin and Meatyard both regularly and





above top:
Ann Hamilton
Whitecloth
1999, mixed media installation: electrical
and mechanical components, wood, silk.


above:
Mariko Mori
Last Departure
1996, Chibachrome print,
aluminum, wood, smoke aluminum

unabashedly incorporated apparitions in their photographs of Louisiana in the 1940s and Kentucky in the 1950s, respectively. Both places were undergoing radical economic and cultural changes when each photographer was working; but rather than documenting these changes, both artists depicted their respective "homes" as haunted. One immediately thinks of Freud's uncanny or *umheimlich*, described most simply as an environment or circumstance with which one is familiar that becomes radically unfamiliar through the process of repression and repetition—here in Laughlin and Meatyard's work, the repression of a variety of social and racial pasts that would not fully disperse. By evoking the phantoms in their work, Laughlin and Meatyard express the experience of feeling simultaneously in and out of place, within and outside history.

More recently Gregory Crewdson explores the uncanny in his theatrical photographs depicting the unilaterally familiar American suburbs. Crewdson stages moments when suburbanites appear to be in the midst of some sort of transformation that is imposed upon them by a foreign entity. In *Untitled*, we observe a young girl's contact with the supernatural in the backyard: out of an ethereally-lit shed, the girl observes the emergence of hundreds of butterflies—the butterfly being a traditional, nearly universal, symbol for the spirit. Whereas the paranormal is imposed upon the characters in Crewdson's work, Leighton Pierce's *The Back Steps* depicts how the uncanny can be woven into part of everyday life. Pierce manipulates one shot of two young girls running down the stairs of his back

porch at twilight on Halloween night. The scene is slowed down, blurred, and repeated over and over again so that the girls are visible only as swaths of gently moving color. The sound, consisting of the girls' faint laughter and the rustle of their movements mixed with silence, is on a different loop from that of the visuals, so that time and motion are skewed to create a beautiful, if unsettled, unworldly backyard.

The artists in this exhibition do not inveigh against an encroaching technological alienation; rather, they embrace technology, if somewhat warily, and derive from it vocabularies of fantasy and imagination—seen especially in representations of the ghost—with which to analyze "reality" and transforming human experiences. For instance, several of the artists in *The Disembodied Spirit* play out the potentially liberating instability of human existence and identity by depicting themselves and others as otherworldly inhabitants. Both Bruce Conner in *Sound of Two Hand Angel* and Francesca Woodman in *Untitled, Rome from the Angel Series* depict themselves as angels. Placing themselves, figuratively speaking, between two worlds they suggest their contradictory desires to inhabit and escape the limits of the visible. In Mariko Mori's *Last Departure*, a less contemplative and far more theatrical work described by one critic as "a futuristic, kaleidoscope-eyed vision," the artist poses in Osaka's Kansai International Airport where she effects, the critic continues, "an ethereal, techno/traditional shaman—a human figure who serves as a medium between earth-bound humans and the spiritual unknown—who is at once both a cyborg and a bodhisattva figure from Buddhist Mandala imagery."⁹ All three artists depict an uncanny form of disembodiment which suggests, rather optimistically, that the subject has the option to leave the body and transport his or her consciousness to a distant destination.

Taken together, the works in *The Disembodied Spirit* offer a slightly different kind of argument—one that uses the inherent slipperiness and indeterminacy of the image of the ghost to evoke visible and invisible, multiple and opposing sensibilities about race, gender, history, politics, subjectivity, and representation itself. Sensing that we are susceptible to being seduced and placated by technology and its suggestion that we can escape social markers of gender, age, sexuality, and race, ghosts are entering the picture—particularly at the juncture of technology and representation—to trouble such benign fantasies. Social markers cannot simply be escaped because, as the ghosts in *The Disembodied Spirit* vividly remind us, they are too ingrained in all aspects of the human condition: fantasies of their disappearance, as we see throughout the exhibition, invite the specter and their return. But rather than simply state this as fact, artists in *The Disembodied Spirit* use the representation of ghosts to draw viewers in, to seduce them visually with phenomena that are difficult to explain, where time is obscured, where repetition is paramount, and disorientation abounds. Once lured into the representation of the ghostly, we find ourselves engaging with memories, stories, histories that, while they may not necessarily add up, cannot easily be forgotten. 

Endnotes

1. Tom Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny," *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, Patrice Petro, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 65-68.
2. Geoffrey Burchett, "Ectoplasm: Photography in the Digital Age," in *Over Exposed: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, edited by Carol Squiers, (New York: The New Press, 1999), 20.
3. Botchett, 19.
4. Karl Schoonover, "Ectoplasm and the Idea of Photography," unpublished paper presented at the 2002 College Art Association for the panel "The Truth is Out There: Photography and the Paranormal," organized by Mark Alice Durant and Jane Marsching. A revised version of Schoonover's paper titled "Ectoplasm, Evanesence, and Photography" appears in the Fall 2003 issue of *Art Journal*.
5. Coosje van Bruggen, John Baldessari (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1990), 35.
6. Judith Tannenbaum, "By Mouth and Hand: Ann Hamilton, 1990-2001," exhibition brochure published to accompany exhibition of the same name at The RISD Museum, November 9, 2001-January 20, 2002.
7. Botchett, 13.
8. Peggy Phelan, "Francesca Woodman's Photography: Death and the Image One More Time," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (Vol. 27, no. 4), 981-992.
9. Dominic Molloy, "Countdown Ecstasy," Mariko Mori (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 6. Alison Ferris is curator at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine.



Mapping Portland

by Phil Harris

The Portland Grid Project. 1995 – 2004

"...In our American cities, we need all kinds of diversity, intricately mingled in mutual support. We need this so city life can work decently and constructively, and so the people of cities can sustain (and further develop) their society and civilization...[M]ost city diversity is the creation of incredible numbers of different people and different private organizations, with vastly differing ideas and purposes, planning and contriving outside the formal framework of public action

— Jane Jacobs, from *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

Grid Participants (over time):

Jim Carmin
Tom Champion
Dawn-Starr Crowther
Deborah Dombrowski
Barbara Gilson
Ann Hughes
Tom Kearcher
Ann Kendellen
David Potter
Doug Prior
Christopher Rauschenberg
Rich Rollins
Patrick Stearns
Paul Sutinen
Bill Washburn

In the fall of 1995, Christopher Rauschenberg, a photographer in Portland, Oregon, had a realization. The realization emerged from a contradiction, and, as sometimes happens in these situations, an idea was born. The realization was that, although he believed that his photographs should help us notice that "the ordinary world around you is wonderful, and not ordinary at all, and you should pay attention to it," he was so busy with his not-so-ordinary life traveling to Paris, Stockholm, and Mexico City, that more and more of his photographs documented everywhere, in fact, except Portland. "My work [was] starting to mean the opposite of what I wanted it to mean: it [was] starting to mean, 'Don't bother with boring places, only go to exotic places.'"

Rauschenberg also realized that like most people, he had a habitual set of destinations and routes through town that he knew well, and that he wanted to go outside what he knew, to really get to know Portland in its entirety, to break out of his known little world. But he didn't want to pursue this as a solo project. If one photographer could write a love letter to a city with a camera (e.g., Atget), think how much more eloquent two or four or a dozen people could be. Rauschenberg also knew that he wasn't interested in simply "divvying up" the city among various photographer friends, in the interest of efficiency. The idea was

companionship—everyone would photograph everything, and then share the results. “I wanted to do the whole thing,” Rauschenberg said. “But I wanted company along the way.” Thus, the *Portland Grid Project* was born.

The *Grid Project* began as an amorphous collection of photographers, united by nothing except a love of the medium and a collective fondness for the city they live in. Most of the photographer/participants had day jobs, and most were connected through Blue Sky Gallery. Blue Sky has existed as a loose collective for 29 years, a membership-driven anomaly that has amassed an enviable prescience for showing undiscovered talent that has later been lauded by the cognoscenti. Every Wednesday night, for the last three decades, all members have been invited to help choose the gallery exhibitions. Christopher Rauschenberg has been one of the gallery’s guiding lights since its inception, when he and four other photographers established Blue Sky in 1975. He is currently co-director and board chairman.

In 1995, after Rauschenberg’s epiphany, he gathered a small group of photographers together to talk about his big idea: what would it be like to try to explore (and photograph) every bit of the city of Portland, over time? Estimates of the size of the city vary from 130 to 145 square miles, excluding outer suburbia; Portland is a relatively compact city, but the idea was still audacious. The photographers had mixed reactions—great idea, but a nine year commitment? Most of them were pursuing bodies of work, exhibiting, and participating in the photographic community on various levels. Did they want to put all that on hold while undertaking such a massive project?

The Grid photographers arrived at an elegant approach to a visual problem that looked, at first blush, overwhelming. Once a month, the members gathered at one or another’s home to review images they’d taken that month and to choose a locale for the following

“This weekend a man came up to me in our current grid square and told me, ‘There’s nothing to photograph here. It’s just a neighborhood.’”

—Christopher Rauschenberg, grid square J11, September 1997

month. This method ensured that a document would be produced over time that would be as imaginative, and as idiosyncratic, as the participants. The resulting pictures would be as varied in their depictions of time and geography as they would approaches and techniques used by those who wanted a piece of the action.

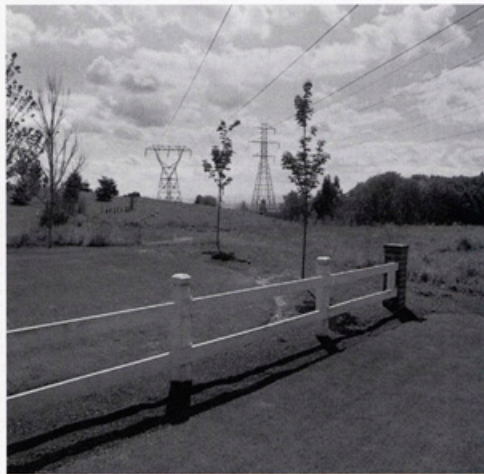
Portland’s two well-defined seasons (wet and dry), its mixture of urban, suburban, and quasi-rural scenery, along with two major rivers, and a wide seasonal variation in the amount of daylight, added plenty of built-in challenges to the ambitious project.

Aside from people with too much time on their hands, where does something like the Grid Project come from? Though this endeavor feels like a typically collaborative contemporary-art effort, its roots go back to both European and American photographic surveys and eccentric passions.

In France, the obvious precursors are the 19th century photographic inventories of Edouard Baldus (government-financed), and Eugène Atget (heartfelt, personal, and obsessive). These two men (along with the Bohemian writers, musicians, and painters of the Second Empire) established the image of “*Olde*” Paris in the popular mind. It was easy for Brassai, Doisneau, and others to follow in their footsteps, cementing Paris as the preeminent spot for romance (heartfelt or tawdry) on the planet.



above left: Tom Kearcher, N7, October 1995
above right: Rich Rollins, M6, May 2003
previous page: Doug Prior, F9 & 10, March 2003



month’s work. They’d cut up a AAA map of the city into its component grid squares and assigned themselves one square (roughly one square mile) of the city to photograph each month, by picking a square out of a hat.

Each person was completely free to interpret the designated locale in whatever style suited. The only constraints were geographical and temporal: you had to have at least one foot in the grid square while you took the picture, and you had to work consistently, so that you had something to show at the end of the

In Germany, photographers took a different tack. There, the fondness for monuments and ruins, and the nostalgic *temps perdu* desire to ruminate over them was replaced by a cerebral/mystical need to catalog people. Which brings us to August Sander, premier librarian of humanity.

