

**DISMANTLING MODERNISM.
REINVENTING DOCUMENTARY**
(Notes on the Politics of Representation)

ONE

Suppose we regard art as a mode of human communication, as a discourse anchored in concrete social relations, rather than as a mystified, vaporous, and ahistorical realm of purely affective expression and experience. Art, like speech, is both symbolic exchange and material practice, involving the production of both meaning and physical presence. Meaning, as an understanding of that presence, emerges from an interpretive act. Interpretation is ideologically constrained. Our readings of past culture are subject to the covert demands of the historical present. Mystified interpretation universalizes the act of reading, lifting it above history.

The meaning of an artwork ought to be regarded, then, as *contingent*, rather than as immanent, universally given, or fixed. The Kantian separation of cognitive and affective faculties, which provided the philosophical basis for Romanticism, must likewise be critically superseded. This argument, then, calls for a fundamental break with idealist esthetics, a break with the notion of genius both in its original form and in its debased neo-romantic appearance at the center of the mythology of mass culture, where "genius" assumes the trappings of a charismatic stardom.

I am not suggesting that we ignore or suppress the creative, affective, and expressive aspects of cultural activity—to do so would be to play into the hands of the ongoing technocratic obliteration of human creativity. What I am arguing is that we understand the extent to which art *redeems* a repressive social order by offering a wholly imaginary transcendence, a false harmony, to docile and isolated spectators. The cult of private experience, of the entirely affective relation to culture demanded by a consumerist economy, serves to obliterate momentarily, on weekends, knowledge of the fragmentation, boredom, and routinization of labor, knowledge of the self as a commodity.

In capitalist society, artists are represented as possessing a privileged subjectivity, gifted with an uncommon unity of self and labor. Artists are the bearers of an autonomy that is systematically and covertly denied the economically objectified mass spectator, the waged worker and the woman who works without wages in the home. Even the apparatus of mass culture itself can be bent to this elitist logic. "Artists" are the people who stare out, accusingly and seductively, from billboards and magazine advertisements. A glamorous young couple can be seen lounging in what looks like a SoHo loft; they tell us of the secret of white rum, effortlessly gleaned from Liza Minelli at an Andy Warhol party. Richard Avedon is offered to us as an almost impossible ideal: bohemian as well as his "own Guggenheim Foundation." Artist and patron coalesce in a petty-bourgeois dream fleshed-out in the realm of a self-valorizing mass culture. Further, the recent efforts to elevate

photography unequivocally to the status of high art by transforming the photographic print into a privileged commodity, and the photographer, regardless of working context, into an autonomous *auteur* with a capacity for genius, have the effect of restoring the "aura," to use Walter Benjamin's term, to a mass-communications technology. At the same time, the camera hobbyist, the consumer of leisure technology, is invited to participate in a delimited and therefore illusory and pathetic creativity, in an advertising induced fantasy of self-authorship fed by power over the image machine, and through it, over its prey.

The crisis of contemporary art involves more than a lack of "unifying" meta-critical thought, nor can it be resolved by expensive "interdisciplinary" organ transplants. The problems of art are refractions of a larger cultural and ideological crisis, stemming from the declining legitimacy of the liberal capitalist worldview. Putting it bluntly, these crises are rooted in the materially dictated inequalities of advanced capitalism and will only be resolved *practically*, by the struggle for an authentic socialism.

Artists and writers who move toward an openly political cultural practice need to educate themselves out of their own professional elitism and narrowness of concern. A theoretical grasp of modernism and its pitfalls might be useful in this regard. The problem of modernist closure—of an "immanent critique" which, failing to overcome logically the paradigm within which it begins, ultimately reduces every practice to a formalism—is larger than any one intellectual discipline and yet infects them all.¹ Modernist practice is organized professionally and shielded by a bogus ideology of neutrality. (Even academic thuggeries like Dr. Milton Friedman's overtly instrumental "free market" economics employ the neutrality gambit.) In political-economic terms, modernism stems from the fundamental division of "mental" and "manual" labor under advanced capitalism. The former is further specialized and accorded certain privileges, as well as a managerial relation to the latter, which is fragmented and degraded. A ideology of separation, of petty-bourgeois upward aspiration, induces the intellectual worker to view the "working class" with superiority, cynicism, contempt, and glimmers of fear. Artists, despite their romanticism and propensity for slumming, are no exception.

The ideological confusions of current art, euphemistically labeled a "healthy pluralism" by art promoters, stem from the collapsed authority of the modernist paradigm. "Pure" artistic modernism collapses because it is ultimately a self-annihilating project, narrowing the field of art's concerns with scientific rigor, dead-ending in alternating appeals to taste, science and metaphysics. Over the past five years, a rather cynical and self-referential mannerism, partially based on Pop Art, has rolled out of this cul-de-sac. Some people call this phenomenon "postmodernism." (Already, a so-called "political art" has been used as an end-game modernist bludgeon, as a chic vanguardism, by artists who suffer from a very real isolation from larger social issues. This would be bad enough if it were not for the fact that the art-promotional system converts everything it handles into "fashion," while dishing out a good quantity of liberal obfuscation.) These

1. For the definition of modernism as immanent critique, see Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Arts Yearbook*, No. 4, 1961, p. 103.

developments demonstrate that the only necessary rigor in a commodified cultural environment is that of incessant artistic self-promotion. Here, elite culture becomes a parasitical "mannerist" representation of mass culture, a private-party sideshow, with its own photojournalism, gossip column reviews, promoters, celebrity pantheon, and narcissistic stellar-bound performers. The charisma of the art star is subject to an overdeveloped bureaucratism. Careers are "managed." Innovation is regularized, adjusted to the demands of the market. Modernism, *per se* (as well as the lingering ghost of bohemianism), is transformed into farce, into a professionalism based on academic appointments, periodic exposure, lofty real estate speculation in the former factory districts of decaying cities, massive state funding, jet travel, and increasingly ostentatious corporate patronage of the arts. This last development represents an attempt by monopoly capital to "humanize" its image for the middle-managerial and professional subclasses (the vicarious consumers of high culture, the museum audience) in the face of an escalating legitimization crisis. High art is rapidly becoming a specialized colony of the monopoly capitalist media.

Political domination, especially in the advanced capitalist countries and the more developed neo-colonies, depends on an exaggerated symbolic apparatus, on pedagogy and spectacle, on the authoritarian monologues of school and mass media. These are the main agents of working class obedience and docility; these are the main promoters of phony consumer options, of "lifestyle," and increasingly, of political reaction, nihilism, and everyday sadomasochism. Any effective political art will have to be grounded in work *against* these institutions. We need a political economy, a sociology, and a non-formalist semiotics of media. We need to comprehend advertising as the fundamental discourse of capitalism, exposing the link between the language of manufactured needs and commodity fetishism. From this basis, a critical representational art, an art that points openly to the social world and to possibilities of concrete social transformation, could develop. But we will also have to work toward a redefined *pragmatics*, toward modes of address based on a dialogical pedagogy, and toward a different and significantly wider notion of audience, one that engages with ongoing progressive struggles against the established order. Without a coherent oppositional politics, though, an oppositional culture remains tentative and isolated. Obviously, a great deal needs to be done.

T W O

A small group of contemporary artists are working on an art that deals with the social ordering of people's lives. Most of their work involves still photography and video; most relies heavily on written or spoken language. I am talking about a representational art, an art that refers to something beyond itself. Form and mannerism are not ends in themselves. These works might be about any number of things, ranging from the material and ideological space of the "self" to the dominant social realities of corporate spectacle and corporate power. The initial questions are these: "How do we invent our lives out of a limited range of possibilities, and how are

our lives invented for us by those in power?" As I have already suggested, if these questions are asked only within the institutional boundaries of elite culture, only within the "art world," then the answers will be merely academic. Given a certain poverty of means, this art aims toward a wider audience, and toward considerations of concrete social transformation.

We might be tempted to think of this work as a variety of documentary. That is all right as long as we expose the myth that accompanies the label, the folklore of photographic truth. This preliminary detour seems necessary. The rhetorical strength of documentary is imagined to reside in the unequivocal character of the camera's evidence, in an essential realism. The theory of photographic realism emerges historically as both product and handmaiden of positivism. Vision, itself unimplicated in the world it encounters, is subjected to a mechanical idealization. Paradoxically, the camera serves to ideologically *naturalize* the eye of the observer. Photography, according to this belief, reproduces the visible world: the camera is an engine of fact, the generator of a duplicate world of fetishized appearances, independent of human practice. Photographs, always the product of socially-specific *encounters* between human-and-human or human-and-nature, become repositories of dead facts, reified objects torn from their social origins.

I should not have to argue that photographic meaning is relatively indeterminate; the same picture can convey a variety of messages under differing presentational circumstances. Consider the evidence offered by bank holdup cameras. Taken automatically, these pictures could be said to be unpolluted by sensibility, an extreme form of documentary. If the surveillance engineers who developed these cameras have an esthetic, it is one of raw, technological instrumentality. "Just the facts, ma'am." But a courtroom is a battleground of fictions. What is it that a photograph points to? A young white woman holds a submachine gun. The gun is handled confidently, aggressively. The gun is almost dropped out of fear. A fugitive heiress. A kidnap victim. An urban guerrilla. A willing participant. A case of brainwashing. A case of rebellion. A case of schizophrenia. The outcome, based on the "true" reading of the evidence, is a function less of "objectivity" than of political maneuvering. Reproduced in the mass media, this picture might attest to the omniscience of the state within a glamorized and mystifying spectacle of revolution and counter-revolution. But any police photograph that is publicly displayed is both a specific attempt at identification and a reminder of police power over "criminal elements." The only "objective" truth that photographs offer is the assertion that somebody or something—in this case, an automated camera—was somewhere and took a picture. Everything else, everything beyond the imprinting of a trace, is up for grabs.

Walter Benjamin recalled the remark that Eugène Atget depicted the streets of Paris as though they were scenes of crime.² That remark serves to poeticize a rather deadpan, non-expressionist style, to conflate nostalgia and the affectless instrumentality of the detective. Crime here becomes a matter of the heart as well as a matter of fact. Looking backward, through Benjamin to Atget, we see the loss of the past through the continual

2. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), trans. Harry Zohn, *Illuminations*, New York, 1969, p. 226

disruptions of the urban present as a form of violence against memory, resisted by the nostalgic bohemian through acts of solipsistic, passive acquisition. (Baudelaire's "Le Cygne" articulates much of that sense of loss, a sense of the impending disappearance of the familiar.) I cite this example merely to raise the question of the *affective* character of documentary. Documentary photography has amassed mountains of evidence. And yet, in this pictorial presentation of scientific and legalistic "fact," the genre has simultaneously contributed much to spectacle, to retinal excitation, to voyeurism, to terror, envy and nostalgia, and only a little to the critical understanding of the social world.

A truly critical social documentary will frame the crime, the trial, and the system of justice and its official myths. Artists working toward this end may or may not produce images that are theatrical and overtly contrived, they may or may not present texts that read like fiction. Social truth is something other than a matter of convincing style. I need only cite John Heartfield's overtly *constructed* images, images in which the formal device is absolutely naked, as examples of an early attempt to go beyond the phenomenal and ideological surface of the social realm. In his best work, Heartfield brings the economic base to the surface through the simplest of devices, often through punning on a fascist slogan. ("Millions stand behind me.") Here, construction passes into a critical *deconstruction*.

A political critique of the documentary genre is sorely needed. Socially conscious American artists have much to learn from both the successes *and* the mistakes, compromises, and collaborations of their Progressive Era and New Deal predecessors. How do we assess the close historical partnership of documentary artists and social democrats? How do we assess the relation between form *and* politics in the work of the more progressive Worker's Film and Photo League? How do we avoid a kind of esthetized political nostalgia in viewing the work of the 1930s? And how about the co-optation of the documentary style by corporate capitalism (notably the oil companies and the television networks) in the late 1940s? How do we disentangle ourselves from the authoritarian and bureaucratic aspects of the genre, from its implicit positivism? (All of this is evidenced in any one second of an Edward R. Murrow or a Walter Cronkite telecast.) How do we produce an art that elicits dialogue rather than uncritical, pseudo-political affirmation?

Looking backward, at the art-world hubbub about "photography as a fine art," we find a near-pathological avoidance of any such questioning. A curious thing happens when documentary is officially recognized as art. Suddenly the hermeneutic pendulum swings from the objectivist end of its arc to the opposite, subjectivist end. Positivism yields to a subjective metaphysics, technologism gives way to auteurism. Suddenly the audience's attention is directed toward mannerism, toward sensibility, toward the physical and emotional risks taken by the artist. Documentary is thought to be art when it transcends its reference to the world, when the work can be regarded, first and foremost, as an act of self-expression on the part of the artist. To use Roman Jakobson's categories, the referential function

collapses into the expressive function.³ A cult of authorship, an auteurism, takes hold of the image, separating it from the social conditions of its making and elevating it above the multitude of lowly and mundane uses to which photography is commonly put. The culture journalists' myth of Diane Arbus is interesting in this regard. Most readings of her work careen along an axis between opposing poles of realism and expressionism. On the one hand, her portraits are seen as transparent, metonymic vehicles for the social or psychological truth of her subjects; Arbus elicits meaning from her sitters. At the other extreme is a metaphoric projection. The work is thought to express her tragic vision (a vision confirmed by her suicide); each image is nothing so much as a contribution to the artist's self-portrait. These readings coexist; they enhance one another despite their mutual contradiction. I think that a good deal of the generalized esthetic appeal of Arbus' work, along with that of most art photography, has to do with this indeterminacy of reading, this sense of being cast adrift between profound social insight and refined solipsism. At the heart of this fetishistic cultivation and promotion of the artist's humanity is a certain disdain for the "ordinary" humanity of those who have been photographed. They become the "other," exotic creatures, objects of contemplation. Perhaps this would not be so suspect if it were not for the tendency of professional documentary photographers to aim their cameras downward, toward those with little power or prestige. (The obverse is the cult of celebrity, the organized production of envy in a mass audience.) The most intimate, human-scale relationship to suffer mystification in all this is the specific social engagement that results in the image; the negotiation between photographer and subject in the making of a portrait, the seduction, coercion, collaboration, or rip-off. But if we widen the angle of our view, we find that the broader institutional politics of elite and "popular" culture are also being obscured in the romance of the photographer as artist.

The promotion of Diane Arbus (along with a host of other essentially mannerist artists) as a "documentary" photographer, as well as the generalized promotion of introspective, privatistic, and often narcissistic uses of photographic technology both in the arena of art photography and that of the mass consumer market, can be regarded as a symptom of two countervailing but related tendencies of advanced capitalist society. On the one hand, subjectivity is threatened by the increasingly sophisticated administration of daily life. Culture, sexuality, and family life are refuges for the private, feeling self in a world of rationalized performance demands. At the same time, the public realm is "depoliticized," to use Jürgen Habermas' term; a passive audience of citizen consumers is led to see political action as the prerogative of celebrities.⁴ Consider the fact that the major television networks, led by ABC, no longer even pretend to honor the hallowed separation demanded by liberal ideology between "public affairs" and "entertainment." News reporting is now *openly*, rather than covertly, stylized. The mass media portray a wholly *spectacular* political realm, and increasingly provide the ground for a charismatically directed, expressionist politics of the Right. Television has never been a realist medium, nor has it been capable of narrative in the sense of a logical, coherent account of

3. Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics" (1958), in R. and F. DeGeorge, eds., *The Structuralists: From Marx to Levi-Strauss*, Garden City, 1972, pp. 84-122.

4. Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy Boston, 1975.

cause and effect. But now, television is an openly *symbolist* enterprise, revolving entirely around the metaphoric poetry of the commodity. With the triumph of exchange value over use value, all meanings, all lies, become possible. The commodity exists in a gigantic substitution set. Cut loose from its original context, it is metaphorically equivalent to all other commodities.

The high culture of the late capitalist period is subject to the unifying semantic regime of formalism. Formalism neutralizes and renders equivalent, it is a universalizing system of reading. Only formalism can unite all the photographs in the world in one room, mount them behind glass, and sell them. As a privileged commodity fetish, as an object of connoisseurship, the photograph achieves its ultimate semantic poverty. But this poverty has haunted photographic practice from the very beginning.

I would like, finally, to discuss some alternative ways of working with photographs. A small number of contemporary photographers have set out deliberately to work against the strategies that have succeeded in making photography a high art. I have already outlined the general political nature of their intentions. Their work begins with the recognition that photography is operative at every level of our culture. That is, they insist on treating photographs not as privileged objects but as common cultural artifacts. The solitary, sparsely captioned photograph on the gallery wall is a sign, above all, of an aspiration toward the esthetic and market conditions of modernist painting and sculpture. In this white void, meaning is thought to emerge entirely from within the artwork. The importance of the framing discourse is masked, context is hidden. These artists, on the other hand, openly bracket their photographs with language, using texts to anchor, contradict, reinforce, subvert, complement, particularize, or go beyond the meanings offered by the images themselves. These pictures are often located within an extended narrative structure. I am not talking about "photo essays," a cliché-ridden form that is the noncommercial counterpart to the photographic advertisement. Photo essays are an outcome of a mass-circulation picture-magazine esthetic, the esthetic of the merchandisable column-inch and rapid, excited reading, reading made subservient to visual titillation. I am also not talking about the "conceptual" and "post-conceptual" art use of photography, since most such work unequivocally accepts the bounds of an existing art world.