Baldus photographed monuments and architectural achievements with the eye of a nationalist; Atget took in the fading Paris of his youth with an intimate nostalgia. But Sander approached the German people with rigor and political rectitude. His desire to pin down every



type of person by their profession, handicap, haircut, sartorial sense and/or social increment is unparalleled in photography. His indelible purpose has marked his descendants, Karl Blossfeldt and Bernd and Hilla Becher, and his grandchildren, Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, and Uta Barth (though their work has evolved to the point that its connection to Sander's meticulous cataloging can only be inferred).

In America, the need to document where we live and who we are (as a consequence?) has been a central strand in photography since its importation in 1839. The fountainhead of the landscape-as-mirror genre is probably Timothy O'Sullivan. O'Sullivan's Civil War experiences were doubtless partly responsible for the unique quality of his western expeditionary work. The haunted emptiness in so many of his images is the great taproot of American landscape photography: the tension between the enigma of the land and the human who dares to crawl across its crust.

When O'Sullivan's work is crossed with Atget's, their hybrid offspring sprouts up as Walker Evans. In Evans, the refined modern American sensibility appears: the tension between the restless and the fixed, the commercial and the private, the local and the generic. Evans said that what he prized as a documentarian and as an artist was the "vernacular." There has been a great deal of debate about what Evans meant by this word. But it seems from the evidence of his pictures that, if Evans was reticent when it came to explanations, he knew the "vernacular" when he saw it. His pictures are a document of home places: the handmade and homemade next to the manufactured; eccentric personal choices constrained by questions of livelihood; oddities of language, like backwater eddies in a world of burgeoning mass communications. Evans, like Atget, foresaw the withering of the sorts of idiosyncrasy he treasured, and reached the same conclusion: large leveling forces are unstoppable, but small treasures can be preserved, and photography is an ideal preservative.

From Evans, the impulse to photograph the man-made landscape

eventually gave rise to a group of American photographers that curator William Jenkins called the New Topographers: Ed Ruscha, Lewis Baltz, Robert Adams, Stephen Shore, Joel Meyerowitz, Joe Deal, and younger artists like Len Jenschel and Diane Cook. Though their differences as photographers are much more apparent than their similarities, these photographers share the same interest in a sense of "home" in the landscape, the tension between commercial culture, nature and the individual sense of self. Whether they are driven by a sense of joy, outrage, irony, loss or just plain curiosity, these artists have elected to explore the American outlook by way of the American outback, or at least the American backyard.

Since the *Grid Project's* inception in 1995, about a dozen and a half photographers have participated for varying lengths of time. The participants agreed to limit the number of people working at any given time by the amount of pictures they could look at in an evening. The consensus was that the most boring and unproductive squares were perfectly maintained suburbs. The houses were all set back so far from the street, and often so inaccessible on foot, that the pictures were hardly worth making. As Rauschenberg says, "No one ever got excited by perfectly clipped lawns." The best places, by some accounts, were mixed residential/commercial areas; alleys were particularly prized for their views of backyards, where life really happens.

Over the course of nine years, much of the original intent of the project has come to pass. Patrick Stearns, a participant for almost the entire nine years, says that the biggest eye-opener for him was "going to different locations around Portland that I had never gone to before, and probably never would have if it hadn't been for the Grid. And sometimes, it felt like I wasn't in Portland at all, but some other city, just because it was so unrecognizable to me."

Another participant, Bill Washburn, was amazed by the amount of shoreline inside the city limits, much of which he explored and photographed by kayak (which he dubbed "an unfair advantage").



above top:
David Potter, E5, April 2002

above:
Barbara Gibson, M9, December 2002

previous page:
Doug Prior, M9, January 2003

"If anything informs this area, it's water. You could forget it because we're in a city, but we're in the delta of one of the great rivers of the world...when you get out onto the water itself, and you get to see the point of view from the water, it's astounding."

The solidarity of the participants seems to have been one of the Grid Project's strongest attributes. Ann Kendellen, another long-time participant, emphasized that the "opportunity to get together with a group of photographers on such a regular basis, simply to look at each other's work was really valuable. And focusing on the same project and seeing how it looked to other people when they were out there, what it was they saw was really interesting." Members of the group would often see something that they knew would excite one of their colleagues, and it was not uncommon for someone to let the group in on a particularly good find in a grid square, or a hidden entryway or access route.

Rauschenberg notes that there were some unforeseen outcomes in generating this vast body of work. For one thing there are almost no pictures of people. People, particularly in some of the least populated areas, were not amenable to being photographed. And, although there have been some exhibitions of work-in-progress, there had been no culminating event planned for the Grid Project. The project, which has been financed entirely by the participants, does not, as yet, have either funding or venue to realize a major exhibition of even a small portion of the work that has been generated.

As one might expect in a long-term group project, the lineup of

the participants has changed over the years, and a few grey hairs have sprouted. Meanwhile, the city has grown, the rivers have flooded and receded, the economy has boomed, built, and gone bust. Participants have dropped out, dropped back in, changed their means and methods, seen their vision open, and experienced mixed feelings about the rising mountain range of images. At this point, by Rauschenberg's conservative estimate, some 20,000 prints have been generated, and a new issue has come to the fore: what to do with all this work?

"What are we going to do with this vast inventory?" asks Kendellen. "So many of us have so many things going on in our lives, and we know [it would] be a huge effort to do some kind of grand finale show, or if we were fortunate enough to be able to publish..." The end of the project, at this point, seems much less definite than its inception; but it's too soon to tell how the work will be shown, collected, archived. The ultimate concern for nine years has been the process, not the resolution of the product. The fact that Oregon ranks near the bottom in funding for the arts hasn't stopped people from participating in the *Grid Project*, but, as Rauschenberg says, "somebody's going to have to show some actual financial interest and some commitment to the idea to make [the completion and archiving of the project] happen." Although it might look to the untutored eye as if Blue Sky is a logical sponsor or venue for sharing the fruits of the Project with the public, the gallery is simply too small and too marginally funded to sponsor work of this scale and complexity.

Characteristically, the spirit of the group seems undiminished by the passing of the accumulation phase. Kendellen thinks the Grid photographers will probably continue meeting. "Even if we're not collaborating on a project, we've built this nearly-ten-year-old relationship of a certain kind, and we're all really reluctant to just end it because Portland's run out of mileage for us. Which it really hasn't

"The bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it and not at all famous to the one who is pictured."

— Naomi Shihab Nye, from her poem, *Famous*

in a way. I think some of the areas we've gone to would be really interesting to revisit."

Rauschenberg is more emphatic about making another circuit, a sort of photographic Saturn return. "A few months ago, I was scrambling down this really sharp embankment along the Columbia Slough, and I thought to myself, 'Well, let's see, I'm 52; nine years from now when I'm scrambling down this embankment I'll be 61. Well, whatever.' I don't know if I'll get my walker down there, but it might all be paved by then, anyway."

What is the significance of this project? For the participants, the Grid Project may be less about pictures generated than about initiatives taken and bonds formed. For the rest of the world, it's another signpost pointing in the direction that the arts seem to be headed: decentralization, collaboration, an attachment to the local and the regional. While a suburban consumer society (and its stepchild, the Internet) have encouraged us to think that everywhere is a bit like everywhere else, a few contrarians beg to differ. The stubborn specificity of where we live, how it feels, what it looks like—these are the real objects of wonder. ■

Phil Harris is a Portland, Oregon-based photographer. His images have been shown around the US and in Europe, and are held in various collections, public and private. In 2000, he published *Fact Fiction Fabrication*, a retrospective book of photographs.

Main Street, around the beginning of the 20th century. Note the variety of ground transportation forms—feet, bicycles, horse-drawn wagons, a trolle—but no cars yet. Courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center.



Our Town: Houston Past Present Future

by Peter Brown

This e-mail exchange took place on the occasion of *Our Town: Houston Past Present Future* by David Crossley and the Gulf Coast Institute at the Joan Wich & Co. Gallery, Houston, March 6 – April 10, 2004, as part of *FotoFest 2004*.

Peter Brown: You've lived in Houston for many years now and have come to know the city and its environment in ways that few of us have. You've been many things: a magazine editor and reporter, a computer graphics and multimedia pioneer, an environmental activist and organizer, a photographer; and back in the '80s, you were the first editor of *SPOT* as well as HCP's [Houston Center for Photography] second president. Talk a bit about some of the reasons why you feel you are where you are right now: the creator of a think tank—the Gulf Coast Institute—and an advocate for carefully planned change in a city that has not been known for thoughtful planning.

David Crossley: For me, my so-called "career" is a seamless string of connected periods. Everything, all the way from college, has been about communication and finding ways to use a growing skill set and to enhance those skills. You gain a lot of diverse knowledge, always acting essentially as a reporter and editor, and this leads to different fields of study. Writing and editing for magazines led to photography, which led to HCP, which brought a lot of visual experience as well as experience creating and operating a nonprofit. That led to 15 years running a commercial photography studio, which led to photo manipulation; and that progressed to multimedia and to the idea of using multimedia to provide environmental education, which led to the creation of Sense Interactive, the city's first

multimedia company; and that led to the loss of huge amounts of money but also to some experience in management and marketing. The basic failure led to transforming Sense into a corporate multimedia service company, and when the Web was invented in the mid-'90s, we jumped right into that and that led me to not liking business very much but liking the civic involvement I had with the Citizens' Environmental Coalition (CEC). That led to the realization that nearly all environmental issues are related to urban growth, and nobody was working on that, and it seemed to me the city needed somebody to study how cities work. So, I founded the Gulf Coast Institute and started reporting on urban issues. All the twists and turns of that career path mean I can now sit at a computer and spew out publications, images, web sites, PowerPoint presentations, and maybe 1,000 words a day of e-mail discussion as well as really crank things up in terms of civic debate. I don't know anybody else who has that whole bag of tricks.

PB: You are the founder of the Gulf Coast Institute. How did this think tank come into being, how is it funded, and what are its basic purposes?

DC: I was at the kickoff of the second phase of the big Environmental Foresight project that Houston Advanced Research Center began in 1998. The lunch speaker was David Crockett—yes, a descendant of Davy Crockett. He's a City Council Member in Chattanooga, which is an amazing success story about citizens turning around what was called "the dirtiest city in America." He talked about the role of the Chattanooga Institute, and I turned to Ann Hamilton from the Houston Endowment [an important funding source for local nonprofits] and said,

"We need a Houston Institute." It was like a hammer on the head, the realization that urban growth was the issue, and no one was working on that in our region. A couple of months later, I went to a national conference in Austin about something called "smart growth," and realized that what was missing from the civic discussion in Houston. The idea that regions are the important economic entities now, not just cities, led me to think that Houston was a little limiting in the name; so I moved [the Institute name] to Gulf Coast Institute. Today, I'm not sure that was a wise thing. The brand really doesn't work as well as Houston would have. As for funding, I always sigh and say we aren't funded, but that's not true. The first major funder was the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which was a big underwriter of the smart growth movement until the 2000 presidential election. Then we began to get significant help from the Houston Endowment. We also have an initiative called 1000 Friends of Houston (www.1000friendsofhouston.org), which is for individual donations, and together, they are the second largest source of funds. But basically we are not funded very well and are severely constrained by our inadequate capacity. Still, we've caused enormous change. The basic purpose, the mission, is very simple: improve the quality of life in the Houston region. We energized the quality of life movement, actually before the Institute was founded, when I was writing about it at the CEC in 1998. There's an economic argument for quality of life, and it's that in this knowledge economy, the skilled knowledge workers can live anywhere, so their top issue is quality of life. Generally, these people, who make up about 30% of the population, prefer a rich, diverse, urban

lifestyle, and Houston simply doesn't offer much of that. As it happens, the more urban space you create, the less you pave the surrounding environment, so the best economic driver is also the most efficient living system. And that gives us more green space. The whole range of environmental issues finds a cure in smart growth.

PB: Houston obviously has many environmental problems. If you were an environmental czar, appointed by Bill White [the current Mayor of Houston] and were given an insane amount of power, what would you do to begin to clean up the city?

DC: Wow, what an excellent idea! Well, first, I would immediately commit the City of Houston to create a general plan for future growth based on the vision and values of its citizens. That's the goal of Blueprint Houston an initiative we started in 2001. That plan would be holistic, sustainable, connected, and coordinated. In simple terms, such a plan would say we want to go generally in this direction over a long period of time with all the steps and policies to get there. And the city would be committed by law to go in that direction, and all public resources would have to be used so they wouldn't cause enormous digressions. Of course, the biggest dynamic you'd see in creating a general plan is the tight connection between land use and transportation. Today, we shrug our shoulders and say nothing can be done to use land efficiently and to tie land policy to a safe, convenient transportation system. This is incredibly wasteful, and it's having an increasingly negative effect on our health, which is basically what environmentalism is about, or should be about—human health.

PB: Your idea for the Midtown Park called McGowen Green seems one of those ideas inspired by some higher power. It makes all the sense in the world to me, and many think it should be implemented immediately. Describe your idea and give us a sense of its feasibility.

DC: There's a piece of property in Midtown that everybody calls the Superblock. It's a big piece of continuous land on the west side of Main Street, starting at McGowen Street and going south for four blocks with no cross streets. There's been a lot of discussion about what sort of development should go there. I was in New Braunfels floating on my back on this beautiful little stretch of the Comal River, and suddenly I thought, "How big is this? Could all of this fit on the Superblock? How much better would this riverine kind of setting be than a big apartment complex or whatever?" As soon as I got home, I downloaded a satellite photo of that piece of the Comal, set it to the same scale as a map of Midtown, and pasted it into the Superblock. It was perfect! Now, the Comal part turned out to be excessive from some people's point of view, but the nut of the idea was simply that that

property should be a park—a very rich and complex urban park, a botanical garden, a tourist attraction, not just a soccer field or a big lawn. Kevin Shanley of SWA Group [an architecture and landscaping firm] did a wonderful conceptual drawing that allowed my notion of little creeks and canoes, as well as trails, to wander around [the Superblock], but all centered on a formal lake with a big promenade around it and ever-changing flora that would provide something unlike anything we now have in Houston, which is just one of the best potential garden places on earth. Everybody I talk to seems to love the idea, and it's so sensible it's actually slowed down some development initiatives that were under way for the property. Property values always rise around parks, so, to put it simply, the City should be using parks and the Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone instrument to make the investment that will drive future property tax collections as high as possible while providing a higher quality of life. The bottom line is that Midtown is going to be a dense residential area, and it will be impossible to put in such a park later.

PB: Houston has obvious financial resources, from vast personal to corporate wealth, yet an incredible paucity of parks and open space. Do you think that as the idea of a more livable city begins to make inroads—with the new downtown, light rail, a new vision of the Bayou, *et cetera*—that these resources will be able to be tapped in new ways?

DC: In order to have access to our financial resources, we have to stop spending money foolishly, which means stop playing catch-up and start to plan how to get the most value out of our infrastructure investments before making new ones. People have tried to quantify it, but it seems that we spend somewhere in the neighborhood of twelve to twenty percent more than we have to because we don't want to plan. It's pretty clear now that the paradigm Houston uses for growth is the most expensive one possible, which not only means tax pressure but means we're not getting as much as we could for our taxes. If we would plan and find a citizen vision for that plan, we'd find [that] parks and other amenities aren't luxuries but essentials; and we'd use them to produce value as well.

PB: Tell me about the bayous, your sense of them historically, and what they might become again.

DC: Generally, our perspective on bayous has been that they should be in the back of everything, that they aren't natural amenities that provide a richer environment while doing massive natural service in draining water away. The concrete work that turned many bayous into sewers and drainage ditches prevented us from seeing how interesting they could be. We also see them

locally; that is, we see a piece of one bayou in our neighborhood, usually with concrete in it, and turn away from it. We don't see the whole enormous connected network of bayous. But there has been a vision of hundreds of miles of beautiful linear parks along the bayous for a century or more, and slowly more people are beginning to see that. The vision is basically that you could have trails and bike paths along all of them so that nearly every neighborhood has a nice place to go for a walk, or run, or bike ride, and those places would actually connect a lot of other neighborhoods, and to a great extent, many people could move around the city below the street network and away from cars. In many places, water taxis are possible. And if you began to plan so that schools, for instance, might be accessible from bayous, lots of kids could safely get to school that way. It's the most transformative vision I know of for the City, beyond the



Computer graphic of the Preston rail station in Downtown Houston. Courtesy of Central Houston Inc.

creation of the urban zone. But both of those are incredibly tentative.

PB: Your show at Joan Wich & Co. Gallery deals with a wide variety of types of imagery, all of which are used to illustrate a series of thoughts on the city of Houston. They verge from very specific historical documents to visions of the Houston of the future. I'm first interested in their provenance—what were your sources for the show?

DC: The historical pictures and documents came from the archives at the Houston Public Library. The modern photos came from a few sources including Metro [the Houston transit agency], Jim Olive, and Alex McLean. The prints that are about policy issues came from my computer, from work we do at the Institute, and the picture of a possible future we are constantly trying to paint. It's interesting how much the show came from data, which is a testament to the power of geographic information systems to transform dry fact into graphic information and knowledge. I assembled all of the material into huge Photoshop files that I printed on a 36-inch plotter, which is a fabulous tool. During the printing, I remembered what a pain it was to make such large prints in the darkroom and

thought about how far this photography business has come.

PB: What did you think of as the general outline of the show—the progression involved? Where did it go, and what were its major themes?

DC: The first thing we arrived at was a name. *Our Town: Houston Past Present Future* gave me something to organize around. I was fascinated by how much elegant and wonderful structure we've lost [in the city of Houston], so that first part, the Past, was a nice adventure. I began to see that Houston was designed as a truly urban place for the first 100 years or so. Main Street's first buildings were lined up urban fashion, and the street layout is a terrific urban grid that provided full connectivity and a very good pedestrian experience. Up until about the 1950s, you see [photographs of] crowds of pedestrians downtown, with a variety of transportation types, including streetcars, for a long period of time. Then, there's an aerial picture from South Main that shows the Shamrock Hotel in the foreground and Downtown in the background, and you can see the beginning of the great sprawling. The Present is a little underrepresented in the show, and we solved that spontaneously while we were hanging the show. Looking out the window of the gallery, you look right down onto the Preston rail stop; and we realized that was Houston's exact Present, its big moment of change. So we put the label for that part of the show on the window and said the Present was right out there. Nobody ever commented on it; so I think the idea was lost, but we liked it.

PB: I missed that too—but it's a great idea, even in retrospect.

DC: The back part of the gallery also has a transitional section about our natural environment, which is Past and Present, and poses some difficulties about the Future. That slides into a lot of demographics about who we are and who we are becoming and then the visions for the Future. These include the two biggest things we have on our civic plates right now, the Buffalo Bayou Master Plan and our decisions about transportation. It all coalesces in one print that describes the idea of creating a true urban zone around the rail system and makes the case that, rather than continue our current development patterns, which will cause us to develop 1,500 square miles of new land out in the prairies, wetlands, and forests, we could achieve all that growth in 73 square miles of modest urban density along the rail lines, mostly inside the Loop. I'm not recommending that; but somewhere along the scale from 73 to 1,500 we ought to look for some balance. So the essential message in the show is that we would benefit enormously from pouring a lot of



Main Street viaduct looking north, probably during the 1910s. Courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center.

public and private resources into re-creating and preserving the "city" part of our metropolis, and that would have great benefit in terms of saving wilderness and natural resources.

PB: Do you continue to do personal photographic work? And if so, has it been influenced by your interest in the growth of the city?

DC: When Bill Pogue and I closed our studio in the early '90s and sold all our equipment, I wound up without any camera at all. However, I had a pocket full of money and went right to the Camera Co-Op [a legendary camera store in Houston] and bought a little pocket camera. That's all I had. It proved to be entirely unsatisfactory for almost anything. What I was looking for was a way to get images into the computer directly, without going through all this lab stuff. When I could get a digital camera that was very small, I did—an Olympus. At exactly that time, I started to travel to cities to study them, and I took the camera. After my first long trip, I came back with several hundred images; and one day later, I gave a PowerPoint presentation about what was happening in those innovative cities. Now I have a much better and smaller Canon and thousands of such images on my hard disk from a couple of dozen cities. Is that personal photographic work? It is for me. It's how I show people what I'm learning.

PB: There is a lot going on here in town, photographically speaking. Is there a way that other photographers—all genres: art, photojournalists, commercial, students—might be able to help with some of the themes we've discussed?

DC: Boy, that would be great! One of the things that I wanted to do with the show was get some photographers to give me some of their favorite Houston shots, photos that show some surprises about our city. I failed there, just didn't get to it. But I'd love to collect such pictures and perhaps do something with them next year. I'd like to

establish an ongoing documentary project that begins to show the richness and diversity of the place and would be very happy to speak to anybody who's interested, particularly if they're interested in managing such a thing. I [also] very much want to publish an urban Web magazine, but it needs all these writers and artists to make it work. Pictures are the whole deal. I can talk until I'm blue in the face, but it's always pictures and other graphics that do the trick.

PB: As you've said, most of the images in the show have been computer-generated. I know you've done a lot of digital work yourself, and I'd be interested in any general thoughts you might have on the digital revolution in photography and the way it impacts the type of work that you do now.

DC: I remember the first time I used Photoshop and just sat back in my chair and said, "That's it. No more darkroom for me!" I also realized then that it wasn't "photography" that I was really interested in; it was "image creation." And computers are the greatest tools we've ever seen for that, of course. When you're a propagandist, and I mean that in the best definition (not the one about deception), you have an unprecedented array of tools to work with. And it's not just about the creation of communication vehicles, but about the increasingly seamless flow from information that's scattered all over the world into your computer and then out again—as something new—a chart, or map, or article. So, in the history of communication, I feel very lucky to have had the tools coming at me as fast as I could learn them. So that's where we are. Unprecedented power in the hands of individuals! **E**

For more information on the Gulf Coast Institute, contact David Crossley at crossley@gulfcostideas.org, or go to the website at www.gulfcostinstitute.org.



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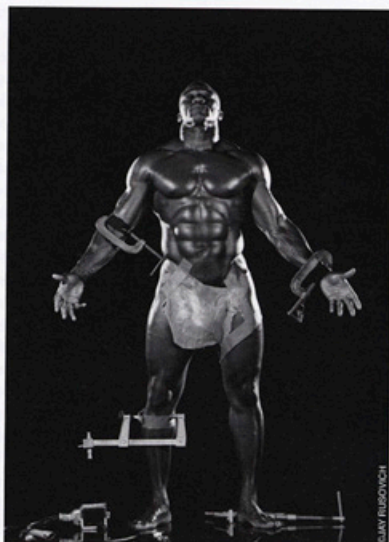
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Revealing Images

Migrant Peruvians Photograph their Lives

by Jerome Crowder

This article is based on Jerome Crowder's research and teaching experiences during his tenure as CIES Fulbright Visiting Professor in Anthropology, Universidad Nacional del Altiplano, Puno, Perú, August-December, 2003.



Ruben, Parents, 2003, original in color

Although categories seem so arbitrary, I call myself a visual anthropologist—one who studies culture through still images or video. In my case, I work with photography. Over the past decade, I have focused my research on the processes of urbanization and migration in the Americas, particularly among Aymara-speaking migrants who live in the Andean cities of La Paz, Bolivia; and Puno, Perú with whom I live for extended periods of time (often 6 months to a year). While I consider myself a serious photographer (I am senior photographer for the Texas Learning and Computation Center at the University of Houston and I exhibit my work regularly) I use photography in my research as a methodological tool, not as documentation, but as a subject for discussion and reciprocal gift-giving. Photography offers a glimpse of Aymara migrants' lives as aspects of their personalities, their families, and their issues of urban survival that I would not otherwise have.