Of the works I am dealing with here, Martha Rosler's *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1975) comes the closest to having an unrelentingly *metacritical* relation to the documentary genre.⁵ The title not only raises the question of representation, but suggests its fundamentally flawed, distorted character. The object of the work, its referent, is not the Bowery *per se*, but the "Bowery" as a socially mediated, ideological construction. Rosler couples twenty-four photographs to an equal number of texts. The photographs are frontal views of Bowery storefronts and walls, taken with a normal lens from the edge of the street. The sequence of street numbers suggests a walk downtown, from Houston toward Canal on the west side of the avenue, past anonymous grates, abandoned shopfronts, flop house entrances, restaurant supply houses, discreetly labeled doors

5. This work has since been reproduced in *Martha Rosler, 3 Works*, Halifax, 1981.

6. The reader may want to compare Rosler's lexicon with one assembled under different conditions. See Edmund Wilson, "The Lexicon of Prohibition" (1929), in *The American Earthquake*, New York, 1958, pp. 89-91.

to artists' lofts. No people are visible. Most of the photos have a careful geometric elegance; they seem to be deliberate quotations of Walker Evans. The last two photographs are close-ups of a litter of cheap rosé and white port bottles, again not unlike Evans' 1968 picture of a discarded pine deodorant can in a trash barrel. The cool, deadpan mannerism works against the often expressionist liberalism of the find-a-bum school of concerned photography. This anti-"humanist" distance is reinforced by the text, which consists of a series of lists of words and phrases, an immense slang lexicon of alcoholism. This simple listing of names for drunks and drunkenness suggests both the signifying richness of metaphor as well as its referential poverty, the failure of metaphor to "encompass," to adequately explain, the material reality to which it refers.

We have nautical and astronomical themes: "deck's awash" and "moon-eyed." The variety and "wealth" of the language suggests the fundamental aim of drunkenness, the attempted escape from a painful reality. The photographs consistently pull us back to the street, to the terrain from which this pathetic flight is attempted. Rosler's found poetry begins with the most transcendental of metaphors, "aglow, illuminated" and progresses ultimately, through numerous categories of symbolic escape mingled with blunt recognition, to the slang terms for empty bottles: "dead soldiers" and "dead marines." The pool of language that Rosler has tapped is largely the sociolinguistic "property" of the working class and the poor. This language attempts to handle an irreconcilable tension between bliss and self-destruction in a society of closed options.⁶

The attention to language cuts against the pornography of the "direct" representation of misery. A text, analogous formally to our own ideological index of names-for-the-world, interposes itself between us and "visual experience."

Most of Rosler's other work deals with the internalization of oppressive namings, usually with the structuring of women's consciousness by the material demands of sex and class. Her videotape, *The Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1976) portrays documentation as the clinical, brutal instrumentality of a ruling elite bent on the total administration of all aspects of social life: reproduction, child rearing, education, labor and consumption. A woman is slowly stripped by white-coated technicians, who measure and evaluate every "component" of her body. A voice-over meditates on violence as a mode of social control, on positivism, on the triumph of quantitative methods, on the master's voice that speaks from within. Rosler refers to the body as the fundamental "battleground" of bourgeois culture.

Since I have mentioned video, I ought to point out that the most developed critiques of the illusory facticity of photographic media have been cinematic, stemming from outside the tradition of still photography. With film and video, sound and image, or sound, image, and text, can be worked over and against each other, leading to the possibility of negation and meta-commentary. An image can be offered as evidence, and then subverted.

Photography remains a primitive medium by comparison. Still-photographers have tended to believe naively in the power and efficacy of the single image. Of course, the museological handling of photographs encourages this belief, as does the allure of the high-art commodity market. But even photojournalists like to imagine that a good photograph can punch through, overcome its caption and story, on the power of vision alone. The power of the overall communicative system, with its characteristic structure and mode of address, over the fragmentary utterance is ignored. A remark of Brecht's is worth recalling on this issue, despite his deliberately crude and mechanistic way of phrasing the problem:

*The muddled thinking which overtakes musicians, writers and critics as soon as they consider their own situation has tremendous consequences to which too little attention is paid. For by imagining that they have got hold of an apparatus which in fact got hold of them they are supporting an apparatus which is out of their control. . . .*⁷

7. Bertolt Brecht, "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre" (1930), *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. John Willett, New York, 1964, p. 34.

The critical anti-naturalism of Brecht, continued in the politically and formally reflexive cinematic modernism of Chris Marker, Jean-Luc Godard, and the team of Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet, stands as a guide to ideologically self-conscious handling of image and text. Americans, schooled in positivism from infancy, tend to miss the point. It was Americans who mistranslated the reflexive documentary methods of Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Pravda* and Jean Rouch's *cinéma-vérité* into "direct cinema," the cult of the invisible camera, of life caught unawares. The advent of the formalist reflexivity of "structural film" has not helped matters either, but merely serves as a crude antithesis to the former tendency.

Jon Jost's film *Speaking Directly* (1975) and Brian Connell's videotapes *La Lucha Final* (1976) and *Petro Theater* (1975) stand as rare examples of American works that unite a developed left-wing politics with an understanding of the relation between form and ideology within the documentary genre. *La Lucha Final* dissects the already fragmented corpus of television news by constructing (perhaps deconstructing is the more appropriate word) a detective story narrative of American imperialism in crisis. The story emerges on the basis of scavenged material: State Department publicity photos, Tet-offensive news footage, bits of late-night television movies. American agents are always asking the wrong questions too late. Another of Connell's tapes, *Petro Theater*, decodes mysterious photo-postcard islands floating off the coast of Long Beach, California. These man-made oil drilling operations are disguised as tropical paradises, complete with palm trees and waterfalls. The derricks themselves are camouflaged as skyscrapers, made to pose as corporate headquarters. Connell's tape reads the island as an image of colonial territory, as nature dominated by an aggressive and expansionist corporate order. The islands are named for dead astronauts, allowing the derricks to assume the glamour of moon rockets. Connell plays the offshore mirage against the political economy of the "energy crisis." Photography like that of Lewis Baltz, to give a counter example, suggests that the oxymoronic label, "industrial park" is somehow natural,

an unquestionable aspect of a landscape that is both a source of Pop disdain and mortuarial elegance of design. Baltz's photographs of enigmatic factories fail to tell us anything about them, to recall Brecht's remark about a hypothetical photograph of the Krupp works. Connell, on the other hand, argues that advanced capitalism depends on the ideological obliteration of the economic base. In California, we are led to believe, no one works, people merely punch in for eight hours of Muzak-soothed leisure in air-conditioned condominium-like structures that are somehow sites for the immaculate conception of commodities.

Jon Jost's *Speaking Directly* is a rigorously phenomenological attempt at political autobiography, setting Jost's own subjectivity as film maker, as he-who-speaks, as particular and emblematic male, as American, as war resister, as rural dropout, as intellectual, as lover, friend, and enemy to numerous Others, against its determinations and constraints. Jost is continually exposing the problematic character of his own authorship, suggesting his own dishonesty in attempting to construct a coherent image of "his" world. The film skirts solipsism; in fact, Jost resists solipsism through an almost compulsively repetitive rendering of a politicized "outer world." American defoliant bombers lay waste to a section of Vietnam again and again, until the viewer knows the sequence's every move in advance. Magazine advertisements pile up endlessly in another sequence. The "politics" of Jost's work lies in an understanding it shares with, and owes to, both the women's liberation movement and sections of the New Left: the understanding that sexuality, the formation of the self, and the survival of the autonomous subject are fundamental issues for revolutionary practice.

These concerns are shared to a large extent by Philip Steinmetz in a six-volume sociological "portrait" of himself and his relatives. The entire work, called *Somebody's Making a Mistake* (1976), is made up of more than six hundred photographs taken over several years. The pictures are well-lit, full of ironic incident and material detail, reminiscent of Russell Lee. Steinmetz pays a great deal of attention to the esthetics of personal style, to clothing and gesture, to interior decoration. His captions vary between sociological polemic and personal anecdote. The books are a curious hybrid of the family album and a variety of elegantly handcrafted coffee-table book. The narrative span of the family album is compressed temporally, resulting in a maddening intensity of coverage and exposure.

While covering intimate affairs, Steinmetz offers a synecdochic representation of suburban middle-class family life. At the same time the work is a complex autobiography in which Steinmetz invents himself and is in turn invented, appearing as eldest son, ex-husband, father, alienated and documentation-obsessed prime mover, and escapee with one foot in a suburban petty-bourgeois past. The work pivots on self-implication, on Steinmetz's willingness to expose his interactions with and attitudes toward the rest of the family. The picture books are products of a series of discontinuous theatrical encounters: the artist "visits the folks." Some occasions are full of auspicious moments for traditional family-album photography: a birthday, a family dinner. Here Steinmetz is an insider, functioning

within the logic of the family, expected, even asked, to take pictures. At other moments, the camera is pulled out with less fanfare and approval, almost on the sly, I imagine. Other encounters are deliberately staged by the photographer: on a weekend visit he photographs his daughter in front of an endless toy-store display of packaged games. She smiles rather quizzically. Judging from the titles, the games are all moral exercises in corporate virtue, male aggression, and female submission. I am reminded of a frame from Godard, but this picture has a different affect, the affect of real, rather than emblematic, relationships.

Eventually the artwork became a familial event in itself. Steinmetz visited his parents with a handful of his books, asking them to talk captions into a tape recorder. Other artists and photographers have done this sort of thing with family archives; Roger Welch is an example. The difference here is that Steinmetz is not particularly interested in memory and nostalgia in themselves. His pictures are geared to elicit ideological responses; they are subtle provocations. The work aims at revealing the power structure within the extended family, the petty-bourgeois ambitions of the men, their sense of ownership, and the supportive and subordinate role of the women. Steinmetz's father, a moderately successful building contractor, poses by the signpost for a subdivision street he named: Security Way. The photographer's mother sits in the kitchen reading a religious tract entitled *Nervous Christians*. He comes closest to identifying with his daughter, with the possibility of her rebellion.

The last of the six books deals with his ex-wife's second wedding. Steinmetz appears at a dress rehearsal—as what? Guest, interloper, official photographer, voyeur, ghost from the past? His wife's new in-laws look troubled. The pictures have a curious sense of the absurd, of packaged roles poorly worn, of consumer ritual. The camera catches a certain awkwardness of tuxedo-and-gown encased gesture and movement. The groom is late, and someone asks Steinmetz to stand in for him. The affair takes on a television situation-comedy aspect as familial protocol lapses into absurdity.

Fred Lonidier deals with more public politics than that of the family. *The Health and Safety Game* (1976) is about the "handling" of industrial injury and disease by corporate capitalism, pointing to the *systemic* character of everyday violence in the workplace. Some statistics: one in four American workers is exposed on a daily basis to death, injury, and disease, causing work conditions. According to a Nader report, "job casualties are statistically at least three times more serious than street crime."⁸ (So much for T.V. cop shows.)

An observation: anyone who has ever lived or worked in an industrial working-class community can probably attest to the commonness of disfigurement among people on the job and in the street. Disease is less visible and has only recently become a public issue. I can recall going to the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry and visiting the "coal mine" there. Hoarse-voiced men—retired miners—led the tourists through a programmed demonstration of mining technology. When the time came to deal with safety,

8. Ralph Nader, "Introduction" to J.A. Page and M. O'Brien, *Bitter Wages*, New York, 1973, p.xiii.

one of the guides set off a controlled little methane explosion. No one mentioned black-lung disease in this corporate artwork, although the evidence rasped from the throats of the guides.

Lonidier's "evidence" consists of twenty or so case studies of individual workers, each displayed on large panels laid out in a rather photojournalistic fashion. The reference to photojournalism is deliberate, I think, because the work refuses to deliver any of the empathic goodies that we are accustomed to in photo essays. Conventional "human interest" is absent. Lonidier is aware of the ease with which liberal documentary artists have converted violence and suffering into esthetic objects. For all his good intentions, for example, Eugene Smith in *Minamata* provided more a representation of his compassion for mercury-poisoned Japanese fisherfolk than one of their struggle for retribution against the corporate polluter.⁹ I will say it again: the subjective aspect of liberal esthetics is compassion rather than collective struggle. Pity, mediated by an appreciation of "great art," supplants political understanding. Susan Sontag and David Antin have both remarked that Eugene Smith's portrait of a Minamata mother bathing her retarded and deformed daughter is a seemingly deliberate reference to the *Pieta*.

9. W. Eugene Smith and Aileen Smith, *Minamata*, New York, 1975.

Unlike Smith, Lonidier takes the same photographs that a doctor might. When the evidence is hidden within the body, Lonidier borrows and copies X-ray films. These pictures have a brute, clinical effect. Each worker's story is reduced to a rather schematic account of injury, disease, hospitalization, and endless bureaucratic run-around by companies trying to shirk responsibility and liability. All too frequently we find that at the end of the story the worker is left unemployed and undercompensated. At the same time, though, these people are fighting. A machinist with lung cancer tells of stealing samples of dust from the job, placing them on the kitchen griddle in a home-made experiment to detect asbestos, a material that his bosses had denied using. The anonymity of Lonidier's subjects is a precaution against retaliation against them; many are still fighting court cases; many are subject to company intimidation and harassment if they do make their stories public.

Lonidier's presentation is an analog of sorts for the way in which corporate bureaucrats handle the problem of industrial safety, yet he subverts the model by telling the story from below, from the place occupied by the worker in the hierarchy. The case-study form is a model of authoritarian handling of human lives. The layout of the panels reflects the distribution of power. Quotes from the workers are set in type so small that they are nearly unreadable. The titles are set in large type: "Machinist's Lung," "Egg-Packer's Arm." The body and the life are presented as they have been fragmented by management. Injury is a loss of labor power, a negative commodity, overhead. Injury is not a diminishing of a human life but a statistical impingement on the corporate profit margin.

The danger exists, here as in other works of socially conscious art, of being overcome by the very oppressive forms and conditions one is critiquing,

of being devoured by the enormous machinery of material and symbolic objectification. Political irony walks a thin line between resistance and surrender.

Above the case studies, Lonidier presents an analysis of the strategies employed by corporations and unions in the struggle over occupational health issues. The final corporate resorts are closed factories and runaway shops. But implicit in Lonidier's argument is the conclusion that work cannot, in the long run, be made safe under capitalism, because of the absolute demand for increasing capital accumulation under escalating crisis conditions. Most businessmen know this, and are resisting reforms for that very reason. The health issue exposes an indifference to human life that goes beyond ethics, an indifference that is structurally determined and can only be structurally negated.

Lonidier's aim is to present his work in a union hall context; so far showings have included a number of art-school galleries, a workers' art exhibition at the Los Angeles Museum of Science and Industry, the Whitney Museum, AFSCME District Council 37 in New York City (AFSCME, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, is the largest union of workers in the public sector in the United States), and at the Center for Labor Studies at Rutgers University.¹⁰

10. This work has since been reproduced in Fred Lonidier, "The Health and Safety Game," *Praxis*, No. 6, 1982, pp. 77-97.

Since the late 1940s, anti-communism has been a dominant ideology within American organized labor. Thus, for obvious reasons, *The Health and Safety Game* only makes explicit a critique of the current monopoly stage of capitalist development, without pointing directly to the necessity of socialist alternatives. This is only one of the problems of working *through* labor bureaucracy and *toward* a rank-and-file audience. At the same time, it should be noted that a number of progressive unions, mostly in New York, are beginning to develop cultural programs. Potentially, this could amount to an attempt to counteract the hegemony of corporate culture and restore some of the working-class cultural traditions that were obliterated with the onslaught of the 1950s. Recent documentary films like Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County U.S.A.* (1976) and *Union Maids* (1976) by Julia Reichert and Jim Klein keep alive a tradition of working-class militancy, emphasizing the active role of women in struggle. Both films reveal the importance of oral history and song for maintaining working-class traditions, both emerge from the filmmakers' partisan commitment to long-term work from *within* particular struggles. Neither of these films qualifies as the standard "neutral" airplane-ticket-in-the-back-pocket sort of documentary.

Nearly all the work I am discussing here demands a critical re-evaluation of the relationship between artists, media workers, and their "audiences". I am not suggesting that the mass media can effectively be infiltrated. Mass "communication" is almost entirely subject to the pragmatics of the one-way, authoritarian manipulation of consumer "choices." I think "marginal" spaces have to be discovered and utilized, spaces where issues can be discussed collectively: union halls, churches, high schools, community



Figure 7: Allan Sekula, *This Ain't China: A Photonovel*, 1974. Photographs and text (excerpt).

colleges, community centers, and perhaps only reluctantly, public museums. Still-photographers ought to consider "vulgar" and "impure" formats, such as slide shows; but formal questions can only follow a more fundamental redefinition of political priorities. A number of cultural workers in the Oakland area are using slide shows didactically and as catalysts for political participation. Bruce Kaiper has produced work on the capitalist image of labor using a critical reading of *Fortune* magazine advertisements and historical material on scientific management. Ellen Kaiper has done a piece on the forced layoffs and "domestication" of women industrial workers after the second world war. These shows are designed primarily for audiences of working people by people who are themselves workers. Fern Tiger is working on an extended documentation of class structure and conflict in Oakland. Her working method involves a lot of prolonged interaction with the people she photographs. She makes return visits with prints as part of an attempt to overcome the traditional aloofness of the merely contemplative, sociological observer or journalistic photographer. Mel Rosenthal is involved in a similar project in the South Bronx.

My own work with photographs revolves around relationships between wage-labor and ideology, between material demands and our imaginary coming-to-terms with those demands. I use "autobiographical" material, but assume a certain fictional and sociological distance in order to achieve a degree of typicality. My personal life is not the issue—it is simply a question of a familiarity that forms the necessary basis for an adequate representational art. I have tended to construct narratives around crisis situations: around unemployment and work-place struggles, situations in which ideology fails to provide a "rational" and consoling interpretation of the world, unless one has already learned to expect the worst. What I have been interested in, then, is a failure of petty-bourgeois optimism, a failure that leads to either progressive or reactionary class identifications in periods of economic crisis. *Aerospace Folktales* (1973) is a family biography which focuses on the effects of unemployment on white collar technical workers, on people who have internalized a view of themselves as "professionals" and subsequently suffer the shock of being dumped into the reserve army of labor. I was interested in the demands unemployment places on family life, in the family as refuge, training ground and women's prison. As Max Horkheimer has noted, unemployment blurs the boundaries between the private and the social.¹¹ Private life becomes mere waiting for work, just, I might add, as work is increasingly a mode of waiting for life, for a delayed gratification. For men who have internalized the demands of production, forced idleness can breed both small and large insanities, from the compulsive straightening of lamps to despair and suicide.