In my work, I try not to emulate Sebastião Salgado, Raghubir Singh, or other well-known documentary photographers and photo journalists. I want to decrease the implied distance between myself as photographer, and my hosts, the subjects. I have perused photography books, viewed exhibits, and browsed the web pages of many documentary photographers; and they all seem to miss something fundamental in their stories—the voices and perspectives of the people themselves. Documentary

photographers tend to be more like flies on the wall, observing and recording the "other" rather than participating in the lives of the people they photograph. As a photographer and ethnographer, my goal is to explore and demonstrate the similarities we share as people from different cultures, not sensationalize our differences. I feel I must involve migrants in the photography process itself, like Robert Flaherty did in the early part of the 20th century, without his taxidermic intentions.¹

Over time, the migrants I work with become my best critics, embracing those images they feel most accurately depict their lives or explaining why others do not. Often, they ask me to take photographs of special events and celebrations (baptisms, funerals, weddings, first hair cuts, etc.) which allow me access to important cultural happenings where I meet more people to work with. Afterwards, I give prints to the residents and discuss what the images mean to them. These photographs become keys to understanding the events from the participants' perspectives and mementos for their families. But special occasions are infrequent, and instead, I have found that mundane experiences reveal the most about how people negotiate their lives through culture. It is in our everyday behaviors that we find our mutual ground, what it is that makes us human.

Even though I live with Aymara migrants for long periods of time and speak their languages (Spanish and Aymara), I am still a

foreigner, or as I am called, a *gringo*.² And because I am not a native, I cannot see the world as they do. I am like a three-year old, learning the rules as I go along. For example, sometimes residents ask me, "Why don't you take a photo of that?" pointing to something that did not immediately catch my attention, like a person, or car, or building. My ethnocentrism is reflected in the images I want to make, influenced by years of viewing other photographers' images of people who are not like me, but who are the "other." No matter how hard I try to be culturally relative, accepting of the Aymara worldview and cognizant of migrants' perceptions, my images continue to mimic the documentary style I see repeated in my culture, frustrating me because they do not adequately represent the relationships we have developed over time. Ultimately, I realized that my friends, the Aymara migrants whose lives I share, should take photographs as well. Maybe, I hypothesized, by combining their images and commentary with mine, we could create a discourse about what life is really like in the urban Andes.³ Armed with this pedagogical framework in mind, I returned in the fall of 2003 to Puno, Perú, a city of 100,000 people on the shores of Lake Titicaca (12,507 feet above sea level). My five-month mission was to teach visual anthropology at the Universidad Nacional del Altiplano and work with Aymara migrants who travel to the city from surrounding villages. Aymara-speaking

people have populated the Titicaca basin for nearly two millennia, subsisting as agriculturalists and pastoralists, cultivating legumes and tubers (e.g., various types of potatoes) and raising camelids (llamas and alpacas).⁴ Because of external pressures like land reform and the global economy, Aymara peasant strategies no longer support their families in the countryside; so they move to cities to sell their goods and to find work.

Having previously worked with urban Aymara migrants in Bolivia, I wanted to approach the Peruvians differently. During this visit, my objective was to understand through photography how rural Aymara conceptualize and interface with the city. To do this, I took fifteen 35-mm film cameras to distribute to people who live in the countryside and travel to Puno and other regional cities relatively frequently. They were to take photographs of the things which they deemed important or significant to their lives: people, places, events, etc. My proposition was to provide them with the camera, the film, and the processing if they would share their images with me, explaining where they took the photographs and discussing why they felt the photographs were important to make. Their photographs would then be a *passé-partout*, of sorts, to migrants' lives, illustrating the processes of urbanization and migration that would not come from typical lengthy interviews or awkward observations on my part. Instead, with their own cameras, migrants would take photographs of their world and explain them to me, effectively removing my cultural constructions to learn more about theirs. This method seemed to be less ethnocentric and more participatory, a proactive solution for a historically subjective enterprise.

While designing the project, I assumed that it would be a self-selecting endeavor, as anyone who wanted to take photographs themselves, or who asked me to make photographs for them, could participate. Before embarking, I did not even know the people who would be using the cameras, but I did understand the environmental conditions in which they would operate; so I chose simple, dependable point-and-shoot cameras (using standard AA batteries) and color negative film for the project. (I forewent digital options because of their price, power consumption, fragility, and technological sophistication.) Because photography is especially expensive for Peruvians, I knew most migrants would not be familiar with cameras, film, or processing; so I would cover all costs. My plan was to teach migrants the basics like how to change a roll of film and more complex ideas like how to spontaneously document an important thing or event in their lives. In return, I only asked that they tell me about their photographs, explain their motivations, interests, and other stories associated with their images. In the

end, I wanted the participants to keep the cameras and continue documenting their lives through photography.

Within the first few weeks of living in Puno, I met several potential candidates who spanned the gamut in experience, motivation, and performance. By the end of my first two months there, I had distributed fifteen cameras and was regularly meeting with migrants in various locations to discuss their photographs or to supply them with more film. One young migrant woman, Lydia, who worked and attended school in Lima, already used a very inexpensive camera to document her family that she visits once a year. I had to keep up with her, and all of the participants, regardless of where she was, when she wanted to talk about her project or needed more film. We had to make dates to meet weeks in advance, so I really had to live up to my promises to come back and pick up their film, develop it and take it back. Some wanted to discuss photo techniques while others barely wanted to even discuss their images.



Yamilet, Data entry at the elementary, 2003

Amadeus, another participant, was a 50-year-old gentleman who lived in Moquegua and who returned to the countryside near Puno every three months to check on his aging parents. Amadeus had never owned a camera before and was eager to learn about photography. He peppered me with questions about my personal photographic equipment and asked me to photograph him and his family. Amadeus returned to Moquegua with a camera and a few rolls of film, but I never heard from him again. Later, his wife told me that he had assumed the camera was expensive and had swindled it from me with the intention of selling it for cash. I realized these types of situations would occur, no matter how well I screened the participants; and in the end, Amadeus was the only real scam I worked with. However, another trifter was a thirty-something woman named Lourdes who only took ten photographs in twelve weeks. She regretfully explained that she had not traveled back to her *tierra* as she thought she might and was not sure what she could photograph in Puno. Luckily, a number of participants embraced the project. Gabriel, a 17-year-old male shot eleven rolls in ten weeks and Javier, a 20-year-old artisan found photography to be another way of expressing

his dynamic culture.

As the project progressed, I reflected on the work of other social scientists who used photographic elicitation in their research. Surprisingly, it wasn't as straightforward as I had assumed. I had overlooked the significant cultural hurdle of interpreting photography as a medium and not simply as a tool. Photography, I realized, is loaded with cultural significance I had not foreseen, their reaction to which taught me as much about them as their images. Just as other anthropologists before me, I had assumed the migrants would understand a Western belief in the essence of photography, of image making, of recording events to re-live and share with family members. But after talking with the participants, I realized that their conceptualization of a photographic image, what it means and how it is used, did not coincide with mine in the least.

In North America, we grow up seeing images of ourselves and of others, of things we know as well as things unfamiliar to us, and we perceive how an image is a



Gabriel, Water Pump, 2003

representation of an event, person, or place. However, in the Andes, photography has an inherently different meaning. It is associated with wealth and authority. I assumed the migrants' compositions would illustrate their world view, and I had not considered how their *not* taking photographs demonstrated their relationship with photography. In other words, by deciding to participate and take photographs (or ask to participate but not take photographs) reflected their perceptions of photography as well as their understanding of who I was. Regardless of all expenses being covered, migrants were still quite conservative with their film consumption and their choice of subject. Sometimes they only took one or two photographs and explained that they didn't want to waste film. Or, they only took photographs of things they thought I would be interested in seeing (please the *patrón*). After shooting three rolls, Javier explained that he finally believed that I didn't care what he shot. "You gave me this camera, the film, what am I supposed to think? I made photos to please you. I figured you were a foreigner and you wanted photos of things you couldn't take yourself. So I took them for you." Other participants loaned the cameras to their friends to take photographs

of their families and events, demonstrating their intrinsic nature of sharing resources with people whom they trust. I was not interested in right or wrong behavior, I simply wanted to observe what participants would do with photography and how it could capture a facet of their lives otherwise unseen or not understood by outsiders.

The first week of September, I met Ruben, a 32-year-old man whose neighbors in the small lakeside village of Titilaca considered him crazy or "ill." As we became friends and developed a relationship, Ruben explained how his parents could not afford to support him when he was 8 years old so he was sent him to live with his aunt and uncle in the border town of Tacna. His relatives promised Ruben's parents that he would go to school and work to earn his keep. Ruben worked smuggling heavy sacks of grain, which the uncle sold in his store, across the Chilean border. When Ruben was not working, he was locked in his room, unable to leave the house or attend school. Ruben returned to Titilaca when he was 16 years old and had to enlist in the army to support himself. Since he was illiterate, he was sent to protect the frontline in the governments' war on terrorism with *Sendero Luminoso*. These stressors, among others, affected his ability to settle into village life when he returned to Titilaca, making him despondent.

— — —

I gave Ruben a camera to divert his depression, thinking that it might give him something unique to do. Ruben eagerly took to photography, soliciting his friends and neighbors for photographs. One of his images shows his parents standing in the plaza of a nearby town, Ilave, where the weekly market draws farmers from all around. "They go here on Sundays to purchase things they need and trade potatoes," he explained. In his photograph, Ruben's parents stand at attention in the center of the plaza in front of a tall, half-constructed building that rises behind them. One day, I showed some of the migrants' photographs to Luperio Onofre, a Peruvian Aymara anthropology colleague at the University. "Very interesting, this one," he singled out Ruben's image. "You see, this photo demonstrates the migrant's interest in progress, to be modern and sophisticated because he has placed his subject directly in front of a tall, half-completed building." I thought about the two different interpretations of the same image, both of which I understood, but one I knew was based on Ruben's personal experience and our relationship, whereas the other provided a more distanced, critical commentary. Both men were correct in their views, for each man's opinion reflected their relationship

with the subject. Ruben described his parents as people in a popular environment, whereas my colleague saw Ruben's photograph as an expression of an Aymara migrant who seeks a better life, who may have subconsciously placed his subjects in the frame to reflect his aspirations. Ruben's interest in photography stimulated his expression of explaining the lives of the people with whom he lived. Whenever we met, we talked photography. Flipping through his images, Ruben enthused over the details about each person pictured and his relationship to them. By December, villagers no longer referred to Ruben as "crazy" but instead as "the one cured by the camera."


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Regardless of the pitfalls and misunderstandings, in the end, I discovered participants' images successfully demonstrated a migrant worldview depicting family members, modes of transportation, animals, and home environments—things important to them. Sometimes multiple subjects were crammed in the same frame, sacrificing their size while maximizing their quantity. Other times, the images were of specific people, places, or events, none of which made much sense (to me!) without an explanation. Their commentaries and photographs reflect their exposure to and understanding of photography, their relationships with those around them, and especially the influence of a *gringo* anthropologist who was not as neutral as he intended to be.

Perhaps the most difficult issue I dealt with during this participatory project was restraining myself from imposing my ideas of composition onto migrants' images. In my own photography, I express the intimacy of life by filling a wide frame with candid moments of the people with whom I work. The participants' images appeared to lack context, looked bland, and were difficult to interpret. However, the participants' explanations precipitated a deeper understanding and interpretation of the world. For example, Ruben chose to photograph the people in his village as they stood at attention, expressionless, and far away from the camera. He explained that this was the way people are used to having their pictures made in school and in the military (the two most frequent places peasant farmers encounter photography).