This Ain't China (1974) is a photonovel which grew out of an attempt to unionize a restaurant. The work is a comedy about theatricalized food, about food as a central fetishized image in an organized drama of "service." Among other things, I wanted to portray the conditions under which people stop obeying orders, and in the way repetitive alienated work colonizes the unconscious, particularly work in crowded, greasy "backstage" kitchens.

11. Max Horkheimer, "Art and Mass Culture" (1937), *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell et al., New York, 1972, p. 276.

Formally, I use long edited sequences of still photographs, usually broken up into "shots" of varying length, as well as lengthy novelistic texts and taped interviews. The photographs deliberately quote a variety of stylistic sources: from motion studies to a deadpan, clinical version of color food photography. The narrative moves self-consciously between "fictional" and "documentary" modes. A lot of scenes are staged. Both *Aerospace* and *China* have been shown on the wall, as books, and, most effectively in a political sense, as live slide-shows for people who have something other than a merely esthetic relation to the issues involved.

Chauncey Hare is a photographer who happens to have spent twenty years of his life as a chemical engineer. This biographical note is central to the meaning of his work. Of all the people I have discussed, he has the least relation to a hybridized, pictorially disrespectful narrative approach to the photographic medium. His photography grows out of a well-established documentary tradition, characterized by a belief in the efficacy of the single image, and a desire to combine formal elegance with a clarity of detail. The radicalism of Hare's work lies in his choice of a terrain and his identification with its inhabitants.

Hare is beginning to be known for work done over the past ten years while travelling across the United States, taking careful, tripod-mounted portraits of people, mostly working people, in their home environments. These images depict home life as a source of dignity and grace (his portrait-subjects are always on balance, sharing none of the grotesquery of Arbus or Bill Owens) and as something flawed, something invaded by the horrific sameness of a consumer culture. It is in the grasping of this dialectical character of family and private life, that Hare partakes of the same general critique I have been noting in the work of other politically aware photographers. This earlier work of Hare's, exhibited in 1977 at the Museum of Modern Art and published by Aperture as *Interior America*, continues in these contexts to reinforce the dominant American myth of the documentary photographer as a rootless wanderer, of art as the project of a contemplative but voracious eye.

Of course, Hare, with his careful, sympathetic interactions, does not share the transcontinental anomic *flânerie* of the Robert Frank tradition. For the moment, then, I am more interested in a more recent project of Hare's, with the working title of "A Study of Standard Oil Company Employees" (1976-77).¹² It is unlikely that this work will ever be exhibited at the Rockefeller-backed Museum of Modern Art, which is, after all, a cultural edifice built on Standard Oil profits, notwithstanding the "relative autonomy" of John Szarkowski's curatorial decisions. Using credentials as a Guggenheim photography fellow, Hare asked his employers for a year's leave of absence from his engineering job, only that he might return to work every day and take photographs that would begin to expose what he saw as the relation between "technology and alienation." Somehow, corporate public relations agents saw the project in a positive light and approved it. After only three months of independent work, Hare's investigations were terminated by a suddenly threatened management. During his wanderings in this familiar



Figure 8: Allan Sekula, *This Ain't China: A Photonovel*, 1974. Photographs and text (excerpt).

12. Photographs from this study appeared in Chauncey Hare, *This Was Corporate America*, Boston, 1984.

territory, Hare photographed and interviewed at every level of the corporate hierarchy, ranging from refinery operators, maintenance workers and headquarters key-punch operators, to supervisors and executive engineers. His photographs form a kind of metonymic map of an abstract bureaucratic structure. Each portrait suggests a life and a position. One sees evidence of the elaborately coded privileges and humiliations of autocratically managed large enterprises. An executive inhabits a large office on an upper floor with a plate glass view of San Francisco's financial district. In a corner, a far corner, behind an expensive potted plant, he keeps a small photographic shrine to his wife and kids. Refinery operators, unable to leave their job sites for lunch, eat sandwiches as they stare at walls of gauges. A woman's head is barely visible in a labyrinthine word-processing cubicle. Refinery operators sit glumly on a bench while their supervisor lectures them about a failed valve, exhibited prominently in the foreground of the picture.

Hare's photographs demand extended captions. His interviews serve to reveal the subjective aspects of the work experience, something photographs can only suggest indirectly. Interviews allow for a kind of self-authorship that portraiture offers only in an extremely limited and problematic way. The photographer always has the edge; and a moment is, after all, only a moment, and only a *visible* moment at that. Speech allows for critical reflection, for complaints, for the unfolding of personal histories, for the voicing of fears and hopes. Hare was trained as a technocrat and a pragmatist, trained to submit all problems to the logic of an efficiency defined solely in terms of profit. This is hardly a personal attack, but merely a remark on the historical role of the engineering profession under capitalism. Hare brings an engineer's knowledge, coupled with an ethical integration of "fact" and "value," to his critique of the petrochemical industry. And yet he sees in the refinery workers an image of his own, previously unacknowledged, proletarianization. He overcomes the contempt commonly felt by professional and technical staff for the people who actually run the everyday operations of a large refinery complex. Refineries are increasingly dangerous, both to workers and to the surrounding communities. Understaffed and poorly maintained, many plants are potential bombs. Pipes wear thin and explode; operators have to contend with doubled and tripled work loads. This crisis situation is evident in Hare's pictures and interview transcripts. A lone worker is photographed in the midst of a large tank-truck loading complex for which he alone is responsible, rather than the normal crew of three. A number of the workers photographed by Hare have since died of cancer. The Richmond, California area, where Hare both works and lives, is a petrochemical center with one of the highest per capita rates of cancer in the country. As a known member of the community and friend, Hare photographs many of the workers in their homes, in private life and retirement. It is among these older, retired workers that he discovers the most variations on the theme of uncompensated injuries and epidemic carcinoma. The younger workers know what awaits them, and talk about their options.

Like Lonidier, Hare has had to protect many of his subjects from the potential consequences of their remarks, from company reprisals. However, he has chosen an altogether different approach to the problems of visual representation, preferring portraiture to a deadpan, clinical style of photography. Lonidier accepts the reified form of visual depiction, and works toward its subversion through storytelling and political analysis. Hare begins with a "humanized" image, but embeds the portrait within a larger frame, within the very midst of a bureaucratic labyrinth and a modern "automated" version of the dark, satanic mill with its routine, its boredom, its sterility and its invisible poisons.

T H R E E

I am arguing, then, for an art that documents monopoly capitalism's inability to deliver the conditions of a fully human life, for an art that recalls Benjamin's remark that "there is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism."¹³ Against violence directed at the human body, at the environment, at working people's ability to control their own lives, we need to counterpose an active resistance, simultaneously political and symbolic, to monopoly capitalism's increasing power and arrogance, a resistance aimed ultimately at socialist transformation. A naive faith in both the privileged subjectivity of the artist, at the one extreme, and the fundamental "objectivity" of photographic realism, at the other, can only be overcome in a recognition of cultural work as a *praxis*. As Marx put it:

*It is only in a social context that subjectivism and objectivism, spiritualism and materialism, activity and passivity cease to be such antinomies. The resolution of the theoretical contradictions is possible only through practical means, only through the practical energy of man.*¹⁴

A didactic and critical representation is a necessary but insufficient condition for the transformation of society. A larger, encompassing praxis is necessary.

1976/78

13. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), *Illuminations*, p. 256.

14. Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" (1844), *Early Writings*, trans. and ed. T.B. Bottomore, New York, 1964, p. 162.

SCHOOL IS A FACTORY
(On The Politics of Education and the
Traffic in Photographs)

1. The exhibition version of this work, published in its entirety in Allan Sekula, *Photography against the Grain* (1984) consisted of a sequence of 19 photographs and captions, intercut with 7 graphics panels, from which the current illustrations are taken unless otherwise noted. An earlier version was published in *Exposure* 15: 3-4 (Winter 1980).



2. Clearly, an adequate account of the developments alluded to in the last two paragraphs would require volumes. Several recent texts come to mind as especially important: Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, New York, 1974, and David Montgomery's *Workers' Control in America*, New York, 1979, are about the corporate struggle to seize control of the labor process by means of "scientific management," thereby isolating and deskilling workers; Stuart Ewen's *Captains of Consciousness*, New York, 1976, about the growth of a consumer culture motivated by corporate advertising; Samuel Bowles' and Herbert Gintis' *Schooling in Capitalist America*, New York, 1976, about the historical relations of educational reform to the changing demands of a capitalist economy; and David Noble's *America by Design*, New York, 1977, about the corporate role of science and technology, with an emphasis on the instrumentalization of higher education. David N. Smith's *Who Rules the Universities?*, New York, 1974, is also valuable, as is Allen B. Ballard's *The Education of Black Folk*, New York, 1973, and the hard-to-find text by the Newt Davidson Collective, *Crisis at CUNY*, New York, 1974.

The arguments made here take us to a problematic intersection in advanced capitalist society, that of "higher" education and the "culture industry."¹ I suspect that you and I are situated, as social actors, in that intersection, maybe directing traffic, maybe speeding through, maybe hitchhiking, maybe stalled, maybe in danger of being run over. I am interested here in speaking to whatever comforts or discomforts you might feel by virtue of the way these highways have been engineered into a larger social geography. This essay is a deliberate provocation, less an intervention from some fictitious "outside" than an argument from within.

In the "developed" world, school and the media bring a formidable play of forces to bear upon the self, transforming and supplanting the more traditional patriarchal authority that emanated from religion and family in the epochs of feudalism and entrepreneurial capitalism. Both mass schooling and mass media are developments intrinsic and necessary to the corporate capitalist world order that emerged in the very late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the United States, the decade after the First World War saw the triumph of a new national culture, a "business" culture, reproduced through compulsory education and promulgated by mass circulation periodicals, radio and the movies. These forces sought to organize people as atomized "private individuals," motivated en masse by the prospect of consumption, thus liquidating other dangerously oppositional forms of social bonding based on class, sex, race and ethnicity.

We have been led by the champions of corporate liberalism to believe that schooling and the media are instruments of freedom. Accordingly, these institutions are seen to fulfill the democratic promise of the Enlightenment by bringing knowledge and upward social mobility within reach of everyone, by allowing each individual to reach his or her own limits. This ideology hides the relentless sorting function performed by school and media. Both institutions serve to legitimate and reproduce a strict hierarchy of power relations, tracking individuals into places in a complex social division of labor while suggesting that we have only ourselves to blame for our failures. School and the media effectively situate most people in a culture and economy over which they have no control, and thus are mechanisms by which an "enlightened" few promote the subtle silencing of the many.²

School and the media are inherently discursive institutions, sites within which discourse becomes a locus of symbolic force, of symbolic violence. A communicative relation is established between teacher and student, performer and audience, in which the first part, as the purveyor of official "truths," exerts an institutional authority over the second. Students and audience are reduced to the status of passive listeners, rather than active

subjects of knowledge. Resistance is almost always limited only to the possibility of tuning out. Domination depends on a monologue of sorts, a "conversation" in which one party names and directs the other, while the other listens deferentially, docilely, resentfully, perhaps full of suppressed rage. When the wholly dominated listener turns to speak, it is with the internalized voice of the master. This is the dynamic of all oppressions of race, gender, and class. All dominating power functions semiotically through the naming of the other as subordinate, dependent, incomplete as a human being without the master's discipline and support. Clearly, such relationships can be overthrown; the discourse of domination finds its dialectical antagonist in a discourse and practice of liberation. Like home, factory, prison and city streets, school and the media are sites of an intense, if often covert, daily struggle in which language and power are inextricably connected.³

Most of us who have managed to develop a professional relation to the traffic in words and images (as artists, writers, or teachers) share, often unequally and competitively, in a *symbolic privilege* which situates us above whole populations of the silenced and voiceless. This role, the role of cultural mouthpiece, normally partakes in the privileging and accreditation of its own status, and that of its patrons and employers, while suggesting that culture exists for everyone, or for its own sake. A contradiction has developed between the bureaucratic and professional organization of all cultural work and the Janus-faced mythology of culture, which suggests, on the one hand, that mass culture is popular and democratic, while arguing, on the other, that high culture is an elite activity, an Olympian conversation between genius and connoisseur. High culture is increasingly no more than a specialized and pretentious variant of mass culture, speaking to an audience composed of the upper class and the intermediary strata of professionals and managers (and especially those professionals and managers whose business is culture). The star system prevails in both SoHo and Hollywood: all culture becomes publicity, a matter of *exposure*.⁴

But artists and intellectuals do not control the interlocking apparatuses of culture and education. Increasingly they are the functionaries and employees of corporate and state institutions: primarily as teachers and grant recipients. The ideology of autonomous professionalism serves to legitimate and defend career interests while, particularly in the case of artist-teachers, building on a hollow legacy of romantic individualism. Although the myth of the lonely oppositional path retains its redemptive ideological force, artists are forced into a dreary upwardly-mobile competition for visibility, with reputation translating into career-capital. Those who refuse or fail are officially invisible, without voice. (I once heard a well-known artist characterize less well-known artists, generally, as lazy.)

The case of photography is especially poignant in this regard, since historically the medium has been central to the development of mass culture, with its necessary industrialization and proletarianization of much of cultural work. The dominant spectacle, with its seductive commodities and authoritative visual "facts," could not exist without photographs or

3. See Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York, 1970, for a very important dialectical understanding of the educational process in its dominating and liberating modes. Ira Schor's *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, Boston, 1980, does an admirable job of translating Freire's insights concerning peasant societies into terms compatible with the experience of North American working-class students. Pierre Bourdieu's and Jean-Claude Passeron's *Reproduction*, London, 1977, is theoretically dense but valuable in its attempt at a "theory of symbolic violence" in the pedagogical sphere. Adrienne Rich's essays on education in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, New York, 1979, especially the one entitled "Toward a Woman-Centered University," are among the most lucid statements I have read on the radical remaking of educational possibilities, and I am grateful to Sally Stein for directing me to them.

4. Thus there is something revealing about the very title of the journal in which this essay originally appeared. *Exposure* was founded in 1964 as a forum for college teachers of photography. In contrast, *Aperture*, founded in 1953, suggested that the practice of fine-art photography involved a small hermetic circle around the guru-like figure of Minor White. One entered this circle through the smallest of apertures (f/64?), rather as if through the New Testament "eye of the needle." *Exposure* supplanted this inner-directed estheticism with a belief in outward-oriented professional boosterism appropriate to the mid-sixties era of Pop Art and growing college art teaching. Both titles share, however, in a venerable fixation with the techniques and apparatuses of photography. Thus "aperture" unites technologism and spiritualism, while "exposure" unites technologism and an incipient photographic star system, realized in the 1970s.



Student welders.

photographers. Treated by the vigorous new art history of photography to an expanding pantheon of independent *auteurs*, we forget that most photographers are detail workers, makers of fragmentary and indeterminate visual statements. These photographs take on a more determinate meaning as they pass through a bureaucratically organized and directed process of assembly. The picture magazine is a case in point. Even the curated fine art exhibition, such as John Szarkowski's "definitive" *Mirrors and Windows* at the Museum of Modern Art, may be another. A bureaucratized high culture needs to celebrate the independent creative spirit while functionally eroding the autonomy of the artist.

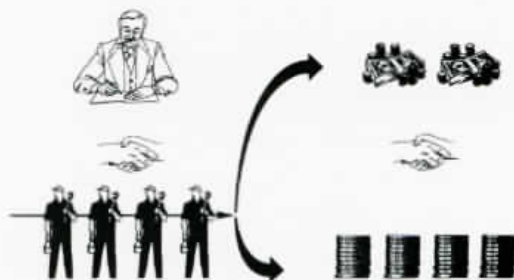
If school is a factory, art departments are industrial parks in which the creative spirit, like cosmetic shrubbery or Muzak, still "lives." Photographic education is largely directed at people who will become detail workers in one sense or another. Only the most elite art schools and university art departments regularly produce graduates who will compete for recognition as fine artists. Nonetheless, the ideology of *auteurism* dominates the teaching of the medium's history at all levels of higher education, even in the community colleges. This *auteurism* actually oscillates in and out of view, sharing prominence with its opposite, technological determinism. Students learn that photographic history is driven by technical progress, except in some cases, when history is the elevated product of especially gifted artists, who are to be admired and emulated. Very few teachers acknowledge the constraints placed on their would-be *auteurs* by a system of educational tracking based on class, race, and sex.

Thus, most of us who teach, or make art, or go to school with a desire to do these things, are forced to accept that a winner's game requires losers. One can either embrace this proposition with a social-Darwinist steeling of the nerves, or pretend that it is not true while trying to survive anyway. Otherwise we might begin to work for a method of education and a culture based on a struggle for social equality.

T W O

Between 1976 and 1979 I was employed as a part-time junior college instructor in one of the largest photography departments in the United States, teaching the history of photography to night students. Two-year "community" colleges constitute the lowest level of higher education in the United States, serving as training camps for technical, service, and lower-level administrative workers, and as "holding tanks" for high school graduates who would otherwise flood the labor market. These institutions have developed since the end of the second world war.

Most of my students worked: as technicians, as postal clerks, electronics assemblers, fast-food workers, welders, social workers, high-school teachers, and as housewives and mothers. A few retired people took courses. Many students had an amateur interest in the medium. Some night students would jokingly rate the classroom events against what they had



missed on television. A good number of the younger students entertained serious thoughts about a career in photography, although many were confused, uncertain about the path to take, knowing that a community college education was not enough. Generally, the committed photography students felt a certain vague pride, believing that the reputations their instructors claimed made this department a better one than most in two-year colleges. Since a number of faculty members exhibited locally and nationally, this suggested that perhaps the students, too, were on the right track. For the most part, though, the students were learning to become image technicians. Their art historical education was icing on a cake made of nuts and bolts. I tried to teach a different history of photography, one that called attention to the historical roots of this contradiction. *School Is a Factory* emerges from the problems I encountered in teaching.

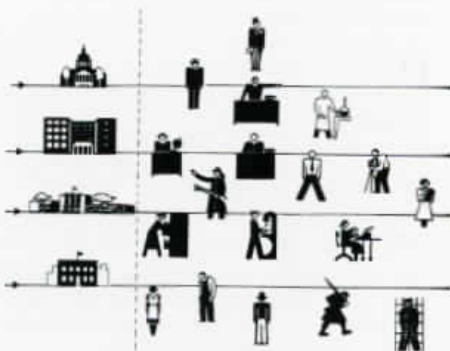
I was asked to exhibit some of my photographs in a gallery run by the students. The space intrigued me not for formal reasons, but because of its dual uses, mixing both an esthetic and a technical pedagogy, while also serving as a convenient student hang-out. The work of reputable art photographers hung on the walls, almost all of it in the fine-print tradition of photography. The gallery also served as a foyer to the student darkrooms, the spaces in which purely technical concerns prevailed. I decided that the appropriate thing to do in such a space was a kind of internal critique—a questioning, fragmentary at best—moving outward from photographic education, to community college education, to the larger political economy which motivated the educational system, and then moving back to the immediate environment in which the students were situated.

I substituted a tape for the top-40 radio that normally played in the gallery/darkroom area. The sound track provided a background of anti-Muzak, beginning with mechanically seductive disco music and ending with the flat, deadened rebelliousness of a new wave version of "Summertime Blues" recorded by the Flying Lizards (a very specific irony in the coastal regions of Orange County in southern California). The intermediary material on the tape was vocal, punctuated with the loud ticking of a darkroom timer. A monotonous monologue goes on about a "sanitary landscape," about "factories disguised as parks," while shifting suddenly to the authoritarian, double-binding voice of the institution itself: "Learn to earn, work, don't work, play, don't play. Everyone is looking at you, no one is looking at you...."

My photographs were intended to work against the typical lyricism of college catalogue photography, with its celebration of joyful encounters between individuated students and the environment, objects, instruments and agents of knowledge: manicured and shaded lawns, dissected frogs, microscopes, and gesticulating professors. So I adopted the hard flash light and the single point perspective appropriate to a rationalized, bureaucratically administered environment which is trying to pass itself off as the site of collegial pleasures and self-discovery. But it seemed important also to work against the prevailing formalism and otherworldliness of art photography, the hegemonic mannerism of a professionalized avant-garde



Biology student and teacher.



that has turned in upon itself. I wanted to suggest that it is possible for art to deal critically with the social ground on which we stand, to speak of people's experiences in terms other than those dictated by individualism. This project involved a break with the cult of the self-sufficient visual image. I am not suggesting that this break necessitates a reversion to some rigid, positivist version of documentary characterized by an obsession with the "facts" overlaid with liberal humanist "values." It would be a mistake therefore to assume that the captions bring a clarifying or restricting sociological facticity to these photographs. Both words and pictures constitute arguments, operating at different levels of specificity, about the prevailing, rather than the idiosyncratic effects of education upon students. Although I am concerned here with the rule rather than the exception, the photographed moments are in no way evidence of an iron determinism at work. I cannot speak for the inner experience, ambitions, or future of the students and teachers who posed for me. The serious looks are as much evidence of guarded caution as anything else, since our brief interactions in the midst of business-as-usual did not provide much time for explanation. Most administrators assumed that a photographer was a potential publicist, rather than a critic, of their domain. Students were understandably reluctant to contribute to the image of the "happy scholar"—and I did not coax them.

I am well aware that this project violates a normal separation of tasks which demands that photographers restrict their activity to the field of the visual, and to the cultivation of esthetic effects. The either-or-ism that rules this separation suggests that either one makes pictures, which speak from and to the emotions, or one writes, speaking thus to the intellect. But neither words nor pictures speak exclusively to one "faculty" or another: this separation is a triumph of a specifically bourgeois psychology and philosophy of mind, enacted in the rigid division of mental labor within the culture industry.

T H R E E

The celebration, by ruling-class commissions, of universal art education, of art education as the "Fourth R" in a revamped, redecorated system of schooling, must be questioned when the same ruling class is promoting educational cutbacks at the same time.⁵ When functional literacy rates are declining, what does it mean to promote a massive shift of educational attention to the development of the esthetic faculties? This plan reads like a technocratic perversion of the liberating pedagogy envisioned by the German romantic poet Schiller in his 1793 letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*.⁶ The estheticism encouraged by the cultural bureaucrats of the 1980s stops short of a necessary integration with critical consciousness. Rather, what seems to have taken shape in these plans is a technocratic vision of a society of expressionist units, playing happily as consumers (of less and less) in a world in which political life is increasingly limited to a spectacle of representation. The task of progressive teachers, artists, and students is to critique this vision and combat its further

5. See David Rockefeller, Jr., chairman, *Coming to Our Senses: The Significance of the Arts in American Education—A Panel Report*, New York, 1977. See also the ominous remarks by Zbigniew Brzezinski, who later became director of the Trilateral Commission and national security advisor to President Carter, on a projected "democracy," based not on the popular ability to influence "policy making," but on "autonomy for individual self-expression," in Daniel Bell, ed., "Toward the Year 2000: Work in Progress," *Daedalus*, Summer 1967, p. 687.

6. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell, New York, 1977. See also Herbert Marcuse, "The Aesthetic Dimension," in *Eros and Civilization*, Boston, 1955.

realization, while preserving the awareness that utopian esthetic possibilities must be struggled for as intrinsic to a genuinely democratic future, but cannot be achieved in a society governed by a mechanical and world-threatening lust for profit and control.

1980

POSTSCRIPT

Here, in retrospect, is a brief historical comment on two pictorial conventions I've sought implicitly to challenge in *School Is a Factory*.

Consider two photographs. First, a photograph made in 1900 by the Washington, D.C. commercial photographer Frances Benjamin Johnson. Johnson came to photography from a *beaux arts* training and an early career as a commercial illustrator. The photograph comes from an album made by Johnson for the Hampton Institute, a vocational college for blacks in Virginia. The purpose of the album was promotional, serving as an aid to fund raising. Thus the attitude of diligent and industrious servitude exhibited here might have been intended to impress white donors, like the steel manufacturer Andrew Carnegie, with the promise of converting a supposedly indolent and uneducated rural black population into disciplined, productive, and unrebelling proletarians. That this careful carpentry is being performed on a "bourgeois" interior, on the bannisters of the Hampton Institute treasurer's house, is no accident. The Hampton photographs were exhibited as well at the Paris Exposition of 1900, following the presentation of a series of Johnson photographs of the Washington, D.C. city schools at the 1899 Paris Exposition. Many of these earlier photos appeared in a series of pamphlets called *The New Education Illustrated*.

It can be argued that, although less engaged than Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine in direct Progressive Era reform politics, Johnson is an equally important pictorial ideologue of that period. Although most of her work was governed by commercial possibilities, she seems to have touched on some of the principal themes of Progressive Era politics, moving from first generation feminism, on the one hand, to the celebration of American imperialism on the other. Thus she was able to photograph in a highly celebratory fashion, both Susan B. Anthony, the feminist leader, and Admiral Dewey, commander of the victorious American fleet at Manila. Johnson was able in her school photographs to suggest the new spirit of scientific and ameliorative education. (The pragmatist John Dewey can be said to be the principal philosopher of that movement.⁷) Johnson presents the school as a total and encyclopedic institution. But the black schools like Hampton and Tuskegee were limited to vocational ends: this limitation was the source of an intense debate between the reform-minded black educator Booker T. Washington and the more radical W. E. B. DuBois, who argued for a black



Figure 1: Frances Benjamin Johnson, *Stairway of Treasurer's Residence. Students at Work*. Platinum print from Hampton Institute album, 1900.

7. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, New York, 1916.

8. In addition to Allen Ballard's *The Education of Black Folk*, see W.E. B. DuBois, *The Education of Black People: Ten Critiques, 1906 - 1960*, ed. Herbert Aptheker, New York, 1973. For an amusing and partisan summary of the differences between Washington and DuBois, see Dudley Randall's poem "Booker T. and W.E.B.," in *Poem Counterpoem*, Detroit, 1966. Randall was writing during a time of rising black demands for open admission to higher education in the United States.

educational system that would include the liberal arts.⁸ Thus, what underlies the educational system that Johnson is promoting, both in her photographs of the black institutes and the then largely white public schools of Washington, D.C., is the process of a thorough-going *division of labor*, a division made along racial, and ethnic, lines. Although, relatively speaking, the black institutes were progressive institutions, they accepted the assignment of blacks to a subordinate position, as manual workers, in a society increasingly dominated by intellectual labor. Also, the black institutes attempted to educate for a craft system of production that was disappearing under pressure from industrial centralization and scientific management. Johnson's photographs, with their mix of realism and an idealizing and academic neo-classical arrangement, are related to what I would call the *instrumental realism* of late nineteenth century social scientific photography.

Like many psychiatric and criminological albums, these photographs, viewed in sequence in the original album, illustrate the so-called disease and its institutional correction and cure: a kind of "before" and "after" narrative structure that in the Hampton album involves the juxtaposition of images of rural southern life with the "improved" conditions of the vocationally educated and industrially disciplined black worker. Thus, behind the realist appearance of these images lies the substance of a new rationalized, and abstract, system of bureaucratic command. One could argue that the speaking subject of these photographs is not black people, taken either collectively or individually, but the *institution* of modern education. I am taking Johnson's photograph here as a *model* for what followed in virtually every college catalogue published in America. What I wanted to achieve in *School Is a Factory* is a way of turning such conventions inside-out, or upside-down, to reveal their contradictions.

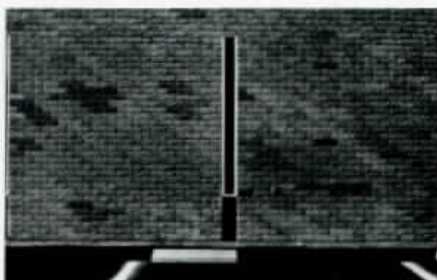


Figure 2: Lewis Baltz, *Window, Industrial Office Newport Beach*, from *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California*, 1975.

But just as I am opposed to the optimistic and disciplined realism of the Johnson photograph, so also I have problems with the following example of American late-modernist photography. Consider a photograph by Lewis Baltz published in 1975 by Castelli Graphics in an English and German language book called *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine California*.¹⁰ This happens to be the "landscape" in which I taught, the "landscape" within which *School Is a Factory* was made. What seems crucial to Baltz's work, and what makes it an exemplar, along with the work of Diane Arbus, among late-modernist photography in the United States, is its fundamental ambiguity in relation to the question of genre. Is this a documentary photograph or an abstraction? Baltz himself makes statements which embrace this ambiguity. And a whole new genre, a genre between genres, has arisen to give this ambiguity its proper place. The American curator William Jenkins has christened this work, along with the much more rigorously typological work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, and that of Robert Adams, Joe Deal, Nicholas Nixon, and others as the *New Topographics*.⁹ These "photographs of a man-altered landscape" derive their ambiguity precisely from the absence of the human figure (not to suggest that the addition of a human figure would necessarily "humanize" these images). In the case of Baltz, a depopulated industrial environment provides the source for photographs

9. *The New Topographics*, curated with an introduction by William Jenkins, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, 1975.

that often seem to aspire to a kinship with late-modernist abstract painting. Obviously, art photography is still haunted by the ghost of pictorialism, the need to affiliate itself referentially with painting. Baltz, then, is a good example of the so-called "loss of the referent" within late modernist culture. (To his credit, Baltz's ambiguity echoes an ambiguity and loss of referentiality already present in the built environment.) Increasingly, one specialized sign system can only refer to itself, or to another specialized sign system. Problems of communication are reduced to problems of self-referentiality, or to problems of translation. I should note that the very term "industrial park" is a linguistic trick, a mystifying translation of a site of production into a site of imaginary leisure. No two terms could be more incompatible, and yet what is suggested by this oxymoronic rhetorical construction is "clean industry," industry without industrialism.

What I hope to criticize here, then, are two related kinds of *abstraction*. First, we have the abstraction inherent in the supposedly *realistic* world picture of a bureaucratic, commodity centered society: the abstraction that emerges from the triumph of exchange value over use value, from the triumph of abstract intellectual labor over manual labor, from the triumph of instrumental reason over critical reason. (My thinking on these issues owes a lot to the German philosopher Alfred Sohn-Rethel.¹⁰) The second abstraction is that which emerges from the separation of esthetic culture from the rest of life, the abstraction process central to the career of modernism (and postmodernism), the abstraction that finds an exemplary esthetic freedom in the disengaged play of signifiers. What I hope to substitute for these two powerful tendencies, which correspond roughly to the realms of "applied" and "pure" photography, is for the moment a kind of political geography, a way of talking with words and images about both the system and our lives within the system.

1982

10. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel, London, 1978.



One of my students, a welder, had worked in a large shipyard in Los Angeles harbor, but poor wages, periodic layoffs and danger drove him to a better-paying job at Disneyland. Now, instead of building bulkheads for Navy frigates and repairing oil tankers, he constructs the hidden skeleton of an amusement park, commuting to the night shift after class. He remarks drolly on the button-down fun-loving ethos of the place, and on the snobbery directed at Disneyland's manual workers by the college students who serve as guides and performers. So he prefers the solitary nighttime work, welding as the fog rolls in from the Pacific, softening the contours of Fantasyland and obliterating the artificial peak of the Matterhorn.

PHOTOGRAPHY AGAINST THE GRAIN

ONE

1. This essay was originally published as the introduction to *Photography Against the Grain* (1984), now out of print. The historical essays on photography from that volume referred to in the second half of this text will be reprinted in *The Traffic in Photographs*, MIT Press, forthcoming.

This is a book *about* photography. This is also a book *of* photographs, a book that speaks within and alongside and through photographs.¹ Here is one way in which this book brushes photography against the grain: normally separated tasks—of writer and photographer, of “critic” and “visual artist”—are here allowed to coexist, perhaps uneasily between the covers of a single volume. In planning this book, I had questions—for the most part still unanswered—about the ways these distinct modes of address might overlap, reinforce each other, or subvert whatever privilege each might claim if it operated alone. It would be, for example, a mistake to assume that the photo works published here were intended as “practical solutions” to “theoretical problems” discussed in the accompanying critical essays.

What unites these tasks, what lends this book its “unitary” character as a text, is a concern with photography as a *social practice*. In 1971, when I first began making photographs with any seriousness, the medium’s paramount attraction was, for me, its unavoidable social referentiality, its way of describing—albeit in enigmatic, misleading, reductive and often superficial terms—a world of social institutions, gestures, manners, relationships. And the problematic character of this descriptive power is itself compelling, compounded by the fact that the life world that beckons is one in which the photographer is already a social actor, never a completely innocent or objective bystander.

At that time photography seemed to me to afford an alternative to the overly specialized, esoteric, and self-referential discourse of late modernism, which had, to offer only one crude example, nothing much to say about the Vietnam War.

So, somewhat naively perhaps, I began to try combining words and groupings of photographs in ways that sought to incorporate and to invite a political dialogue. Such dialogue seemed possible in theatre and cinema, especially in the work of Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Luc Godard, and Peter Weiss, but more difficult to imagine for the nonliterary visual arts, which are dialogical only in the very important sense that one work might “answer” or respond to another. One attraction and challenge of photography was its dumb resistance to language, its way of suppressing in a static moment its often dialogical social origins. I was initially drawn as a spectator to that genre of photography which was most clearly the outcome of an inter-subjective play or conflict of intentions and representations: the portrait. Looking at the works of August Sander and Diane Arbus, for example, I saw mute enigmatic evidence of hidden theatrical enterprise, the wordless outcomes of wordy encounters. I developed a parallel interest in verbal interviews and began to use a tape recorder as well as a camera. David

Antin's approach to a nonliterary poetics of talk was quite influential—both practically and theoretically—at this point. Somewhat later I began to read and listen to Studs Terkel's remarkable oral histories, which seemed to pose a challenge from below to the authority of professional historiography and literary culture.²

On a more practical, material level photography and audiotape recording were cheaper and less demanding technically than either theatrical or documentary filmmaking—both beyond my grasp—and open to being used in ways that kept close to the visible events and patterns of everyday life and the flow of mundane talk, argument, reminiscence, and self-justification. Furthermore, I wanted to construct works from *within* concrete life situations, situations within which there was either an overt or active clash of interests and representations. Any interest I had in artifice and constructed dialogue was part of a search for a certain "realism," a realism not of appearances or social facts but of everyday experience in and against the grip of advanced capitalism. This realism sought to brush traditional realism against the grain. Against the photoessayistic promise of "life" caught by the camera, I sought to work from within a world already replete with signs.