Another gentleman, Pelucarpio, combined all the elements of his life into one image: his house, his family, their bicycles, his new-born calf, and the surrounding mountains and trees. Huddled around the calf in front of their adobe house, Pelucarpio and his family wore their best clothes and stood erect for the camera. "This photo," he proudly explained,

"represents everything in my life. Isn't that what you wanted?" Giving the *gringo* photographs of things tourists are interested in seeing seemed reasonable to them, especially since I was paying for them. Because time did not allow me to build close relationships with every participant, about half of them saw me as nothing more than a foreigner, projecting their interpretations onto me and the project itself. Their discrimination or biases towards *gringos* would ultimately affect the results, but that is normal for anthropological research. As a colleague solemnly states when discussing people's behavior, "sometimes when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." Through this project, I wanted to give migrants new tools to describe their world and encourage them to try something new; however, in hindsight I was really asking them to speak my visual language. Their dedication to making images they thought I would appreciate reflects a long history of working for *patrones*, be they Spanish colonialists, academic researchers, or other tourists.

Ultimately, the migrants' photographs reflected a level of trust. Those who realized that I kept my word (by developing, printing, and returning all of their photographs) found it easier to make more images of the things they thought were interesting. The project allowed people who are usually spoken for by anthropologists, tour guides, and government officials, to speak about their lives as migrants, explaining what they do, how they survive, and who they care for everyday through photography. Their words and images circumvented an imposed bias and inherent fault of basic ethnography by giving the people a tool (although packed with other assumptions and biases!) to demonstrate their understanding of their world to someone whom they trust and who cares about their lives. Ultimately, these images are important to them because they document their history to share with family and friends, shedding light on their lives in ways a visitor would never see or understand on their own. 

Jerome Crowder is a lecturer in the Department of Anthropology and a senior writer/editor and photographer for the Texas Learning and Computation Center at the University of Houston.

Endnotes

1. Flaherty made the film *Nanook of the North* in 1922 to demonstrate 19th century Inuit culture to a North American audience. He asked contemporary Inuit to wear clothes and use utensils as their ancestors had, in order to preserve their memory.
2. The term *gringo* carries a negative connotation with it in parts of Latin America; however, I embrace the term in the Andes as a self-deprecating strategy, acknowledging my heritage and position, which serves to deflect most ill intentions.
3. This is not a novel idea, even in Peru. TAFOS (*Talleres de Fotografía Social*) or Social Photography Workshops, were conducted with indigenous people in several Latin American countries to photograph their lives through their own eyes.
4. The Spanish introduced sheep, pigs, and cattle as well as a variety of other vegetables.

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Water and the West, an exhibition of eleven photographers at Williams Tower during FotoFest 2004, was a collection of images from a variety of locations, all raising the same question: Can photography change human behavior?

Documentary photography in the western United States was supported by the U.S. Government from the 1860s onward to survey the resources available for population expansion and commercial application. The litany of photography's successes has traditionally included the creation of national parks by persuading Congress and Easterners that some of the tales were true, thereby encouraging western expansion.

One of the traditions of documentary photography lies in the belief that by photographing certain conditions, one can change them, through a sort of alchemy. Examples frequently cited include child-labor in the early twentieth century, conditions of poverty, U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and prisoner abuse in Iraq (which stands in marked contrast to the other cases because the perpetrators provided the evidence used against them through their own photographic activity).

Faith in photography's efficacy to alter human behavior has been based on twin pillars of naive trust: first, that photography doesn't lie (what you see is what you get); and secondly, the assumption that good citizens, when presented with the evidence of terrible wrongs and injustice, will demand an end to the pictured wrongs.

The need, desire, and ability to alter photographs have existed since Daguerre and Fox Talbot. Adobe Photoshop allows a new pixel level of intervention, but tricks of the trade have always included ways to coax different truths from the lens than what the laws of physics and optics were able to produce.

The photographers included in this exhibit want to create change, and primarily they, too, have placed their faith in the ability of the camera to produce "just the facts" sufficient to raise consciousness, alter behavior, and save the planet. Fifteen years ago, they formed the Water in the West Project "... committed to using photography to encourage the American public to consider the political and environmental implications of water policy in the western United States," writes John Pultz, curator of an earlier exhibition of their work at the University of Kansas.

Collectively, they have documented how water has been used in the West for agribusiness, industry, entertainment, and recreation. Many of the photographs examine the movement of water from western states to the cities of Los Angeles and San Francisco in pipelines and aqueducts.

The approach taken by the majority of these photographers is within the documentary mode: the neutral distance of the "objective" topographical. They would have us believe that this is what we would have seen if we had been there.

Their artist statements make clear they believe strongly that by documenting certain

conditions, other people will share their response, and the behavior they see as destructive to the planet will then cease. Photographer Laurie Brown writes, "I am looking at visual evidence of the suburban growth taking place on the city's (Las Vegas) outlying edges, where there has been relentless development of, and expansion into, the rural or wild tracts of the surrounding desert." But not everyone sees the desert, or even open land, as valuable in its undeveloped state. Photographer Peter Goin believes "human tampering with the natural world has made the Earth itself an artifact, for the process of civilization has been one of domesticating nature." Robert Dawson captures the opinion of all the photographers with his statement: "Certain photographs document abuse, while others examine the complex, evolving relationship to water that I hope to influence with this work."

These statements reflect the good intentions of documentary photographs to change human behavior. They say, "Look at this, see here, pay attention!" But are they just preaching to the choir? If you already think that using large amounts of water to keep a golf course in the middle of the desert is obscene, then you will view these photographs with a certain attitude. But what if you are a golf enthusiast, travel the world to play golf, demand a good smooth, well-manicured course, wherever you want to go? Perhaps you see these images in a different way. Do the images only serve to reinforce your existing attitude toward water usage, or is there something capable of altering your perceptions? Is it possible for this approach to turn our uses of water from fact into a moral question?

Others of these photographers have taken different stances. Ellen Land-Weber has taken

Water and the West

Williams Tower Gallery, March 12 - April 12, 2004, Houston, Texas

by Paul Hester



straight-forward views of a marsh in northern California that was created in an abandoned industrial site to treat wastewater and collaged them with animal species that might be found there "following prolonged global warming, global cooling, genetic engineering of animal and plant species, or all three."

Sant Khalsa installed boxes of bottled water (with the word "Watershed" on them) and documentary photographs (entitled *Western Waters*) of retail water stores, to "address the commodification of nature, water as a consumer product, and human desire—a never-ending thirst. The photographs will serve in the future as a historical document, either registering a fleeting fad or laying the foundation of what will have become commonplace in our society."

Sharon Stewart's documentation of a New Mexico community's cooperative maintenance of their shared irrigation ditch (*acequia*) "gives insights into sustainability through cooperation" by focusing on intimate human gestures and quiet observations of small-scale solutions.

Geoffrey Fricker combines his photographs of man-made structures with quotations from public documents "to mirror the values of a wide range of organizations within our community... Words seem to develop a rich and contradictory complexity, creating convoluted and circuitous language that is much like the natural meander of the river itself."

One group of images stands apart in this exhibition. Mark Klett's pieces suggest how a radical reordering of priorities, a shift in perspective, might come about. Klett's work first came to my attention with the photographs of *Second View, the Rephotographic Survey Project*, in the 1970s, with its representation of change using "then & now" comparisons of views by a group of contemporary photographers, based on 19th-century survey photographs by, among others, O'Sullivan, Jackson, and Russell. Some of the pictures show no change in the passage of one hundred years, others present dramatic human presence. Taken together, the images

undermine the idea of a single point of view—as iconic monumental landscape.

Perhaps inherited from traditional landscape painting that invested so much time and materials into heroic views of majesty, early landscape photography also sought bigger prints with bigger cameras, and emphasized notions of a correct, unique, one-point perspective. But these *Second Views*, by providing us with the context of time and the additional information gleaned from the process of finding, determining, and duplicating the original point of view, require us to let go of our "either/or" approach to judging "the best picture" and offer instead the possibility of a "both/and" acceptance—a more inclusive way of seeing.

In 1990, Klett made a panoramic photograph of San Francisco based upon an Eadweard Muybridge panorama of 1878. Both photographer's use 13 separate exposures linked together to give their final image a 360-degree view of the city from Nob Hill. Notes included in a publication (*One City/Two Views*, published by Bedford Arts, 1990) of the two photographs describe Klett's realization that Muybridge had to remake one of his panels, apparently by a change in the direction of the lighting. Klett writes: "... This incongruity interests me because it reflects a reality of making photographs, and a choice that he made in response to a problem."


Between the making of these two panoramas, a nineteenth-century camera, called the Cirkut panorama, offered the possibility of making a seamless panorama with a revolving camera that pulled 8 feet of film past a quarter-inch slit. Many high school class pictures were photographed with Cirkut panorama cameras in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The photographer carefully mapped an arc on the ground, lining up the graduates in a gentle curve, equal distance from the rotating lens of his view camera. The fleet of foot would attempt to run past the sweep of the lens to appear at both ends of the picture, which is not a single moment,

but a series of moments, 10, 15 or 20 seconds long, presented as, and assumed to be, the solitary, singular instantaneous flash of a snapshot. It is instead a narrative of time, with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

In *Water and the West*, Klett presents panoramas that contain several incongruities. Two of the large-scale photographs of adjacent frames include photographs made by other photographers of the same place, many years earlier, collaged in geographic logic with his contemporary frames.

Learning from his earlier work and the example of Muybridge, Klett has surrendered to the inevitable, celebrating the discontinuous nature of panoramas comprising sequential frames and concluding that his subject is not geography but time. Rather than blur several different exposures into the appearance of one moment in time, he combines time and space. Continuity is provided by the geography of the landscape, but time has been called into question. Different times of day, different seasons, different years, all collide in the space of this one geographic moment.

If Renaissance perspective placed man at the center of the universe, controlling nature through surveillance and defining our place in the universe above the fields and the animals and the infidels, what does this multi-layered elision of vantage points mean? That we don't own the land, or the water, or the oil? That unilateral actions of domination are short-sighted, presumptive, narrow-minded, suicidal?

These panoramas imply a cycle, a larger point of view, slipping past the one-point perspective of camera vision to a new understanding of time, nature, and water. Through the engagement necessary to read these images, our assumptions about the order of things are questioned, and in the working through of our answers, it is possible that our mind will change about the way things are and how they might be. 

Paul Hester is a photographer living deep in the heart of Texas.



Mark Klett
*Deer Creek Falls Over Two Days
and One Night*
2002
(original in color)

FotoFest 2004 celebrated its 20th anniversary as a leading photography festival in the world. Each year, *FotoFest* co-directors, Wendy Watriss and Fred Baldwin choose a theme—this year it was “water”—as the central motif of the works selected. The month-long biennial event includes city-wide exhibition programming, film screenings, a print auction, and educational discussions based on the theme. One of the most popular components of *FotoFest* is the *Meeting Place*, a portfolio review that pairs emerging and mid-career photographers with curators, collectors, and art publishers from museums and galleries throughout the world.

Rather than assign a single writer to attempt an overview of the frenzied thirty-days, we selected a range of arts professionals to tell us how they felt about the work shown, the influence of the theme, and the experience of the *Meeting Place*. We thank the following who contributed: Roy Flukinger, Kelly Klaasmeyer, George Krause, MANUAL (Suzanne Bloom and Ed Hill), Linda Walsh, and Clint Willour.

Skimming Fotofest 2004

Downstream

by Roy Flukinger

There was that point in the *Meeting Place* where the “water” theme for *FotoFest 2004* became just a little surreal. One day the luck of the alphabetical seating chart placed me in the center of a row with a direct, head-on view of the entrance door. Jake Mooney, the Daily Time Schedule Coordinator, Jenny Antill, the *Meeting Place* Coordinator, and Dave Wilson, volunteer, had finally gotten all fifty of us reviewers to our seats (a monumental feat second only to making cats march in line!) just as Jake announced the start of the first session. The entrance to the room filled with a human wave of participants. *Meeting Place* volunteers and staff ran for cover and headed for higher ground. I looked up to see a flood of faces, figures, feet, and ‘folios burst through the doorway and head our collective way. If they had been water, my feet would have been wet by the time the first participant reached my table.

Ah, I do love the *Meeting Place*!

Perhaps it is just because I have been fortunate to have been invited to every one of the past *Meeting Place* reviews and have never had a conflict so pressing as to not be able to attend. The daily morning and afternoon sessions fill up rapidly; and despite the busily regulated schedules, there never seems to be enough time for participants or reviewers alike. In fact, the schedule of evening activities and levels of personal

stamina permitting, I often find myself tacking a few more individuals onto the afternoon sessions. This year, I even had the opportunity to seize a table in the lobby on a day off and see over a dozen more bodies of work. I even had some quiet time for a leisurely and enlightening conversation with long-time friends and photographers like Craig Barber who lives out of daily conversation range in upstate New York.

I also look forward to purchasing new work at the *Meeting Place*. As curator of the Photography Collection at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, I am often fortunate enough to have a small budget for acquisitions. When I see high-caliber work, I often buy it from participants on the spot.

And, I’d like to think, my comments during the review session give something back to a number of photographers who’ve taken the time to share their work, their ideas, and a bit of their lives, with me. I hope that the majority of the mail deluge I get after each ‘Fest is genuine and goes a degree or two beyond someone just wanting to sell me prints.

In fact, I value the *Meeting Place* most because it provides me with an opportunity to learn from the photographers themselves. At the Ransom Center, we are fortunate to collect the works of a tremendous number of photographers. They are historically important, influential, creative, and significant artists. Unfortunately, the vast majority of

them are also dead! I can usually get a decent dialogue going with a work of art; but I also enjoy a personal exchange from talking with an artist whose work we collect or might collect in the future.

For me, the exchange with participants and their work makes the *Meeting Place* alive! It’s a robust and ever-evolving experience, where I can meet old friends, make new acquaintances and also see what makes new generations of image-makers tick. I may learn how one photographer spends a week to trying to save a failed picture and how another creates a remarkable image without being able to explain why, or even if, it is outstanding. The review session is a concentrated lesson in that ceaseless-yet-never-totally-successful attempt at trying to fit mere words to the profound richness of a photograph.

Many people ask how we reviewers hold up over days and days of looking and talking. Your admiration should go to all those participants who share with us so intensely this culmination of their art and hearts. After all, they have journeyed to Houston over many miles, left behind work and family, plopped down their money, and received slots of 20 minutes in which they are to place pieces of their work and their lives before arts professionals who they may or may not have heard of and probably have never met. Then they must smile throughout whatever we may say about the bare pieces

of their labor and their love that lay between us on the table. They are the ones with true fortitude, talent, and endurance. I applaud them and hope that they never stop coming.

And I hope that Wendy and Fred continue to invite me back. Place me downstream again and let the flood of photographers wash over me once more. I am not all wet. I am refreshed anew!

Roy Flukinger is Research Curator of Photography for the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin.

Kelly Klaasmeyer on FotoFest 2004

"Water" translated into ridiculously literal subject matter in the majority of works on view at FotoFest 2004. Water and its attendant issues are intriguing and politically provocative; but changing the theme to, oh, I don't know, maybe *sunsets*, might be the only thing that would result in a higher percentage of clichéd images. There were strong works like Edward Burtynsky's images of ship-breaking or Susan Derges' huge photograms of water, but the problem also had to do with quantity. Even when works were individually successful, so many images of water shown together, well, *diluted* each other.

FotoFest's film and video series fared better. It was well-selected and diverse but with a manageable number of works presented. They ran the gamut from documentary to experimental and addressed a range of issues, ideas, and images related to water. The water theme was reinvigorated through the communicative powers of film and video and they also provided a welcome change of pace from the overabundance of static water images.

A theme isn't necessarily a bad idea—it can be provocative and serve as an interesting way to organize and present work. The best solution would have been to curate a nice, tight, and considerably smaller exhibition around the idea of water. (The *Water in the West* exhibition at the Williams Tower Gallery was the most cohesive segment of FotoFest.)

In its exhibitions, FotoFest is also undermined by a reluctance on the part of organizers to open themselves up to new media and broaden their definitions of photography. Works that push the envelope of traditional photographic output need to be included. There is a lot of strong, photographically-derived, contemporary art out there that does not fit neatly into a frame and hang on a wall.

Kelly Klaasmeyer writes about art for the Houston Press.

The International Meeting Place

March 12-25, 2004

by Linda Walsh

On my third try, the planets were aligned: I was chosen by lottery to participate in the

portfolio review session known simply as the *Meeting Place* that takes place during FotoFest. This good news meant I would spend what initially seemed an ungodly sum showing my work to many of the world's foremost critics, publishers, curators, and photography collectors.

Here's how the *Meeting Place* works. The computer assigns you four or five reviewers a day based on your priority choices. Each reviewer is assigned a table with a number. Each day, participants mass in front of the doors to the large meeting

sold six of his prints to his first reviewer.

More often, *Meeting Place* contacts offer a good beginning. You need to go back to those reviewers who offered help, let them know you appreciate their comments and expertise, and keep them informed about your work and your accomplishments. This requires a level of follow-through and organization that I am still working on. The opportunities, though, are well worth it.

Linda Walsh is a photographer and psychologist based in Houston, Texas.



George Krause, from the *Sfumato Portrait* series, 2004

room where they are expected to find their reviewers. When the moderator says, "You may enter the room," it feels like the beginning of the California gold rush with everyone racing to lay claim to "their" reviewer. If you were at the front of this group and happened to stumble, you would be grateful that the Texas Medical Center was near by.

So, with the cost (about \$700 for a 4-day pass), the perilous scramble, and months of preparation, the question arises, "Is it worth it?" My answer is a resounding "yes" (as long as you remember to leave your ego at the door!). One reviewer may love your work and want slides and offer promises of exhibitions, whereas a reviewer at the next table may recommend you look at other work (a sure sign that he or she thinks your work is a poor imitation). The old saying is true here, "It is a short walk from the palace to the outhouse."

The reviewers are chosen for their knowledge and ability to give useful critiques, and the process works. This past year, friends came away with sales in their pockets and excellent contacts for future exhibitions. One friend who purchased a single-day pass from another participant

George Krause on his Sfumato Portraits at FotoFest 2004

For many years, I have wanted to explore an idea where the face is viewed as one would a landscape, a terrain full of peaks and valleys. It wasn't until I arrived at Tylee Cottage in Wanganui, New Zealand for a 6-month art residency (October 1997 to April 1998) that I found the perfect lighting for this series I've titled *The Sfumato Portrait*. As I climbed the stairs and reached the second floor landing, I discovered a small, strange skylight situated in the middle of the slanted ceiling. It is this slant and the thickness of the skylight walls, with the sunlight coming in from behind and wrapping around the head that reveals the sculptural quality of faces in such a surprising way. The position of the subject's head is usually the same—looking straight into the camera lens. This frees me to concentrate on capturing the essence of the person in this unique light source.

Before leaving Wanganui, I measured the width, height, and depth of the skylight at Tylee Cottage so that I could re-create the *sfumato* lighting with a "portable skylight." To further intensify the effect of the light, I added mirrors on the four sides of the new model and replaced the unpredictable New

Zealand sun with a powerful strobe. I use a large-format camera with 4"x 5" black-and-white film. At first, I printed on 16"x 20" silver gelatin paper. Now, I scan the negatives, digitally manipulate them (with Adobe PhotoShop), and output to large-format (3'x 4') museum-quality paper with archival-pigmented inks. This fantastic new medium allows me much more control and creative freedom.

I have set up my portable *Sfumato* skylight at the past three *FotoFest* Meeting Place events (2000–2004). I invite participants, reviewers, and *FotoFest* staff to pose for a brief photo shoot that takes only a few minutes. The photos seen here are from the 2004 Meeting Place.

George Krause is a photographer based in Texas. More information on Krause and his photography can be found at www.georgekrause.com.

Wading Through FotoFest 2004

by Clint Willour

I must admit that I did feel a little waterlogged by April 1st. Having trekked through a half-dozen or so downtown spaces as well as Vine Street Studios, Williams Tower Gallery, the New World Museum, The Station, Project Row Houses, and the Rice Media Center—not to mention dozens of galleries—my brain was flooded with liquid images. A few standouts still sloshing around in my memory include:

Susan Derges' amazing Shoreline photograms (the most amazing of which—a triptych—has found a permanent home in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston) at the New World Museum; Mark Klett, Geoffrey Fricker, and Ellen Land-Weber in the *Water in the West* exhibition at the Williams Tower Gallery; DoDo Jin Mings' *Seascapes* at Houston Center; Bohncang Koo's *Fountain*, JungJin Lee's *Ocean*, Helen Zout's *Water as a Graveyard*, and David Maisel's *The Lake Project* at Vine Street; David Goldes' *Looking at Water* at One Allen Center; Edgar Moreno's powerful images from the *Memories del Agua: Orinoco River Project* at The Station; Thomas Joshua Cooper at Texas Gallery; and Sally Gall's photos of *Subterranea* at Parkerson Gallery.

In the non-water category, a few of my very favorites were Gay Block's gutsy confrontation with her relationship with her mother Bertha Alyce at the Houston Center for Photography; MANUAL's enlightening 30-year retrospective beautifully installed at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; John Heartfield's photomontages at the Holocaust Museum Houston; Kelli Connell's *Double Life* at Lawndale Art Center; perennial *FotoFest* favorite Oscar Muñoz's vertigo-inducing *Ambulatorio & Re/Trato* at Sicardi Gallery; and Nancy O'Connor and Michele Grinstead's haunting (perhaps haunted!) installation at 5004 Feagan Street.



George Krause, from the *Sfumato* Portrait series, 2004


All in all, this event was one of the more enjoyable and even *FotoFest* presentations ever. I just hope my shoes will dry out before *FotoFest* 2006!

Clint Willour is Curator of Galveston Arts Center, Galveston, Texas.

Reflections on FotoFest 2004

By MANUAL (Suzanne Bloom and Ed Hill)
"FotoFest rocks!" the younger set would say. We're inclined to suggest that it resonates and that its form, by now, resembles more of a forum than a festival, one with a global reach. There is a core body to *FotoFest* and several arms extending out to the museums, independent commercial galleries, and alternative spaces. The question of whether *FotoFest* works better with or without an overarching theme may be moot since it's been successful both ways. If *FotoFest* is motivated by an issue, then it seems appropriate to collect the best work circulating around that issue, or commission new work, and present it in that context. Based on the usual thoroughness of Watriss' and Baldwin's search, they can justly claim to be taking the pulse of things

through the work they bring to Houston. The other exhibition spaces may support *FotoFest*'s thematic project; but if not, each in its own way can bring other dimensions to the whole concatenated program on photography and media spread widely throughout the city. As we see it, over the twenty years the *FotoFest* biennial has existed, it has become increasingly important to the cultural viability of the city. The risk for all concerned may be too much familiarity leading to a place of taken-for-grantedness or even a state of enervation—which inevitably follows each month-long *'Fest*. Plain and simple, if *FotoFest* ceased, for any reason, it would be a major loss to Houston, and at this point, the rest of the photo/cultural world.

All that said, our favorite "water" show/installation this year was Brazilian artist Edgar Moreno's *Memories of Water* held at the Station. The work's sociological and anthropological grounding forged into poignant visual (and verbal) poetics, resonating with and moving us toward another level of appreciation for the human and ecological richness of Moreno's subject matter. 