Aerospace Folktales was a first attempt at an extended "documentary." As an undergraduate at a science-oriented university in 1968, I had discovered lots of reasons to view corporate science with suspicion. Working as a chemical technician for a couple of probably only moderately corrupt aerospace subcontracting companies and pouring hydrofluoric acid to the sound of Muzak did little to improve my opinion. And nothing in my experience inclined me to accept Reyner Banham's vision of Los Angeles as a post-urban utopia.³ My work on *Aerospace Folktales* was also affected by feminist and Marxist critiques of the New Left. These critiques emerged as that movement broke into sectarian fragments at the end of the 1960s. The "old" New Left that had sustained a continuity of struggle from the civil rights movement onward to the mass opposition to the Vietnam War was now charged with having ignored issues of gender and personal life on the one hand, and issues of class and labor on the other. I felt that the only way to "account" for my politics—the only way to invite a political dialogue—was to "begin" with my own class and family background. *Aerospace Folktales* was structured around a movement between mock-sociological distance and familiarity. Certainly it is impossible to escape or ignore the fact that this is a work by a young man about the conditions of his own upbringing and those of his siblings. And to some extent the class anger discovered in the work—the sense of one's parents' lives being caught within what Ernest Mandel has termed the "permanent arms economy" of late capitalism—mixes with filial anger and desire. In its own adolescent way, the commentary both exposes and denies this confusion. So in the interests of whatever value that commentary might have as a "document" of the relationship between the personal and the political, I have decided to let the words stand, "and insofar as they were an image of my foolishness, to let them accuse me," to recall James Agee, who cultivated a Roman Catholic sense of confession. *On the other hand*, adolescent rebellion has

2. See David Antin, *Talking*, New York, 1972, and *Talking at the Boundaries*, New York, 1976. See also Studs Terkel, *Division Street: America*, New York, 1966, and *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression in America*, New York, 1970.

3. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Harmondsworth, 1971.



Figure 1. Alfred Stieglitz, *The Steerage*, 1907.

its truth. This needs saying when neoconservative psychologizers would have us remember the late 1960s and early 1970s as no more than an unpleasant and not-to-be-repeated episode during which the collective juvenile unconscious ran wild in the streets.

Although my work is more "reflexive" than traditional social documentary, it seeks to avoid what Perry Anderson has termed "the megalomania of the signifier." Unlike most modernists (and most photographers are still committed to modernism, bewildered by the irony lurking in their invitation into the cafeteria of postmodernism) I am not particularly interested in cultivating an "individual style." And unlike many postmodernists, I am not concerned with an art based on the fatalistic play of quotations and "appropriations" of already existing images, especially when that play emerges from an idealist isolation of the "image-world" from its material conditions.

The emphasis in these photo works has consistently been on the *ensemble*, and not on the formal or semantic success or failure of the single image. This seemed the only reasonable way to shift photography away from its affiliations with painting and printmaking and toward an investigation of its shared and unshared ground with literature and cinema. Furthermore, this seemed the only reasonable way to counter the tendency to incorporate photography into the museum, the tendency to produce work designed for judgment and acceptance by that institution.

I have decided not to say much about any "system" of montage behind the making of these photo works. Their construction is experimental and contingent. The function of text is not to introduce certainty. My hope is that the present context will allow these works to be read as "chapters" in a larger discontinuous work.

One last confession. I have consistently found it difficult to resist the attraction of a certain gestural repertoire consisting of "vulgar" or "popular" responses to the representational challenge posed by the camera: mugging, hyperbolic displays of objects, plays on the two-dimensional rendering of space. All of these derive from a popular understanding of the artifice of photography. Why should one assume that this understanding is solely the intellectual property of specialists?

T W O

My interest in the history and theory of photography emerged from and closely paralleled problems encountered in practice. Having begun to photograph as a way out of a late modernist cul-de-sac, I also realized that photography was in the process of being assigned a new position within the late modernist system of the arts. This was enough to spark both caution and historical curiosity.

Perhaps it is significant that I began, innocently enough, by looking at published photographs, and not at museologically preserved specimens. Thus I was more quickly impressed than might otherwise have been the case by the extreme degree to which photographic meaning was dependent on context. Here was a visual art for which, unlike cinema, discontinuity and incompleteness seemed fundamental, despite attempts to construct reassuring notions of organic unity and coherence at the level of the single image. This condition has two consequences. First, the problem of reception, the problem of what Walter Benjamin termed the "afterlife" of the work of art, becomes especially important for photography. Second, the category of the author is especially fragile and subject to editorial revision.

When one encounters the photographs of Lewis Hine in *The Survey*, and those of Alfred Stieglitz in *Camera Work*, it becomes difficult to sustain the belief that their differences are primarily stylistic, for those two historically coincident journals constituted such radically different discursive contexts: one devoted to a developing politics and professionalism of social welfare and the other to a vehemently anti-utilitarian avant-garde. Could the photographs of Hine and Stieglitz be understood independently of their mode and context of address? And could either photographer be considered an "artist" independently of his affiliation with these discourses? These were the questions that I set out to answer in "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning" (1974). Beyond this, my primary aim was to sketch out the limits of a discursive field using their works and reputations as exemplars, to examine the way in which the twentieth century discourse of photography oscillates between the need for "Hine"—the model of liberal-utilitarian realism, and a need for "Stieglitz"—the model of autonomous aesthetic endeavour. (However, it should be added now that the official need for "Hine" has diminished drastically with the collapse of a liberal ideological consensus in the United States since the end of the 1960s, and thus the social documentary tradition Hine had a hand in inventing becomes problematic in a new sense. This was the issue I attempted to address from an activist position in "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary.")



Figure 2. Lewis Hine, Neil Gallagher, worked two years in breaker. Leg crushed between cars. Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, November 1909.

My early critical interests, then, were antagonistic to the formalist closure inherent in the American modernist project, a closure that would regard Hine and Stieglitz as authorial embodiments of stylistically opposed tendencies in photographic history. And, on a more theoretical level, while I was clearly indebted to structuralism, and particularly to Roland Barthes's early essays on photography, the isolation of an abstract language system from social language, from language use, seemed to have produced a related kind of closure, more "scientific" perhaps than that effected by modernist criticism, but closure nonetheless. Walter Benjamin's emphasis on the historical specificity of the "age of mechanical reproducibility" was an important counter to the tendency to think of photography in overly synchronic or ahistorical terms. It was impossible to think about photography without recognizing the importance of historical shifts in the meaning, function and cultural status of photographic representation. Furthermore, in 1975 I discovered the very early Marxist critique of the "abstract objectivism" of formalist linguistics in one of the works of the

4. See V. N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik, New York and London, 1973. See also P. N. Medvedev/M.M. Bakhtin, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics* (1928), trans. Albert J. Wehrle, Baltimore and London, 1978; and M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin, 1981. Raymond Williams' reading of Voloshinov's importance for Marxist literary theory is found in *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford, 1977, pp. 21-44. (An unresolved controversy brews about the extent to which Voloshinov and Medvedev were "authors," or junior partners in a dialogue with Bakhtin, or scribes or even pen names for Bakhtin. The matter is complicated by the fact that neither Voloshinov nor Medvedev survived the 1930s, and by Bakhtin's life-long reticence about the matter.)

"Bakhtin circle" of Soviet literary scholars and semiologists: V. N. Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929). The aim of M. M. Bakhtin and his associates was to establish a sociology of literature based on a recognition of the "heteroglossia" of "living language," on a recognition of discourse as an arena of ideological and social difference and conflict. Voloshinov sought to supercede not only the abstract objectivism of Saussurean linguistics, but also the "individualistic subjectivism" of linguistic theories—derived from Wilhelm von Humboldt—which stressed the individual creativity inherent in the speech act. As Raymond Williams has remarked, "Voloshinov's decisive contribution was to find a way beyond the powerful but partial theories of expression and objective system." This "way beyond" necessarily acknowledged the socially-created character of language.⁴

If we look at contemporary cultural studies in the United States, we discover a curious echo of the reverberations between Voloshinov's "two trends in the philosophy of language." On the one hand, structuralist and post-structuralist models assert the autonomous determining force of language, its priority over human subjects. On the other hand, a more conservative and institutionally entrenched "humanist" paradigm claims to defend the autonomy of the creative subject. For those of us who are involved in photography, the polarities of this debate are quite evident, both in theory and in practice.

However, this is merely the latest stage in the prolonged crisis of subjectivity at the heart of bourgeois culture. Photography, in its mechanical character, in its instrumental affiliation with bureaucratic rationalism, in its acceleration and quantitative extension of visual representation, has long been understood as a threat to the category of the author in the visual arts. Think of the early artisanal resistance to the daquerreotype expressed in the caricatures of Honoré Daumier and Gérard Fontallard—cartoons in which these artists of the hand scoffed at a medium in which human creativity was reduced to passive clock-watching, in which, as Fontallard put it, "talent comes through sleep." Think of the deliberate cultivation of the "honorific marks of hand labor" (Thorstein Veblen) in the "camera work" of pre-modernist art photographers. And think finally of the contempt for handwork expressed by early modernist photographers, who come to regard the photograph as the product of a machine governed by pure thought. For László Moholy-Nagy, this "new vision" was exercised on the model of engineering; for Edward Weston it relied on a more metaphysical "previualization." Thus the authority of the artist was re-established on higher ground, that of "intellectual" rather than manual labor.

I am not suggesting that the study of photographic history be reduced in its entirety to this problematic, born of the historical tension between the forces of living labor and those of the "dead labor" invested in machinery. But we do stand to gain in understanding from a materialist social history of photography, a history that takes the interplay of economic and technological considerations into account. Thus we need to develop a history writing in accord with Walter Benjamin's challenge to bourgeois cultural

historicism, a challenge influenced by Georg Lukács's philosophical investigation of the effects of the commodity-form on both the material conditions and the subjective culture of capitalist society.⁵ Benjamin's argument has a special pertinence, I think, for a postmodern culture devoted to historical eclecticism, to the random dredging of the archive of past culture. Benjamin recognized that the cultural monuments of the past were the products of a division of labor, of "genius" and "anonymous drudgery:"

There is no cultural document that is not at the same time a record of barbarism. No history of culture has yet done justice to this fundamental fact, or can well hope to do so.

Yet this is not the crux of the matter. If the concept of culture is a problematical one for historical materialism, the disintegration of culture into commodities to be possessed by mankind is unthinkable for it. Historical materialism does not regard the work of the past as over and done with. It does not see that work, or any part of it, as falling with convenient quiddity into the lap of any epoch. The concept of culture as the embodiment of entities that are considered independently, if not of the production process in which they arose, then of that in which they continue to survive, is fetishistic. Culture appears reified. Its history is then nothing but the residue of memorable things and events that never broke the surface of human consciousness because they were never truly, that is politically, experienced.⁶

It was in the context of this problem that Benjamin was to speak later of the need for historical materialism to "brush history against the grain."

I see my own critical project now as an attempt to understand the social character of "the traffic in photographs." Taken literally, this traffic involves the social production, circulation, and reception of photographs in a society based on commodity production and exchange. Taken metaphorically, the notion of traffic suggests the peculiar way in which photographic meaning—and the very discourse of photography—is characterized by an incessant oscillation between what Lukács termed the "antinomies of bourgeois thought." This is always a movement between objectivism and subjectivism. Depending on the circumstances, it may also be a movement between rationalism and irrationalism, positivism and metaphysics, scientism and estheticism. We can detect its rhythm in advertising jargon and in criticism.

One already-published essay seeks to develop further some of these themes.⁷ That text was written as a very specific contribution to a collaborative project, a reading of a particular photographic archive, and a questioning of the institutional and semantic authority of photographic archives in general. It also examines a lineage of technical realism, tracing the role played by mechanical means in representing technical processes that were themselves subject to mechanization. Thus it is an essay about the photographic representation of work, about the affiliation of photographic realism with the logic and enterprise of engineering, and thus a return to some of the themes of the photo works included in this volume.

5. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, (1923), trans. Rodney Livingstone, London, 1971, pp. 83-222.

6. Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian" (1937), trans. Kingsley Shorter, in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, London, 1979, pp. 359-360.

7. See my "Photography between Labour and Capital," in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Robert Wilkie, eds., *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton 1948-1868*, Halifax, 1983, pp. 193-268.

The "photography boom" has rejuvenated sectors of elite culture and conferred a new prestige upon sectors of mass culture. A vast archive has been opened up for art historical sorting and accreditation. The dramas of modernism are repeated with a new cast of characters; this time, as Marx remarked of the Second Empire, history repeats itself as farce. But there is also a dialogue of opposition and resistance, a dialogue within which I count myself as only one voice. My hope is that this dialogue will move beyond its present institutional limits.

SOME AMERICAN NOTES

[W]hat influence may help us to prevent the English people from becoming, with the growth of democracy, Americanized? I confess I am disposed to answer: On the action of the State.

Matthew Arnold, "Democracy," 1861.

Arnold is a source for this group [the New Right], though it is significant that many of them have dropped much of his actual social criticism and especially his untiring advocacy of extended popular education. That part of Arnold, indeed, is now seen as a main symptom of the "disease" they believe they are fighting. But that is often how names and reputations are invoked from the past.

Raymond Williams, "A Hundred Years of Culture and Anarchy," 1970.

1. This essay incorporates two earlier texts in expanded form: a paper presented at the British National Photography Conference in Newcastle, July 22, 1989, and a statement read at an artists' rally supporting the National Endowment for the Arts, held in Los Angeles on Aug. 26, 1989. This latter statement was published in a revised version as an opinion piece in the *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 21, 1989. I am grateful to Thom Andersen, Maureen Murphy and Sally Stein for advice, comments and criticism.

2. See Hans Haacke, "The Good Will Umbrella," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, New York and Cambridge, 1987, p. 158.

"Enterprise culture?"¹ This phrase has a curious ring to my—and presumably to other—American ears. (I'm going to use the label American here self-consciously in its everyday imperialist sense to refer to citizens of the United States and not to the citizens of the thirty-odd other countries that make up the continental and Caribbean Americas.) My hunch is that Americans—bourgeois Americans, that is, as well as most of the professional and managerial class—hear this phrase "enterprise culture" with a certain low-level bewilderment. The phrase is both redundant (For Americans what other culture could there be than one rooted in the free soil of enterprise?) and oxymoronic. (Culture in the honorific sense should be somehow free of venal entanglements). This confusion is partly the effect of the differences between culture defined in the broad, mass or popular senses, and culture defined in a more narrow, elite sense. But this confusion is also the effect of the fact that these very differences have become themselves confused with the incorporation of traditional high culture and elements of the contemporary artistic "vanguard" into the institutionalized flux of mass culture.

An American hearing the phrase "enterprise culture" and knowing its recent British origins might be doubly puzzled. After all, isn't "enterprise culture" what "we Americans" have done for example with the BBC's *Masterpiece Theatre*, brought to us on the Public Broadcasting System through the kind and disinterested sponsorship of Mobil Oil. Isn't culture "British" and enterprise "American?" Isn't this a quintessentially American merger?²

The phrase "Enterprise culture" assumes an existing apparatus of state-funded cultural programs and activities and assumes further that this apparatus must be dismantled. Culture must be won away from the state, and "liberated" by the spirit of capitalism.

This is a more drastic prescription for Britain than it is for the United States. The British Council's annual budget is 720 million dollars; that of the National Endowment for the Arts, the equivalent American agency, is about \$172 million. (The French government allots \$1.6 billion to the arts, while West Germany spends \$4.5 billion. In the United States, it is often remarked that the Pentagon spends more on military bands than the entire federal arts budget.)

Despite the relatively small stakes, and rather in the elephant-gun spirit of the invasion of Grenada, American conservatives have been maneuvering to restrict arts funding since the very beginning of the Reagan presidency in 1981. Certainly, this is part of the larger right-wing agenda which has succeeded in gutting the welfare function of the state, often through the installation of hostile and even criminally corrupt officials in federal agencies and in cabinet level positions. But like the Grenada invasion, the

attack on state support for the arts is strongly motivated by ideological concerns, by the need to make an example in a small corner of a symbolically charged arena. In this case the arena is culture, rather than the Caribbean.

While Thatcherites learn from the American spirit of untrammelled enterprise, Reaganites learn from the British spirit of reactionary militance in dismantling a comparatively larger state cultural sector, much as they learned Grenada press-muzzling from the British example in the Malvinas/Falklands. Differences exist, however, between conservative tactics in Britain and the US. The cultural policy of American conservatives advances under the banner of elitism and anti-populism. The 1981 Heritage Foundation report that provided Reagan with a blueprint for the dismantling of the liberal state complained specifically about the "ever greater employment [by National Endowment funded organizations] of advertising techniques which cheapen when they do not actually compromise artistic content."³ In Britain, the Tory rallying cry is a pseudo-populist call to market: "We like to be considered a mainstream leisure product," asserts the new "marketing manager" of the Victoria and Albert.⁴

This summer we've seen a very serious flare-up in the American defunding war. The fire this time burns around photography. An arson investigation is warranted. I hope to say something useful about the tactics and the psychopathology of the conservative agenda. In doing so, I may only be—forgive this play on what must be an increasingly ironic and empty expression—"bringing coals to Newcastle." But then one reason I'm here in Newcastle is to learn something from your experience, and to seek, in a necessary internationalist extension of the words of Jesse Jackson, "common ground." The practical internationalism of the transnational bourgeoisie and their neoconservative lieutenants—the "policy intellectuals"—can only be countered by a new internationalism of the left.

For the moment, I want to turn to the specific question posed by this conference, the question of the survival of something called "independent photography" in an environment of free enterprise. Independent photography? Independent from what? This label has no particular currency in the United States. It was possible until quite recently to speak with a reasonably straight face of something roughly equivalent called "art photography." But that term seeks a more emphatic ideological resolution of the problem of photography's position within the modern—and "postmodern"—systems of culture. The label "art photography" is inherently conservative, ignoring Roland Barthes's remark that "photography displaces, shifts the notion of art, and that is why it takes place in a certain progress in the world."⁵ The equivalent term to the one used in Britain is found in other, closely related media: we speak of independent film and video meaning here independence from Hollywood production. (Increasingly, however, with the atrophy of experimental/vanguard film culture, "the independents" denote smaller producers within Hollywood.)

So again, independence from what? From commerce, certainly. Or actually not so certainly, since the commercial exchange of art photographs has

3. Michael S. Joyce, "The National Endowments for the Humanities and Arts," in Charles L. Heatherly, ed., *Mandate for Leadership: Policy Management in a Conservative Administration*, Washington, D.C. 1981, p. 1052. For an early analysis of the conservative agenda for the arts, see Catherine Lord, "The President's Man: The Arts Endowment under Frank Hodsoll," *Afterimage*, Feb. 1983, pp. 3-4.