Exhibitions

Haunted

Inhabited

Michele Grinstead and Nancy O'Connor
5004 Feagan Street
Houston, Texas

March 13–April 8, 2004

Cynthia Freeland

Inhabited is a multimedia installation with furniture, objects, photographs, and two single-channel videos. This work was included in the *Houston Area Exhibition* at the Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, Houston, Texas, June 25–August 29, 2004.

Imagine the story of how the exhibit *Inhabited* came about. We can visualize it as a movie—a film about a haunted house. In the opening scenes we see a happy young woman out walking her handsome dog along pretty suburban streets. Suddenly she stops, transfixed by the sight of a dilapidated little house with a “For Sale” sign out front. Next we see her, now changed into a little girl, tip-toeing around back where she sneaks in an open door and enters the house, her bare feet crunching through dead leaves as she goes up the steps. Like any foolish heroine in a horror flick, she just doesn’t know when to run away (even though the dog’s hackles are rising). She, Michele Grinstead, goes inside to find empty rooms where time stopped fifty years ago. The deep aqua walls are stained, the green chenille couch is spotted with cigarette burns, and an empty can of Dinty Moore beans sits on a peeling linoleum table in the kitchen. Two battered cabinet doors are plastered with notes about appointments, phone numbers, and reminders to “Turn off the lights.”

Is this creepy enough for you yet? No? Well, just wait. Now the intrepid heroine pads up the stairs. Again, more signs of habitation. The bathroom shelves are full of ancient cosmetics. The bedroom closet holds a rack of dresses kept pristine in dry cleaner bags. Just as in the movie *Sixth Sense*, we can almost see the atmosphere become chilly as frosty breath fills the air. Our heroine senses the presence of a ghostly woman. “Who are you?” she asks, “and what is it you want of me?” The answer comes in a flash of insight: the ghostly woman, Juanita, is not menacing, only sad. She just wants to be remembered and recognized as a person who once lived a life here with her own possessions, thoughts and feelings. Long ago she inhabited this now-empty house. She wants her life to be acknowledged, if only briefly, before the little home becomes just another West University tear-down.

Inhabited is the result of Grinstead’s strong feeling of obligation to Juanita. The photographer brought in her friend, video artist Nancy O’Connor, to collaborate in recording a memorial to Juanita’s lingering presence in the house. They combined their efforts into a haunting, creepy, and lyrical installation that includes not only O’Connor’s videos and Grinstead’s photographs, but also many literal remnants of the house (which they salvaged before it did indeed get torn down last January). The visitor will find here the actual dirty old sofa, sputtering lamp, linoleum table with its empty bean can, shelves of cosmetics, and the rack of dresses

shielded in plastic.

The entry part of the exhibition features Grinstead’s huge (50 x 50 inch) color Lambda prints. Some, like *Bed Jacket*, successfully evoke the strong sense of a bright presence animating bundles of old fabric. *Sofa*, a close-up of a cigarette burn, shows in almost nauseating detail the decay of a life, with implied associations about death and corpses. The most striking image by far, *Inhabited*, reveals the photographer lying nude on the dirty sofa. In this empty room with its lurid shadows and filthy carpet, she looks small and vulnerable. Yet her large dark eyes stare quietly out at the camera. Somehow she has managed to relax and simply *be there* to repossess that space, even though the couch we actually can examine in another part of the exhibit makes me shiver with the sense that it must be full of “cooties.”

O’Connor worked with Grinstead in creating two videos. The first, a one-minute loop, was exhibited along with the linoleum table and other items from the kitchen. It shows old sponges and the windowsill over the sink with views out to a leafy tree. The artists explain that a neighbor told them Juanita’s son Bill lived on in the house many years after his mother’s death, but had recently been taken to a nursing home. It seems extraordinary that Bill never did anything with his mother’s things. Was he lazy, or perhaps comforted by them? Beside the Dinty Moore can on the table sits a big old faded pink box with roses and the word “Mother” on the cover. It once held Valentine’s candy but is now stuffed with clippings, most of them yellowed old poems saved from newspapers dating as far back as 1908. Some of them must have been treasured by Juanita’s own mother. There are photographs showing her, together with sympathy cards Juanita received after her death, in another part of the installation.

The artists’ second video was an eight-minute long piece, screened over the sofa where you could sit (if you dared) to watch it. It was the lyrical heart of the exhibition. The video’s beautiful images re-created Grinstead’s entry into the house and her encounter with all its empty but haunted spaces. We witness the effective transformation of the photographer into a barefooted little girl and even hear the dried-out crunching leaves as she goes up the back steps. A haunting but lovely humming (from O’Connor and Laurie Ware) makes the video feel dreamy rather than creepy. In a lovely sequence, Grinstead rustles through the bags of preserved dresses. She selects a ruffly formal maroon gown, and actually puts it on. It fits perfectly! On her it looks new and splendid. Happy now, Michele/Juanita dances through the house that the artists have decorated with pink rose petals. This work is eerie enough that it manages not to be too sweet, and it keeps the entire show from being overwhelmingly depressing and dreary.

I couldn’t help but be reminded when I saw *Inhabited* of Roland Barthes’ powerful book about photographs, *Camera Lucida*, which was prompted by reflections on the death of his mother. In his grieving process, Barthes looked helplessly for a photograph that would recapture his mother’s “essence,” until he finally found one that showed her as a little girl. This lyrical book offers one of the best statements I have read about the power of photography to make the past live and to bring back the dead. Photography (and photographic media like video) serve up a paradox: they make the absent become present. Barthes wrote,

For Death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life. Contemporary with the withdrawal of rites, Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into a literal Death. Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print!



Michele Grinstead, *Inhabited*, 2003,
48 x 60 inches, lambda print

Inhabited is a very “feminine” exhibition. I don’t mean by this that it’s “feminist,” rather, it manifests a female sensibility. Although Juanita’s son Bill lived on in the house after her death, and although it features images of her husband (Bill’s father) Beau, the house remains a maternal space, with its sad pocked surfaces, crinkly dresses, antique candy box, and dried-out jars of ointments. The strong presence of Juanita’s own mother through yellowed newspaper clippings, photos, and cards, adds to this matriarchal aura. The installation is likely to work more powerfully on those who, as I do, grieve over the dementia or deaths of their mothers, grandmothers, and old great-aunts. Or again, any grown adult child who has faced the hard task of disposing of closets full of their dead relatives’ clothes may also be gripped with poignant nostalgia and understand why these artists became so haunted by Juanita. We can hope that through their artistic tribute, Grinstead and O’Connor have released Juanita from her ghostly visitations, reminding us at the same time of our own mortality.

Cynthia Freeland is a philosophy professor at the University of Houston, and author of the book *But is it Art?* (Oxford, 2001).

Endnotes

i. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Translated by Richard Howard (New York, Noonday Press, 1981), p. 92.



Julio Zaccagni - Fire Controlman Second Class U.S.S. TEXAS, Veteran 1940-42, gelatin silver photograph, 1996

Facing History

CREW: The Men of the U.S.S. TEXAS

Photographs by Will Michels

Interviews by Ephraim Dickson

March 6 - April 4, 2004

Galveston Arts Center

Marisa Sánchez

During his last semester as an architecture student at Pratt Institute in New York, Will Michels made a life-changing decision to pursue photography seriously. For fifteen years now, he has been fully engaged in the medium and has found an eye for portraiture. In 1994, he began his first personal body of work, in which he sought to examine and record on film his own image through self-portraits. Every Friday morning for six months, he woke up and shot three rolls of film, documenting himself in his apartment. For Michels, this regimen served to better teach him photographic techniques and the mechanisms of the camera, but it also revealed his tremendous self-discipline and understanding of the human body in relation to the camera's lens. During these private hours, Michels developed a lasting knowledge of photography and his own practice; it was at this time that Michels discovered the square format, which dominates his work today. As a result of these experiences, his training as an architect and his work as a photographer merge with full force in his ongoing project, *CREW: The Men of the U.S.S. TEXAS*. The exhibition includes nearly fifty black-and-white photographs taken by Michels between 1996 and 2003; approximately fifty oral histories conducted by Ephraim Dickson between 1998 and 2002; 28 historic photographs as well as scrapbooks and souvenir photographs made by the crew; and a web site (www.CREWUSSTEXAS.com). The result of eight years in the making, Michels' photographs of the veterans is one part of a larger, ambitious attempt to document as many active veterans who served on the ship as possible. These photographs reveal Michels' deep respect for his subjects and their experiences.

Michels' investment in this project began while working on the battleship as the project architect responsible for its restoration from 1995 to 2000. While restoring the ship, he began to encounter remnants of the lives that once inhabited the spaces, such as a discarded fork discovered behind a locker. These materials haunted the photographer because of his fascination with their origins. Who had used that fork? Who had slept in

that bed? Who had walked through that doorway? As each day offered something remarkable, he found the 34-year history of the ship reflected in the lingering artifacts. Realizing that the history of the U.S.S. TEXAS was inextricably tied to the individuals who served onboard, he thought about pursuing a photographic project to document the men of the battleship. Plans were under way when he met Ephraim Dickson.

Dickson was a volunteer on the battleship and was organizing a new foundation dedicated to the Battleship Texas. He met Michels, and after several conversations, which revealed Dickson's interest in collecting oral histories, the two joined forces. They started looking for funding. Michels had initially received a generous grant from the Cultural Arts Council of Houston Harris County through the Lawndale Art and Performance Center in 1997. Later he received a fellowship from the Houston Center for Photography in 1999 and that same year exhibited sixteen of these photographs at HCP. Since then, the project developed substantially but the biggest challenge lay ahead: locating over a thousand living veterans scattered throughout the U.S.

Michels began his search with a generic letter mailed to the men that included a simple proposition: "I am writing to ask if I can take your portrait..." As is evident in the ephemera on view in the exhibition, some of the replies were sent by widows notifying Michels that their husbands would have been eager to share their stories, but had since passed away. These replies underscored the urgency with which Michels had to proceed in order to ensure that these personal histories were recorded before the last of the men are gone.

A vintage panoramic photograph loaned to the exhibition by veteran Charles Denbo illustrates one of the first waves of men to hit the beaches on D-Day in 1944. Michels had originally discovered a copy of this photograph when he interviewed veteran Bob Lang; to Michels' surprise and good fortune, Lang had handwritten on the border of the print the names of all 69 men pictured. This photograph was unlike several hundred images Michels uncovered in the battleship archives. He wanted to know all of the names of the men pictured from lieutenant, mess cook, storekeeper, war correspondent, to civilian; a hierarchy of service on board the ship that Michels deliberately obliterated in his portraits. Although the labels indicate the veterans' position, Michels' photographs focus on the individual. He presents each veteran singularly and with dignity. In turn, the photographs reward the viewer in the clarity and simplicity of the compositions. Primarily centered in the foreground of the photograph and looking directly into the lens of the camera, some men appear more expressive while others look reluctant.

Michels' photo shoots typically consisted of two hours with each veteran on site in their homes all over the country, from California, Florida, New York, and Illinois. He preferred to photograph the men in their home environments (from dated but comfortable living rooms to well-worn front porches) since his portraits were about "who these individuals are today," not who they were sixty years ago. Despite the comforting backgrounds, some portraits, like that of *Ed Reichert, First Lieutenant (1941-1945)* reveal a past that can never be forgotten. His face, his stance, and lieutenant's cap speak of the weight of responsibilities he bore

on the ship during World War II. Unlike any other photograph on view, Reichert's exposes a psychological intensity that reveals the harsher side of the memory of war. His facial expression signals a profound sense of mental anguish and uncertainty.

One of the most successful portraits on view is *Julio Zaccagni - Fire Controlman Second Class (1940-1942)*, a shot taken almost by chance. Michels spent several hours with Zaccagni, talking with him about his job and experience on the battleship. After they had finished talking, Michels packed up his Hasselblad and turned to say goodbye when suddenly Zaccagni reached into his pocket and pulled out a dog-eared snapshot of him standing on board the ship as a young man. Michels grabbed his camera and captured the proud Zaccagni holding a picture of himself from years ago.

In a few cases, Michels photographed veterans on board the ship, as seen in *Wilmot Ragsdale, War Correspondent Time/Life (June 1944)*. Michels' portrait of the former correspondent places him on the exact spot where as a young man he narrowly escaped death after leaving the area seconds before a German shell exploded.

Respectful of the long history of photo journalists, Michels included two photographs taken by Ragsdale in the exhibition. One is of an injured shipmate, *Anthony Peppe Being Lowered from the Navigation Bridge, 1944*. Michels successfully contacted Peppe whose portrait shows him standing behind a screen door inside the foyer of his home. Peppe wears a bold U.S.S. TEXAS sweat-shirt while a decal of the American flag mounted to the door waves its stars and stripes. Michels' reflection is visible in the door behind the patriotic veteran. One is reminded of Robert Frank's *The Americans* (particularly *Barbershop through Screendoor-McClellanville, South Carolina*) and of the self-portraits by Lee Friedlander who photographed his shadow as a way of recording his interaction with American urban landscapes.

For this viewer, these photographs are not only about the veterans but they are also about the photographer—his personal experience on board the battleship and his desire to insert a human element back into the sterility of a ship that had been put to rest. Each one of these men pictured are part of a pivotal period in American history, yet in their collective efforts the individual becomes absorbed into that history and, over time, memory fades and faces no longer have names. It is through Michels' pursuit of facing that history that he focuses on the individual. What inspires the viewer about his work is not so much how the photographs function independently of each other but how they function as a whole portrait of a generation of American men who served their country. For Michels, who is donating a set of prints and materials to the Battleship, it is clear that this project is more about giving something back to history than challenging contemporary issues or presenting cutting-edge work. The portraits are quiet, thoughtful, and serene. "In the beginning, I took these portraits for myself... I now see the bigger picture and am eager to share these faces."

Marisa C. Sánchez is Curatorial Assistant for Photography at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.



The Devil's Playground

by Nan Goldin
published by Phaidon
November 2003
Chas Bowie

There are few contemporary artists whose biographies are so intertwined with their artworks as Nan Goldin, and even fewer who are as willing as she to lay bare before their audience, presenting themselves as existing in a maelstrom of friendship, betrayal, romanticism, drug abuse, loss, and intimacy. In *The Devil's Playground*, the massive collection of over 500 recent photographs, viewers get a chance to catch up with Goldin's life; to see faces familiar from her past work; to meet new lovers and friends; and ultimately to see that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

The book itself is gorgeous, physically imposing; and although it contains minimal text, it requires repeat viewing just to make it through once. The photographs are divided into thematic chapters such as the clumsily named, "From Here to Maternity," "Empty Rooms," and "57 Days Roosevelt Hospital, New York City." Most of the images are printed full bleed without borders, and many of the best photographs are spread over facing pages, so that the seam of the book completely disrupts the image. Despite this flaw, *The Devil's Playground* is a masterfully designed monograph whose scale and volume alone will ensure it a place in the pantheon of classic photography books.

When the book opens, we find Goldin as an art-world globetrotter. Thanks to two decades of artistic success, she and her omnipresent entourage have a travel budget now; and through the artist, we see Icelandic moss-covered boulders, Sicilian grottoes, French forests, and Egyptian twilights. Goldin's work is typically associated with a seedy griminess and desolate isolation, but here she proves that she is capable of capturing moments of tenderness and serene beauty. One of the most memorable photographs from *The Devil's Playground* is *Breakfast in Bed, Hotel Torre di Bellosguardo, Florence* (1996).

Against beautifully parted white curtains, the photo depicts a consummate European breakfast with poached eggs, croissants, a teakettle, and fresh fruit. Symmetrical and subtly toned, it is as lavishly rendered as a Dutch still-life painting. Among these tranquil and calming shots are, of course, portraits of her companions. Most of the players are a little grayer and more fatigued-looking than her *Ballad of Sexual Dependency* posse, but Goldin appears to gravitate naturally toward youth. *Simon on my pink sofa, NYC* (1998) shows a young man in pajamas reclining on a baroque couch in a manner reminiscent of the contemporary painter Elizabeth Peyton.

As the title of the book suggests, the good times don't last for long, and we are soon transported to Roosevelt Hospital for a 2-month stint in rehab. The photographs from this period are melancholic and cool-toned. Friends visit and appear concerned; we see an orchid that somebody has brought and a game of Scrabble in which the players have added the words "detox" and "gin." The following chapter, "Falling into an Empty Pool," is a gory account of an accident that Goldin sustained while taking photos for the film *Murriel's Wedding*. The fall resulted in a grotesque wrist wound through which you can see her white arm bone peeking out. In addition to this monster gash, we are treated to photographs of more antiseptic rooms and bored-looking well wishers. No matter how much we may root for the artist, though, the bad times don't end there. Several chapters later, Goldin relapses and is committed to the Priory Hospital in London. Her visit here makes the Roosevelt treatment center look like a day at Disney World. A haunting photo titled *Self-Portrait in Delirium* is included; and *Smoking in My Room*, a shadowed self-portrait, ranks among the best photographs of institutions and captivity in memory. The most chilling photograph of all, though, is a fresh grave where somebody has left a floral arrangement spelling out the word "Nan."

Besides her candid documents of her personal drug scene, Goldin is also known for her frankly sexual portraits, and she doesn't stray far from these roots in *The Devil's Playground*. There are multi-page spreads of Valerie and Bruno in *coitus*, as well as Clemens and Jens, Marina and Jean-Christian, and Simon and Jessica. However

monotonous the chapters get, they are always salvaged by knock-out individual pieces like *Simon and Jessica in the Pool at Night, Avignon*, and *Simon Holding Jessica Up, Paris*.

The Devil's Playground highlights two notable areas of artistic growth in Goldin's oeuvre. The first area is her use of ambient light to create dark, smoky tones. On-camera flash is rarely deployed in the photographs here, and the results are deeply sensual and evocative. The other striking development is her attention to unpopulated spaces, empty beds, and vacant rooms. Although Goldin will forever be known as a portraitist, much of the strongest work in *The Devil's Playground* is contained in the chapter "Empty Rooms." Goldin presents us with blankly romantic bedrooms that house burnt mirrors, a collection of Turkish curios, a smoldering fire at Napoleon's house, and a well-worn hotel pillow atop a stripped bed. Human presence lingers large in these empty rooms, and viewers are able to experience their latent emotions without tying them directly to specific faces.

Fans of Goldin's work have had nearly 25 years to watch her career skyrocket and lull, and through her photographs, to watch her and her extended family grow. It is more than a little depressing, then, to see her continue to struggle with her drug addictions in these recent works. After all these years, it feels as if we are seeing reruns, or at the

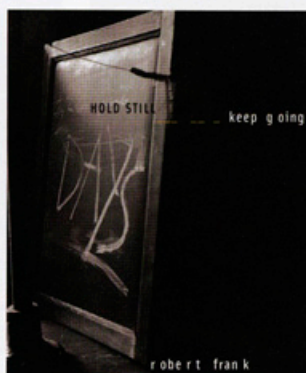
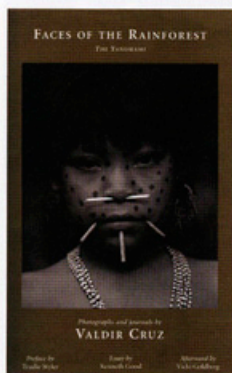


above left: Joanna laughing, L'Hôtel, Paris, 1999
© Nan Goldin/courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

above: Valérie floating in the sea, Mayreux Island, 2002
© Nan Goldin/courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

least, a destructive cycle set in an endless spin. Even Brian, the abusive villain of *Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, makes a few appearances in *The Devil's Playground*, and it is impossible not to feel a disappointment that his presence lingers in her life. If in art we look for redemption and solace, we might yield to the title of Goldin's new book. As romantically tragic as her photographs are, more so than ever before, the artist and her subjects remain trapped in a purgatorial playground where they cyclically reenact the same pleasures and the same pains while the audience watches on, devastated by the presentation but hungry for progress.

Chas Bowie is an artist and writer in Portland, Oregon.



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Saturday, October 29, 2005
24th Anniversary Party
Houston Center for Photography

Save the Date



In Memoriam: John Coplans

The art world was dealt a triple blow with the death at 83 in August 2003 of John Coplans. A founding editor of *Artforum*, then a museum director, and finally a renowned photographer, Coplans was still producing important work in his last years despite the challenge of severe vision loss due to macular degeneration.

His photographic career, begun when he was already near normal retirement age, spanned three decades and his prints have been shown and collected by museums all over the world, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; and the Tate Gallery, London.

An extremely talented writer, he produced several important monographs on artists such as Paul Cezanne and Ellsworth Kelly, as well as wonderfully readable statements about his own work and life. He retained an upbeat, playful curiosity into old age, never boring with too much gravity or sentimentality, but informing himself and his readers with the historical lessons relevant to his artistic pursuit.

Coplans made a unique contribution to photography, crossing over from the world of high art to create honest, innovative self-portraits of his unglamorous, aging body. From the first pictures to the last, he combined a rigorous formalism with a sense of spontaneity, finding new shapes and poses

again and again. His use of the silvery black-and-white aesthetic of the Polaroid positive-negative process, and the often tremendous prints he displayed, set a standard of technical excellence and appropriateness that few traditional photographers could match.

Often working in diptychs, triptychs and quadruplychs, as well as larger groupings, Coplans' explorations relied greatly on gesture and the subtle but significant differences between similar poses. In addition to asking us in each individual picture to consider the physical marvels of the aging male body and the details we would otherwise never notice, with the juxtapositions of his series he constantly challenged our perceptions—the laziness of them, the lack of rigor.

Through scale, selection and repetition, Coplans made every view, every movement refreshingly new and monumental. Over time, the evolution of the work and the natural aging process of the artist conspired to build an oeuvre of rare power and presence.

Susan Kismaric, curator of photography at the Modern, summed up his contribution in a recent article in *Artforum*, writing: "Shockingly, no one had ever made such pictures."

Shocking, because work of this caliber almost always leaves the viewer with the sensation of its necessity—its inevitability.

John Coplans
Self-Portrait (Seated Figure, No. 61, 1987)
gelatin silver photograph diptych

Perhaps the clearest precedent of Coplans' work would be Greek sculptural friezes made thousands of years ago. How could it have taken so long for such work to exist again?

Born Jewish in England and raised between there and South Africa, John Coplans was a combat veteran of World War II; equally, he was a relentless battler in the trenches of the California and New York art worlds of the 1950s, '60s and '70s, first as a painter and professor (though he never finished high school) and then as a critic and curator. His stubbornness, clarity, honesty, and utter willingness to make enemies were legendary.

As his stunning, 25-year self-portrait makes plain, Coplans was a giant presence whose impact on the world of art and on the lives of the people who knew him will be strongly felt for a long time to come.

David Brickman is a photographer, curator, teacher, editor and art critic. He lives in Albany, N.Y.

HCP 2005 Collectors' Print Program

1. Kevin Kwan

Rubicon #21, 2005
Chromogenic print

2. Jason Dibley

Goodnight Max, 2005
Gelatin silver print

3. Bridget Milligan

Happily Never After, 2001
Gold-toned gelatin silver print

4. Deborah Bay

Untitled, from the series
The Fringes of Cyberia, 2004-05
Type C print



1



2



3



4

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