4. Charles Mills, quoted in Andrew Graham Dixon, "Culture Shocker," *Vanity Fair*, Oct. 1989, p. 113.

5. Roland Barthes, "On Photography," in Linda Coverdale, trans., *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, New York, 1985, p. 360.

been a significant aspect of the American art market since the early 1970s. But we are talking about independence from the larger field of photography's instrumental applications, from fashion to forensics. This distinction is manifested even in the rather anarchic "system" of photographic education in the United States. Some schools train "art photographers." Others train "commercial photographers." Those that attempt to encompass both are often balkanized, riven with resentment and contempt, and generally quite crazy.

Historically, the dialectical tension between commercial instrumentalism and independent modernism has been more pronounced in the United States than in Europe or Britain. Ungrateful wreckers, like myself, probably need to be reminded that the institutional basis for an independent art of photography has been stronger in the US than elsewhere, at least since the late 1930s. If this brought us a discourse that was—by the 1950s and the advent of Minor White's journal *Aperture*—depoliticized, romantic and prone to cornball mysticism, at least there was a sense that photography could be practiced in ways that didn't mesh with the machineries of corporate journalism and advertising.

It has become a commonplace on the cultural left to disparage American photographic modernism, to assert its inferiority to and domestication of the more radical modernisms practiced in Germany and the Soviet Union of the 1920s. There is certainly truth to this argument, but we must also recognize how pressing the weight of commerce was for American photographers who wanted to assert their "independence." Although (and also because) American commerce sought to absorb the lessons and devices of modernism, the anti-commercial spirit is especially strong and assertive in the work and pronouncements of many modernists. One has only to read Alfred Stieglitz's short memoir fragment entitled "How I Got Out of Business," or read the young Walker Evans's scornful remarks on the "note of money" in the 1920s fashion photographs and celebrity portraits of Edward Steichen.

This hostility toward the commercial photographer is still voiced: I recall Larry Clark, the documentary photographer and author of *Tulsa* and *Teenage Lust*, referring in an interview to commercial photographers as "squirrels," a crude and unflattering bit of animal physiognomy that aptly describes the endless cycle of gathering and hoarding that is the Sisyphean fate of the commercial hack. The persistence of this hostility—which is not matched in any other medium—suggests that the photographer's position as an artist is inherently unstable, and that this instability translates subjectively into professional status anxiety. I think that status anxiety also partly explains why many teacher-practitioners of art photography in the United States have been uncomfortable with and even hostile to challenges from below, from women, African Americans, gays and lesbians, and from the challenges posed by new theoretical paradigms that call romantic notions of authorship and the established canon of photographic history into question.

If the idea of "independent photography" contains the hope that photography can be practiced in relative freedom from commercial demands, it also contains a more limited notion of autonomy, one that is specifically modernist in its drawing of boundaries. The notion is this: photography as an art is independent of other arts, subject to its own ontological conditions and historical lineages. This argument was first articulated by Paul Strand in 1917, and it continues to be voiced today in an Eliotic version—derived from Eliot's 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," but also from Clement Greenberg—in the writing and curatorial decisions of John Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art.

The breakup of modernism has brought both the first and second senses of "independent photography" into crisis. The boundary between art practice and the general flux of commodity culture is now recognized as extremely porous if not nonexistent. Boundaries between genres and media are dissolved, or accorded a variety of exaggerated mock respect. After a period of heightened prestige in the 1970s, no one wants to be labeled a mere photographer anymore. What has returned from earlier periods, supplanting romantic optimism, is the more negative idea of the photographer as a subservient being, a stupified detail worker, a "naive realist." What is missing is the dialectical insight into contested relations of cultural production found in Bernard Edelman's description of the photographer as the "proletarian of creation" or in Walter Benjamin's earlier but subsuming notion of the "author as producer." The terms have shifted into a more passive and fatalistic mode; for "proletarian of creation" and "author as producer" we might now substitute "intelligent consumer of the (always) already created."

Photographers are reinventing themselves in various ways; as neo-pictorialist *pompier*s, as quasi-curatorial impresarios, as melancholy archivists, as the antiquarian restorationists of obsolete instrumental practices such as the composite photograph and the motion study; in short, they seek to join the company of "real artists" who work "with" photographs. I'm not discounting the fact that interesting and compelling work has resulted from these shifts, nor am I nostalgic for the pursuit of some "pure" essence of photography. What disturbs me is the ambition implicit in much of this work, the ambition to "transcend," to "gain higher ground," in an artworld in which semiotic status and market value are closely correlated. To my mind the very inferiority and "slavishness" of photography's position affords the cunning practitioner with a critical advantage. This advantage is lost when one moves up in the artworld.

Photographs are the perverse currency of a culture of simulations. The key theoretical source for this widely accepted proposition is Jean Baudrillard, whose enthusiastic reception by American artists and critics was prepared on the bedrock of a more native (that is, Canadian) McLuhanism. This theory argues that the circulation of images in the media now precedes and supplants any substantial worldly referent. To provide an example which parallels those offered by Baudrillard, the probable massive Southern California earthquake of the near future already exists as a

6. See Baudrillard's remarks on the "improbable and in some sense imaginary" Three Mile Island nuclear accident and the earlier film *The China Syndrome* in his *The Evil Demon of Images*, trans. Paul Patton and Paul Foss, Sydney, 1987, p. 19.

7. Thomas Crow, "The Return of Hank Herron," in David Joselit and Elizabeth Sussman, eds., *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*, Boston and Cambridge, 1986, p. 18.

8. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred, Minneapolis, 1987.

9. See Alain Lipietz, *Mirages and Miracles: The Crises of Global Fordism*, trans. David Macey, London, 1987.

media simulation for tourists at the Universal City Studios in Los Angeles. A real earthquake would merely be the "imaginary" echo of this prior representation; in effect it would be condemned to conform to the logic of that representation. A materialist might argue that we'll have to see how things shake out. The simulationist theory of disaster strikes me as whistling in the dark, an idealist ritual in which the claim for discursive predictability stands in—fatalistically but with a reassuring intellectual certitude—for the real-world absence of scientific predictability.⁶

The simulationist argument is enormously flattering to artists, even as it dispenses with traditional notions of originality in artistic production. As the art historian Thomas Crow has argued, the simulationist project turns on the claim that the economy of artistic signs is indistinct from the larger sign economy, although the artists involved know full well that artworks are privileged signs in late capitalist consumer culture. This willful blindness to the "difference that makes a all the difference,"⁷ can be construed as bad faith, as a kind of involuted media fatalism, or as a form of "cynical reason," this last being the attitude of knowing-better-but-proceeding-to-do-one's-business characteristic of educated professionals and intellectuals in bureaucratic societies.⁸

Contemporary American artists' fascination with consumerism, with the deadpan replication of commodity relations frozen in that luminous moment just prior to the realization of exchange value, is curiously anachronistic. To the extent that this fascination is manifested in works designed to be purchased in commercial art galleries, it is also curiously narcissistic. It is a fascination that shows little understanding of the relationship between speculation-fueled acquisitiveness and the sharp increase in poverty and homelessness in the United States of the 1980s. The work of the sculptor Haim Steinbach, for example, with his Artschwageresque laminated shelves of goods, seems to assume that we continue to live in Galbraith's "affluent society," or in a "Fordist" world of enforced high-productivity, high wages, and a generalized capacity to purchase "consumer durables" which necessarily had to include the working class if the economy was to avoid a crisis of overproduction. Leisure became a kind of work, the work of consumption crucial to the health of the economy. With a new crisis of profitability, dating from the late 1960s, a "post-Fordist" world emerges, characterized by an new international division of labor and an aggressive management assault on the unionized high-wage proletariat employed in the basic productive industries of the advanced capitalist world. For a large sector of the working class, the full leisure of Fordism disappears for the thinner, meaner leisure of unemployment or the desperate non-leisure of low-wage employment. Of course an art that is content to thematize economics as a species of indeterminate but global semiosis needn't be bothered with these trifling technical details.⁹

If Baudrillard is the theoretical bishop of simulationism, the spiritual avatar and rediscovered prophet is the American modernist photographer Man Ray. Man Ray is enlisted as the perfect antidote to the austerity and intellectualism of the Duchampian rejection of the retina. Man Ray is comforting

to the American art scene in several respects: his protean energies stand as a good example for the engines of fashion, he effects the domestication of surrealist tropes in his fashion work for *Harper's Bazaar* in the late 1930s, he prefigures the "conspicuous fraudulence" of Yves Klein, who can be regarded as a key postwar source for Pop and the current simulationism.¹⁰ By harmonizing the avant-garde and commerce, the figure of Man Ray does for the cynical but status-anxious photographic artworld of the late 80s what the figure of Steichen did for the more sentimental scene of the middle 70s.

The notion of the artist as a photomonteur, as a faker, as a jokester working cynically within the flow of the media is also increasingly prevalent within American mass culture. I think this turn is evident in the recent film *Batman*, in which Jack Nicholson's Joker is a malevolent photomonteur, completely outstyling the prosthetically-assisted, forensically-minded "realist" Batman. The figure of the evil artist replaces that of the mad scientist. The Joker is a criminalized and popularized version of Man Ray, or Yves Klein, or even John Baldessari, who also defaces, and who, like the Joker, seems at times to profess a rather Hobbesian view of desire. Like most recent Hollywood films, *Batman* speaks from both sides of its mouth (or mouths—the garish cosmetic leer of the Joker and the pursed lips of Michael Keaton). If the film celebrates a kind of anarchic, estheticized and spend-thrift criminality, it also closes its narrative with the victory of a repressed and repressive forensic spirit, the spirit of upper class connoisseurship and filial respect for parental memory. In effect, it is at least two films, an "actorly" film in which Nicholson wins, and a narrative in which the Batman wins.

The ideological contradictions of *Batman* are those of the current moment in American cultural politics. Or rather, with a nod to Baudrillard, I will propose for the sake of further argument that the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe is really the Joker, and the critic Hilton Kramer is really Batman, with the journal *New Criterion* serving as a well-equipped Batcave. American conservatives have cooked up a grimly Malthusian policy for the arts, motivated partly by free market economic dogma, and partly by an ideological (and public relations) need to indulge in conspicuous displays of moral outrage. Both mainstream and artworld press accounts have concentrated on the fulminations of Republican Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, whose courtly but philistine ways make him an easy target for artworld scorn. Less attention has been paid to the workings of a standing political alliance between neoconservative New York intellectuals and the politicians and activists of the New Right.¹¹

The controversy of the past spring and summer over government funding for "blasphemous" and "obscene" artworks by photographers Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe was fueled from both sides of this alliance, marking a curious tactical fusion of elitist and populist cultural agendas. Despite the fragility of any such coalition, and the reciprocal opportunism necessary for its survival, for the moment, it has been remarkably successful. Congress has now passed "compromise" legislation that specifically stigmatizes the expression of a fairly wide range of sexual themes,

10. The term is Nan Rosenthal's. See her "Assisted Levitation: The Art of Yves Klein," in Institute for the Arts, Rice University, *Yves Klein: A Retrospective*, Houston, 1982. On Man Ray, see National Museum of American Art, *Perpetual Motif: The Art of Man Ray*, Washington and New York, 1988, and John Esten, *Man Ray: Bazaar Years*, New York, 1988.

11. For a good overview of the New Right censorship agenda, see Carole S. Vance, "The War on Culture," *Art in America*, Sept. 1989, pp. 39-43.

including art characterized as "homoerotic" in its content. Suspect works will from now on be called out of the funding lineup for further obscenity tests. Even if these tests prove negative, as they almost always will, given the liberal Supreme Court obscenity guidelines incorporated into the legislation, the process will serve to inhibit artists, curators, and funding bureaucrats. The system of "peer review," one of the guiding principles of professionalism in modern democratic societies, has been badly damaged. The NEA may not survive as a viable funding agency for practicing artists. The constriction of the NEA will occasion an even more market-oriented art-world, eliminating or severely restricting genres such as video, performance, and mural painting, that only thrive with some form of government support. For young artists, class privilege will become a larger factor in success.

These developments fulfill a battleplan mapped out over the past eight years by Hilton Kramer, former art critic for the *New York Times*, and currently editor of *The New Criterion*, and that journal's publisher, the music critic Samuel Lipman. As the title of their journal suggests, these men are committed to a vision of late modernist culture derived from the earlier modernism of T.S. Eliot. They seek to erect a stable authoritative canon, and to defend a contemporary art practice that has an intelligent and polite dialogue with that canon. Artists with an impolite, aggressive or debunking attitude to the art of the past don't rank very high with Lipman and Kramer: for example, they don't like the Dadaists.¹²

12. For an early formulation of Kramer's Eliotic position, see his *The Age of the Avant-Garde: An Art Chronicle of 1956-1972*, New York, 1973, pp. 3-19.

Lipman, in particular, would like to see the NEA become a ministry of dead art, funding only the historical endeavors of museums. This makes sense in conservative terms, since recent American tax law changes have removed incentives for private art collectors to donate art to museums, and escalating art prices have made it difficult for museums to compete with these same private collectors. A real institutional crisis is brewing, precisely because of the speculative hypertrophy of the free market. You might say that Lipman favors a modest "museum bail out program" based on shifting money away from living art to dead art. Contemporary art would have to succeed or fail in the marketplace.

Kramer strikes an Eliotic pose, but plays a role that Eliot would have shunned, that of a bare-knuckled polemicist. Kramer is the only American art critic to aspire to and succeed in the role of "policy intellectual." His political attacks on individuals and institutions are usually well-timed, and explicitly addressed to advertisers, trustees, and politicians. In this respect, he writes instrumentally, for a public defined in the narrowest class terms, rather than for artists or for the larger artworld. In other words, he knows how to go for the purse strings. Kramer's attacks on leftism, cronyism, and immoralism among American art critics began in 1975 with the charge that "muddled Marxism" had replaced serious art criticism at *Artforum*. This charge contributed to the resignation of that journal's editors, the liberal critics John Coplans and Max Kozloff, and thus led indirectly to the shift in the character of that magazine to its current unreadable market-happy delirium. Later, in 1984, by successfully calling for the elimination of NEA art critics' fellowships, Kramer succeeded in driving art criticism further

into the flux of market forces. As we will see shortly, *The New Criterion* is the art-critical equivalent of a corporate-funded blockbuster exhibition. And like a blockbuster, it seeks to level the opposing terrain.

Kramer shares his vision of American cultural malaise with a number of other conservative intellectuals, like Daniel Bell. But unlike Bell, Kramer does not attribute this malaise to the acquisitive and individualistic values of capitalism itself. Rather, he prefers to seek the causes of moral crisis in marginal social groups, and in renegade artists and intellectuals.¹³

In several respects, Robert Mapplethorpe constitutes a perfect if somewhat complicated target for Kramer and Lipman. Mapplethorpe isn't around to defend himself, and his defenders are divided in their priorities and their knowledge of the political terrain. Kramer can profess to approve Mapplethorpe's estheticism, while finding in the sheer indexicality of the sado-masochistic pictures of the "X Portfolio" the direct evidence of a pathological and dangerous sexuality. The moral outrage is a response to the documentary status of these pictures. Kramer voiced no objection to the Whitney Museum's recent exhibition of Charles Demuth's explicit watercolors of carousing dandies and sailors. On the other hand, perhaps Kramer would also be less appalled by Larry Clark's documentary photographs of the boy hustlers of Times Square showing off their penises, precisely because Clark maintains a careful, if rather nervous, heterosexual distance. The problem with Mapplethorpe is his own double role as both observer and participant.

Since Mapplethorpe fully implicated himself in the subculture of sado-masochism, it has not been difficult for critics to regard his visual description of sado-masochistic acts as a form of "advocacy." This is an ambiguous term, one that probably exaggerates Mapplethorpe's intentions in the X Portfolio, which were, I think, quite simply descriptive rather than either titillating or hortatory. To say this is not to ignore the fact that Mapplethorpe clearly understood the charged archival relation between these "simply descriptive" pictures and the more cloying, sentimentalized and openly derivative eroticism of his portraits (the Y Portfolio) and flower pictures (the Z portfolio). Mapplethorpe is neither a pornographer nor a Sadeian idologue of sex—rather he is an esthete who deliberately made a mockery of "closeted" discretion by politely compartmentalizing his desire, and then alphabetizing the compartments. This allegorization of gay existence within the very archival structure of his work is perhaps one unacknowledged source of his enormous popularity, which is usually attributed to his pictorialism.

Where a liberal might see in Mapplethorpe's supposed "advocacy" a call for the tolerance of sexual difference, a conservative might see a recruiting campaign. Thus Kramer charges that the public exhibition of Mapplethorpe's sado-masochistic pictures constitutes an attempt to "aggrandize and abet erotic rituals involving coercion, degradation, bloodshed and the infliction of pain."¹⁴ Since Mapplethorpe's work has been commercially very successful, Kramer can stress that he has no problem

13. See Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, New York, 1976.

14. Hilton Kramer, "Is Art Above the Laws of Decency?" *New York Times*, July 2, 1989.



Robert Mapplethorpe: *Self-Portrait*, 1980.
© 1980 The Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe

15. *Ibid.*

16. Kramer, *Age of the Avant-Garde*, p. 269.

with a private culture of homosexual eroticism. What bothers him is the implied moral imprimatur of the government in funding the exhibition of Mapplethorpe's work.

Liberals are suffering from a failure of nerve in this crisis, allowing the right wing to hold both the moral and the economic high ground. We should be aggressive in exposing both the homophobia and the economic inconsistencies of the conservative argument. Kramer is happy as long as homosexual culture remains within the closet, and he's even willing to accept a small homosexual aristocracy of taste within the artworld. How generous!

Kramer's homophobia differs from the more prudish revulsion of Jesse Helms. We can compare Kramer's celebration (in 1960) of the sculptor Gaston Lachaise with his recent complaints about Mapplethorpe. Borrowing a page from the already rather outdated feminist critique of "objectification," Kramer writes that many of Mapplethorpe's photographs provide "so absolute and extreme a concentration on male sexual endowments that every other attribute of the human subject is reduced to insignificance."¹⁵ We can find a similar reduction of the female subject to breasts and vulva in the work of Lachaise. (*Breasts with Female Organ Between*, 1930-32) Kramer argued, however, that "[e]ven at his most extreme moments of expressiveness in dealing with the female figure, Lachaise conveys a sense of complete and unstrained mastery in realizing his sensations."¹⁶ Kramer's notions of subjectivity seem to be quite gender-specific. Lachaise, of course, can be claimed for a "vitalist ideal" while Mapplethorpe stands condemned for "social pathology."

What terrifies conservatives like Kramer and Lipman is a truly popular, open homosexual culture, a culture capable of forging alliances and bonds with dissident and mainstream groups in American society. They fear the sort of politicized gay and lesbian culture that emerged with the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969 and gathers force now in response to the AIDS crisis.

Furthermore, Robert Mapplethorpe and gays in general are being stigmatized for taking seriously one of the utopian promises of a late capitalist market economy: the promise of liberated desire. Given the collapse of Fordism, conservatives worry about the continued popularization of hedonic impulses; this is especially evident in the new "war" on drugs. Gays and lesbians pose another economic problem for conservatives, a problem that turns on the metaphorical association of biological reproduction with capital accumulation. For conservatives, gays and lesbians are suspect because they allegedly don't reproduce "normal" family life. They supposedly don't have children, and they are especially visible working in "frivolous" fields on the fringes of the Gross National Product. In other words, conservatives project their own fears of both unfettered desire and an impotent economy onto gay and lesbian people, who are easily scapegoated in a society obsessed with productivity.

The language of the attack is often economically revealing: Samuel Lipman speaks of Mapplethorpe's "gross images of sexual profligacy" and complains



Jack Nicholson as the Joker. © 1989 DC Comics Inc.

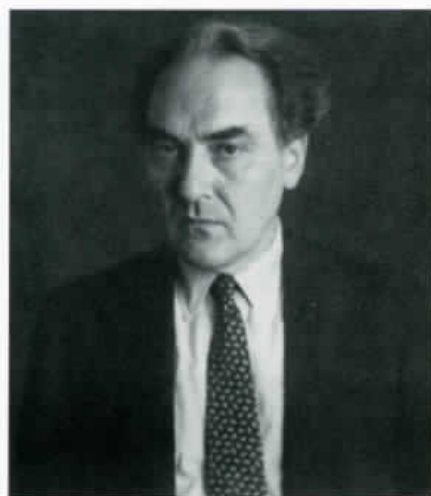
about a "rampant media culture [that] profits hugely from the pleasing, and the lowering, of every taste."¹⁷ Here again, a critique of capitalist consumer culture, akin to that voiced by Daniel Bell, turns back onto a specific homosexual subculture, as if the leather bars of the 1970s could be understood simply as mere extensions of shopping malls and television (or vice versa), and not as spaces both colonized by and resistant to the dominant economy of desire.

Another conservative intellectual, Gertrude Himmelfarb, has recently suggested a connection between the supposed profligacy of Keynesian economics and the personal homosexuality of John Maynard Keynes. Echoing the counter-revolutionary sentiments of Edmund Burke, Himmelfarb seeks both the resurrection of Victorian morality and the critique of its most outspoken post-Victorian critics: "Today more than ever, we have reason to be wary of the kind of 'civilization' celebrated by Bloomsbury, which dismissed conventional morality as 'a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.'"¹⁸ Turning to Keynes, Himmelfarb argues that:

*something of the "soul" of Bloomsbury penetrated even into Keynes's economic theories. There is a discernible affinity between the Bloomsbury ethos, which put a premium on immediate and present satisfactions, and Keynesian economics, which is based entirely on the short run and precludes any long term judgments. (Keynes's famous remark, 'In the long run we are all dead,' also has an obvious connection with his homosexuality—what Schumpeter delicately referred to as his 'childless vision.') The same ethos is reflected in the Keynesian doctrine that consumption rather than saving is the source of economic growth—indeed that thrift is economically and socially harmful.*¹⁹

The notion that Keynesianism is "based entirely on the short run" is certainly peculiar. Keynes wanted to prevent the disastrous consequences of a falsely optimistic reliance on the neoclassical economic doctrine of the self-regulating market. He was committed to nothing less than the preservation of the capitalist system. Despite this strained effort to discover a permissive welfare-state "bottom line" in Keynes's self-described "immoralism," Himmelfarb is also worried about other more obvious political and cultural aspects of the Bloomsbury ethos: opposition to militarism and imperialist war, sympathy for the working class, and sexual libertarianism. In short, Bloomsbury is the elitist precursor of the counterculture of the 60s. Now, at the end of the 80s, the "Victorian morality" that Himmelfarb seeks to restore is being retooled for an age of AIDS, austerity, and anti-terrorist adventure.²⁰

The conservative conflation of economics and sexuality remains puzzling. Is there something else at stake in Himmelfarb's association of homosexuality and welfare-statism, in Lipman's anger over Mapplethorpe's "sexual profligacy"? Consider the fact that despite their differences, Serrano and Mapplethorpe have both committed specifically scatological offenses: Serrano with his crucifix dunked in urine, Mapplethorpe with his wetsuited masochists and his own self-portrait as Martin Luther's devil, with a whip



Hilton Kramer, 1982.
Photo: Timothy Greenfield-Sanders

17. Samuel Lipman, "Say No to trash," *New York Times*, June 23, 1989.

18. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Marriage and Morals among the Victorians and Other Essays*, New York, 1987, pp. xiii-xiv. Two chapters of this book were originally published in the *New Criterion*.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

20. Given Himmelfarb's advocacy of this agenda, it is alarming but not surprising that she is reported to be one of George Bush's appointees to the new presidential commission investigating the National Endowment for the Arts. See William H. Honan, "Senate Dispute Delays Naming of Arts Group," *New York Times*, Nov. 25, 1989, p. 12.



Michael Keaton as Batman © 1989 DC Comics Inc.

21. See Sigmund Freud, "Character and Anal Eroticism" in Philip Rieff, ed., *Character and Culture*, New York, 1963, pp. 27-33.

22. I have consulted *The Foundation Directory* for this information. See also Haacke, "U.S. Isolation Box, Grenada, 1983," in Wallis, ed., *Hans Haacke*, pp. 258-59, and Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s*, Chapel Hill, 1987, pp. 358-65. As this essay was going to press, a review of Olin Foundation attempts to create a neoconservative monopoly in academia appeared: Jon Wiener, "The Olin Money Tree: Dollars for Neocon Scholars," *The Nation*, Jan. 1, 1990, pp. 12-14.

inserted into his anus. A conservative reading of Freud would justify the horrified response to these pictures as the exercise of a more mature and sublimated sexuality. But a more generous reading might find in this revulsion the workings of a definite *reaction formation*, that is, the attempt to control a repressed wish through the exertion of a countervailing force. We should also note the well-known connection between sublimated anal erotism and the "more mature" interest in money.²¹

In short, in the conservative attack on Mapplethorpe, Serrano and the NEA, we are witnessing a particular conjunction of moralism and public parsimony. This attempt to control the sphincters of government spending may well be a cover for the spendthrift impulses of conservatives themselves. Maybe conservatives are all closet Keynesians, secret believers in government deficit spending, notably of the military variety.

Samuel Lipman's *New Criterion* began publication in 1982 with a half million dollars in support from a number of conservative foundations, including the John M. Olin Foundation, which provides an annual \$100,000. (This is very comfortable indeed for a journal that also receives advertising income from commercial galleries and does not run editorial illustrations.) The Olin Foundation describes itself as committed to the support of "undertakings which encourage the preservation of political and economic liberty." Over the past decade this commitment has rewarded the free-market Heritage Foundation, the anti-communist Hoover Institution, the anti-feminist Eagle Forum (for a study critical of wage parity between men and women), and a number of prominent neoconservative intellectuals, including Michael Novack, Peter L. Berger, Irving Kristol, and Allan Bloom.²² The Olin Foundation's executive director, Michael S. Joyce, wrote the initial criticism of the NEA included in the Heritage Foundation blueprint for the Reagan administration.

The connection of this enterprise to military-Keynesian policies is quite direct. Olin money comes not from some abstract patronage pool in the sky, but from the Olin Corporation, a major chemical and munitions manufacturer, with government contracts ranging from rocket propellants to fifty-caliber ammunition. And if we turn to the populist side of the attack on the NEA, where would Jesse Helms be without his two causes—military aid to brutal Central American rightists and tobacco subsidies? As threats to public health, Robert Mapplethorpe's deadpan documentary pictures from the late 70s of unwittingly unsafe sex between consenting adult men hardly compare.

It has been too easy for the "artworld"—a label that suggests both cosmopolitanism and parochialism—to see itself as a unified body under attack by philistines. The artworld is perfectly capable of dividing against itself under pressure from within and without. Some American arts administrators have stated their willingness to "live with" a congressional compromise that will specifically stigmatize "homosexual" expression. This will create a zone of moral quarantine. Why should gay and lesbian artists have to live and work under this shadow? Why should any artist who wishes to speak

about the complicated vicissitudes of sexuality have to endure the special scrutiny of the government? And why should any other artist accept this stigmatization of his or her fellows?

The artists' boycott of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the institution which volunteered to serve as the laboratory for conservative cultural policy by cancelling Robert Mapplethorpe's scheduled exhibition this past summer, is an appropriate and justified response, a kind of strike. The most hopeful aspect of this fight has been artists' newfound and unexpected capacity for solidarity and self-organization. The issue now is to develop common ground with other groups seeking to defend civil rights and liberties in an increasingly authoritarian society.

WAR STORIES

I don't have it quite right. You may be able to recognize the Clancy version of the Persian Gulf War in the endless and moronically repetitive stories that circulated in the press, illustrated with clean-cut diagrams detailing payloads, speed, range and cost to the U.S. taxpayer; little pocket-biographies of the A-10 Warthog, the venerable but usually and ominously nameless B-52 (the Stratofortress), the F-16 Falcon, the F-17 Stealth, the A-6 Intruder, the Apache, the Cobra, the entire natural history museum of military-Keynesian excess. This version is the war without bodies.

The bodies that don't exist in any official version are those *many* on the ground, those for whom air war is always and already ground war. We are confronted with a peculiar scalar shift. On one side, there are *those bodies*, many of them, too many of them, too many to look at, too many to count, as if the refusal to count was the crowning virtue of a higher morality, of a humanist revulsion against the quantification of death.

On the other side, "our side," there are *these bodies*, subject to an almost microscopic attention, deployed and armored and monitored, expendable but relatively expensive. Innumerable third world bodies, precisely enumerated first world bodies.

Unfortunately for the technocrats of late modern warfare, the battlefield cannot be completely automated, transformed into a conflict pitting artificially intelligent software and steel against stupid and wholly alien and abstracted peasant conscript flesh, to be "attritted," in the language of the Pentagon, to the point of surrender or oblivion. That is, even if the bodies of our enemies can be redefined as mere matter in space, mere *occupied volume*, distinguishable from inorganic matter only by the quality of being "soft" rather than "hard," and thus vulnerable to different intensities and distributions of destructive force, the problem remains of *our* bodies. What to do with them, how to direct their energies, manage their labor power, curb their tendencies toward indolence, lethargy, inefficiency, enervating self-gratification, fear, resistance to command, ethical and biological revulsion, autonomous individual and collective action, mutiny.

This management problem extends to both military forces and the civilian population at home, although in the case of the latter group, indolence, lethargy, and enervating self-gratification can be turned to good political use. *Information*, supplied in massive doses, can serve to blunt the capacity for resistance, for independent moral judgement, for memory from one day to the next, reducing the spectator to a nervous state of narrative anticipation, waiting for the next horrific or triumphal story, the next "telling" bit of evidence, invited voyeuristically into mechanical rehearsals of mourn-

ing in advance of loss, as if this were an anticipatory version of Ken Burn's PBS television documentary on the American Civil War. It is interesting that the two persistent visual icons of human activity in this war are curiously passive, anticipatory: the soldier waiting and the spectator watching. One unacknowledged truth of these icons of waiting is that they tend to surface in periods of economic depression, signifying a stagnation of productive energies, an immobility of capital. War is the hyperkinetic and capital-intensive release of energies from the slump of depression.

The question remains unanswered. How is the "all too human" constructed in this war? If the Elroy text I've imagined is too unruly, too perverse, to be acknowledged as the model for the ghoulish narrative fragments that surface even in the most respectable reports in the *New York Times*, are there other forms of narrative that might serve as a substitute for the "bad" story of the "soft" body? What narratives might complement the "good" story of the "hard" machine, the Clancy story? Is there a "good" or redemptive story to be told about the body?

I believe there is such a story, and its language is the language of therapy. As I've already suggested, this is, in part, a harsh therapeutic language, a language of abstinence, of vices overcome cold turkey and *en masse*. More importantly, this therapeutic language has co-opted and rechanneled many of the concerns of the feminist movement. Within the austere and gritty desert laboratory an apparently new and even radical androgyny could be invented, only to be submitted to a remodeled and "sensitive" paternal authority. A good father had to appear to preside over this vast mobilization of the forces of death.

A feminist political columnist I usually admire, Ellen Goodman, had this to say on March 15th about General Norman Schwarzkopf:

...we've seen a man who is on speaking terms with his emotions, a man willing to express his fears, but not paralyzed by them. Someone who isn't afraid of violence, but doesn't like it. An Army man who calls war "a profane thing."

She concludes with a partisan political fantasy: "To recognize Schwarzkopf as role model isn't to anoint him as politician, though it would be poetic justice if this general turned out to be a Democrat." Of course, Goodman may have missed the fact that Schwarzkopf's "profane thing" is an awkward secular recoding of the Civil War general and Indian fighter William Tecumseh Sherman's maxim that "war is hell." And Sherman, even in the sentimental gloss provided by Ken Burn's PBS extravaganza on the Civil War, was, by virtue of his strategic mission, no gentle man.

Where did Goodman get this enthusiastic nonsense? Specifically, from the *New Republic* of March 11, the neoconservative journal from whence it proliferated with amazing rapidity, abetted by "sensitive" and "revealing" interviews with Schwarzkopf by smitten and deferential pool reporters in Saudi Arabia. The story in question was written by C.D.B. Bryan, who first met

Schwarzkopf in 1971 while researching the book *Friendly Fire*. Consider for a moment the contrast between the homophobic demonology of the Iowa case and the opening paragraph from Bryan's article:

I have read the stories about "Stormin' Norman," the terrible-tempered "Bear" who is a "pussycat" to his family. I have read how this general with the 170 genius-level IQ lulls himself to sleep in his Riyadh quarters listening to Pavarotti and Willie Nelson. I have read of his fluency in French and German; his love for the ballet and opera; and his membership in the International Brotherhood of Magicians. And I am sure, as reported, he has studied T.E. Lawrence's Seven Pillars of Wisdom, and that he has The Kingdom, Robert Lacey's acclaimed history of Saudi Arabia, on his nightstand. I especially enjoyed the account of how, at his Kuwaiti hosts' insistence, Schwarzkopf several years ago donned Arab robes and later said of the experience, "It was just like the scenes in Lawrence of Arabia when the British officer's clothes are taken away and replaced by robes, and he waltzes into the desert, intrigued by their feel and grace. I stood in front of the mirror and did the same dance. It was wonderful."

What is at stake here is a redefinition of the character of the American elite, or at the very least a significant cosmetic alteration of the group portrait of the American ruling class and its lieutenants. Military men are no longer ill-lettered brutes, if they ever were. Nor are they unreconstructed patriarchal authoritarians, as they often were. In effect, military men are being retrofitted as the new universal subjects of American political and cultural life. This occurs at a time when the moral and cultural prestige of artists and writers and scholars has been severely damaged by attacks from right-wing politicians and conservative intellectuals. Norman Schwarzkopf now represents the approved list of bedtime readings and the acceptable limits of cross-dressing. Again, (remembering Elroy) this newfound tolerance has its obverse, its imaginary walk on the wild side: in a recent broadcast, the radio-noir novelist Joe Frank imagined a fictional dictator cowering in his bunker during bombardment, remembering childhood transvestism and fantasizing himself a *chanteuse*. And Schwarzkopf's recollections of *Lawrence of Arabia* have a dubious boy-scout innocence. What of O'Toole's characterization of the major as a man tortured by the self-recognition of his own capacity for bloodlust and barbarism? What of that scene in which Lawrence and his Arab calvary slaughter a retreating Turkish column, fictionally paving the way—as Mike Davis has pointed out—to the carnage on the highway from Kuwait City to Basra?

Of course, Bryan's story on Schwarzkopf may well be the familiar sycho-phantic offering designed to launch a political career. Whatever the stakes in this case, it is clear that on both elite and popular levels, the terrain of gender is being reconfigured: the division of labor is less rigid, women can be manly, men can be womanly, as long as the dirty job gets done. But despite the fact that H. Norman Schwarzkopf is able to identify fleetingly with the gay orientalist, guerrilla fighter and British imperialist T.E. Lawrence,

he commands in a military that is profoundly threatened by homosexuality and still seeks to root out and expel lesbians and gay men.

This mendacious ideological "feminization" of American military power occurs at a time when American women have been more skeptical than men of the wisdom of war and of the policies of the Republican Party. This is also a time when the contradictions of the "poverty draft" were most appallingly evident in the cases of young enlisted women, usually Black or Latina, often single mothers to boot, desperately seeking childcare as they prepared to depart for the Persian Gulf. These stories, fairly common in the local press during the early month of mobilization, conformed to none of the three types—neither Clancy nor Elroy would have been inspired. And therapists may well have tried their best to put a good face on the situation, but psychology only goes so far in explaining or ameliorating the feminization of poverty.

The adulation of Schwarzkopf can be better understood as yet another instance of what Susan Jeffords has termed the "remasculinization of America," the narrative reinscription in diverse fiction and non-fiction texts about the Vietnam War of a male-gendered power and authority. Significantly, C.D.B. Bryan's *Friendly Fire*, published in 1976, opposed an enraged Cassandra-like female voice of dissent, the voice of Peg Mullen, an Iowa farm woman who lost her oldest son to American artillery fire in a theater of operations under Schwarzkopf's command, to the higher truth of a calm, rational, empathetic but self-exonerating voice of male authority, the voice of Schwarzkopf himself. Conforming ultimately with Christa Wolf's description of the Homeric mode of narrative, Bryan's story begins with empathy for "the world of women," but ends by seeking and following the red thread of "male action." Women's dissent is acknowledged for its moral force but dismissed in the end for its inability to grasp the empirical truth of war, which Bryan sees as merely the truth of chance, of accident, a truth beyond guilt, understood only by men. What Bryan plows under in his search for this fatalistic truth is the extraordinary epistolary solidarity constructed between a mother and her dead son's enlisted comrades, all of whom regarded the Vietnam war as criminal and evil.

IRAQ SYNDROME

In a society in which all social relations are explained in terms of psychological categories, *victimization* is a hard monkey to shake. The difference between Vietnam Syndrome, so-called, and Iraq Syndrome is this: Vietnam Syndrome sufferers are losers who see themselves as victims. Iraq Syndrome sufferers are winners who continue to see themselves as victims, even as that victimized feeling is loudly being put to rest.

The mythology of Schwarzkopf as national redeemer rests on his own background: wounded in Vietnam, falsely accused of negligence by the mother of one of his men, resentful of being sent to fight "the government's war" in Southeast Asia. The journalistic preservation of the memory of this younger, victimized Schwarzkopf has allowed him to seem more noble in his present capacities than earlier military men of equivalent authority, such as William Westmoreland. What Schwarzkopf shares with Westmoreland is the indignation of the powerful victim, unjustly indicted with crimes against the wretched of the earth. If evil has occurred, the accused admits to no complicity, no kinship with guilty comrades, underlings, superiors. Here is Schwarzkopf speaking to C.D.B. Bryan about his feelings toward those who charged the American military with "burn[ing] villages and kill[ing] babies" in Vietnam: "I hadn't done any of that!" Even at the pinnacles of command, a self-exonerating individualism reigns supreme.

This persistence of the category of the victim explains the inordinate symbolic importance in both conflicts of the *prisoner of war*. The POW, like the hostage, is the secular "desert saint" of the neo-imperialist religion known as the New World Order. Whatever their missions, POWs are rendered innocent by the fact of captivity. The woman POW constitutes a new overlapping and reunifying category, embodying both the abstract and increasingly anachronistic "femininity" for which wars were once fought, and the new disengendered operationalism of the military specialist.

How do we look then, as spectators at this peculiar embrace—the "soft" male and the "soft" female—frozen in two colorful slices on the front and back covers of *Life*? What are we to make of the title "Coming Home," with its perverse evocation of a more-or-less feminist anti-war film from the seventies starring Jane Fonda? Our eyes are invited to embrace this embrace, to bracket it, and are enfolded, bracketed as we read. On the back cover, it is Schwarzkopf whose smile persists like that of the Cheshire Cat, suggesting that this cover-to-cover embrace structurally reproduces the great national alibi of the powerful victim, turned inward on a pain real and imaginary, "empathetic" but also oblivious to all other pains. Specialist Melissa Rathbun Nealy, with her girlish braids, is Schwarzkopf's prop, his prodigal daughter, and his double. Like Peg Mullen in Iowa, she may have something to say, but no one is really listening.

1991

IMAGINARY ECONOMIES:

An Interview with Allan Sekula

Debra Risberg

INTRODUCTION

On the surface, our society looks much different than it did when Allan Sekula began writing criticism and making photographic works. In the late 1960s and early 1970s there was an identifiable counterculture, struggling, for example, to end the war in Vietnam. By contrast, today's social fabric seems both less tattered and more opaque. We can no longer identify a specific "enemy" as a tangible force that can be grasped or pictured, and perhaps it is even harder now to recognize our own complicity.

What drew me to Allan Sekula's work in the first place was his ability to explore the social matrix from the top down, the bottom up, the inside out. His words and pictures begin to unravel conceptually the knots that bind us to family life, the workplace, educational institutions, and the culture industry. In doing this, his work challenges traditions of documentary photography and questions still-powerful romantic notions of the artist's role in society.¹

Debra Risberg

1. This interview was conducted by email over the month of November 1998. Unless otherwise noted, all installation photographs are by Allan Sekula.

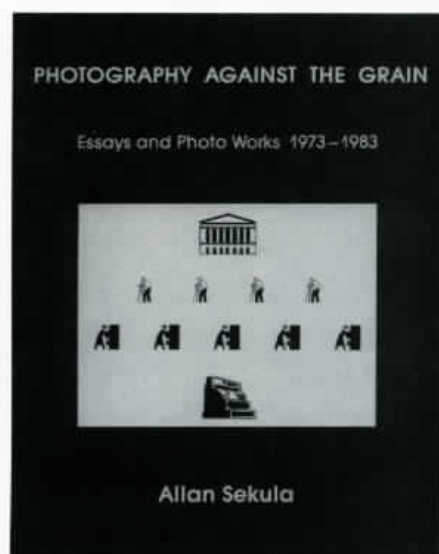


Figure 1. Front cover, *Photography against the Grain*, 1984.

DEBRA RISBERG: You gained prominence as both artist and critic with your 1984 book *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983*, published by the Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. From the beginning the book was hard to find, and it has been out of print now for over ten years. My experience was probably like that of a lot of people: encountering your work in graduate school—through bootleg photocopies—which cast a dark shadow over the prevailing philosophy of art photography. How is this exhibition and book a revival of that earlier project, and how is it different? Can you explain your title, *Dismal Science*? I know you've borrowed it from Thomas Carlyle, the nineteenth century Scottish essayist and historian. You've used the same title twice in your work on the maritime world, *Fish Story* (1995), both for a long essay and for a sequence of slides that takes us to the abandoned waterfronts of Glasgow, but how does it now provide a unified context for your projects over the last twenty-five years?

ALLAN SEKULA: I'll start with "dismal science." Carlyle coined the phrase, his sardonic label for political economy, in a bizarre semi-satirical essay with an evil title: "The Nigger Question" (1849). This purported to be the text of an anonymous rant criticizing both the statistical blindness of proponents of *laissez-faire* capitalism and the naive philanthropy of advocates of slave emancipation. I say "semi-satirical" because these were, in large measure, Carlyle's views at the time. He was afraid that unregulated

emancipation would produce an impoverished "Black Ireland" in the West Indies.

Carlyle is unread and virtually unreadable today, even though he invented terminology—"Industrialism," "cash nexus," "dismal science,"—that pervades the language of economic life. Indeed, the absorption of these terms into economic discourse obscures the critical character of their first usage. As Raymond Williams has argued, Carlyle was really the first romantic anti-capitalist, and certainly the first to develop a sustained critique of industrial society.

My mother read Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* along with *Moby-Dick* as an English major at a small Lutheran college in western Pennsylvania in 1941. Her generation is probably the last with this list of undergraduate readings. And yet if we read Carlyle's essay "Chartism" (1839), written in the year of photography's public emergence, there is much that seems, in meaning if not in style, strikingly contemporary. When I wrote the text for the Glasgow slide sequence, and spoke of capital as a "protean force, pushing people this way and that and leaving them to stew or rot or boil over," I was echoing Carlyle. His remarks on the "hurling asunder" of "whole multitudes of workmen" could be recommended cautionary reading for the more enthusiastic postmodern celebrants of nomadism and diaspora.

What interested me in particular about "dismal science" is that Carlyle explicitly defined it as the negative of poetry, the "gay science." This opposition—economics vs. poetry—seems to me to replicate the institutional contradictions of photography, perpetually stranded as it is between the "necessity" of documentation and the "freedom" of art.

DEBRA RISBERG: So "Dismal Science" refers also to the "grey area" occupied by documentary within the world of fine art photography? Documentary photographers may set themselves apart from photojournalists by assuming the freedom of the fine arts, but ultimately they must struggle with issues of accountability.

ALLAN SEKULA: One reason social documentary is such a necessary bad object for contemporary art is because it seems implicitly or explicitly to challenge the prevailing dogma of art's fundamental "irresponsibility." Consider the way in which the very existence of the economic is being conjured away in contemporary art criticism. In his book *Air Guitar*, critic Dave Hickey repeatedly reminds his readers of his nitty-gritty experience as an art dealer while offering up the reassuring homily that "art and money never touch." This is a pastoral fantasy, since it reduces the complexity of art-world interactions to barter exchange between connoisseurs. In this sort of intellectual environment, simply to insist that social or economic life can or should in any way be represented now seems like an ethical reproach, as welcome as dragging in a dead cat.

DEBRA RISBERG: Perhaps that's one aspect of what makes your work



Figure 2. Weekly World News, 2 September 1998.



Figure 3. Boy looking at his mother, Staten Island ferry, 1990 from *Fish Story*, 1995.



Figure 4. From *This Ain't China: A Photonoel*, 1974.

seem difficult, even vexatious. It's neither glamorous nor decadent. There is also a sustained attention that you demand from the viewer, which doesn't offer much to the distracted search for esthetic pleasure.

ALLAN SEKULA: I suppose I'm asking people to work a bit. This doesn't go over well with the fun police, that is, critics who enforce the tyranny of the model of play. But there is certainly a kind of pleasure to be had in "solving" the puzzle of the work's meaning and structure. In most cases, this requires both looking and reading, and sometimes listening. There is a bit of a joke in presenting all this under the sign of Carlyle, the stern Victorian Calvinist, obsessed as he was with the virtuous model of work.

So, to answer the rest of your first question, Carlyle's critical pessimism, embedded in the metaphor of the "dismal science," seems as apt for the crisis-ridden multinational capitalism of the post-1960s era as it had for the British imperialist industrialism of Carlyle's 1840s.

Completing *Fish Story* in 1995 allowed me to rethink the trajectory of my earlier work, the stubborn way that I'd stayed close to economic themes since the early 1970s, a time-span that encompasses the rise of the new transnational capitalist economies so powerfully emblemized by the emergence of containerized cargo-handling. In other words, the historical present constructed by *Fish Story* is roughly coincident with my own working life as an artist and writer.

Unlike many of the earlier generation of American artists associated with pop and minimalism, personal experience made it difficult for me to take the long postwar wave of capitalist expansion as a given. I came to insist on the simultaneous ideological and economic determination of various spaces—small crowded apartments, border zones, the meticulously landscaped public spaces of central banks—within the larger system of postwar development. Photography was a way of describing these spaces as sites of "official" ideology, but also as spaces of more idiosyncratic psychic investment, of actions and materialized memories that could be connected, for example, to "biography."

So the works that make up *Dismal Science* chart a number of micro-histories of the last two decades of the Cold War, from the war in Vietnam to the war in the Persian Gulf. The terrain surveyed is that of the American military-Keynesian economy, where government spending on war is a big motor of prosperity and a source of social imbalance. The key space is Southern California, with its aerospace and affiliated military industries. The boy aboard the Staten Island Ferry who may or may not be "looking at his mother" in the opening pair of photographs in *Fish Story* wears the decorated leather jacket of an aspiring "Top Gun." His image is a link between the world of *Aerospace Folktales*—of the girl (my sister) optimistically tossing a ball into the air—and that of the sea, of a more venerable theatre of military violence. By saying this, I'm suggesting that there is a larger montage principle at work than that internal to any single work, or even book. Any retrospective look allows for that larger montage to emerge.

DEBRA RISBERG: You decided to leave certain works out of this collection, even though they are no longer available in published form, and to include others. What determined your choices?

ALLAN SEKULA: *Photography against the Grain* was an autonomous book, only tangentially connected to a rather informal exhibition that travelled mostly in Germany in 1984-85. Here, there is a greater opportunity to address the specific formal differences between a photographic book and an exhibition. The selection differs in several ways. I've included an early slide projection piece from 1972 as well as one of the two slide projections from *Fish Story*, having rediscovered slide projections in the late 80s, and recognizing a certain historical complementarity between the two pieces. Furthermore, I've omitted or severely edited works from the earlier collection that were overtly theatrical, even comedic, in their reworking of "documentary" possibilities, such as *This Ain't China* (1974), and *School Is a Factory* (1979/80). This amounts to a retrospective response to the inflated prestige of fictional staging in the photography of the 80s and 90s. That being said, I think there is still a case to be made for mugging, slapstick, and cheap optical tricks, all low and popular forms of acknowledging the conventionality of the photograph.

And in fact, something more than generalized skepticism was at stake for me in the 1970s. For example, the internal movement from "documentary" to "fiction" within *This Ain't China* turned on unemployment. Once the cooks and waitresses I worked with were ejected from this particular restaurant, there was nothing to do but fall back on the "poor theatre" of pantomime, lacking even the utensils of a commercial kitchen. So in this case, fiction was a bargain-basement solution to the inaccessibility of the means of production. "Reality"—in a material sense—belonged to the boss.

DEBRA RISBERG: So in a way you've "returned" to documentary, even though today the value of documentary's credibility and empathic appeal has been seriously challenged. For example, now we have television docudramas and police shows that blend truth and fiction; viewers are offered a vicarious trip through the hazardous social landscape just outside their door.

ALLAN SEKULA: It may seem strange to argue that documentary is a genre in crisis, since what used to be called "middlebrow" mass culture is now replete with "fact-based" offerings. Another example would be the current craze for memoirs in American publishing. The apparent "crisis" surrounding the photographic image is less the result of skeptical enlightenment or digital technology than a matter of assigning a new cultural status to photography: the climb upward requires that truth claims be checked at the foot of the stairs. So the old myth that photographs tell the truth has been replaced by the new myth that they lie. This creates room for subjectivism, which is also what is at stake with the culture of the memoir.

The staged photograph is a calculated wink to an audience that already subscribes to the new myth of photographic "untruth." For me this mutually



Figure 5. From *This Ain't China: A Photonovel*, 1974.

flattering middle-class compact is less and less interesting. When David Byrne promotes a new photography journal with the rather smug slogan, "the magazine for those of us who no longer trust photographs," I want to run in the other direction. Where are those naive souls who still trust photographs? Are they simply the people whose primary expectation of photography is that it will be used against them, and who perhaps enjoy tabloids and confessional television not because of any "truth" to be found therein, but because there is pleasure to be had in outrageous plausibility and pseudo-disclosure? At the other end of the social spectrum, the experts at the FBI, the CIA, the National Security Agency and the local police are clearly still committed to the refinement of the trustworthiness of photography. So Byrne is really talking to artists, and to a middle class that seeks a share in the subjectivism of the artist's world.

By the early 1970s, within the art world, documentary was becoming a decadent genre; more precisely, it was passing through a mannerist and subjectivist phase on its way to a decadence achieved only in the 80s. Ultimately, what passes for self-consciousness in contemporary photography is an endless reiteration of the Cretan paradox, but with a hierarchical twist: "All photographers are liars. I am an artist who uses photographs. Therefore I am smarter than the cretin-photographer who thinks she is telling the truth."

So throughout the 80s a theatricalized skepticism was being added to Walker Evans' 1971 idea of a dandified, distanced "documentary style." Remember that John Szarkowski had already, in 1967, announced the death of social documentary in his MOMA exhibition *New Documents*, featuring Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Gary Winogrand. With this enormously influential exhibition, Szarkowski stated explicitly that serious photography could only have an ironic and fatalistic relation to the social world, and he did so—quite pointedly—at a time of enormous social upheaval.

DEBRA RISBERG: Were you reacting to this state of affairs with your earliest projects?

ALLAN SEKULA: Not immediately. I didn't start as a photographer. In 1970-71, I was making sculpture and performing actions: stealing meat from a supermarket and throwing it on the highway, riding a freight train past a place where I used to work. So early on I was trying to provoke a clash with large technical and economic systems. But action-art seemed to devolve into artistic self-aggrandizement. I became less interested in the petty criminal and transient as romantic disguises, and more interested in documentation, especially the ambiguity of the documentary function and the esthetic modesty and worldliness of the photograph. I was drawn to a very mundane idea of documentary: something very direct, uninflected by obvious esthetic treatment. And I began to think that it might be possible to photograph everyday life—leaving a factory, or housework—as if it were performance.



Figure 6. Box Car, 1971.

What interested me, by 1972, was a way of reviving the social dimension of documentary. What impressed me about August Sander, for example, was more or less the same thing that had impressed Walker Evans back in 1931—the “photographic editing of society.” But for me that meant not taking a modernist or “pure” path, but rather embracing a hybridity of materials, playing with the relation between staging and the everyday event, understanding even that the everyday event already embodied an element of fiction or theater. I was drawing variously on the sociologist Erving Goffman, on Bertolt Brecht’s notion of the “social gest,” and also on my own observations of the informal symbolic inversion from below of power relations: the way workers mock the boss through mimicry, the common everyday equivalent in working life of Jean Genet’s play *The Maids*. I was moving toward a dialogic model of social interaction. More generally, there was no way to rethink the documentary tradition without incurring an intellectual debt to the lineages of sociological thought—to Marx, Durkheim and Weber, and especially to the very precise sociological studies of Marx, like *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. One thing I learned from reading Durkheim, for example, was that it is impossible to photograph a “social fact.”

DEBRA RISBERG: What did this mean for the way you made photographs? Your photographs are not illustrative in the way that the images accompanying anthropological or sociological studies often are. And you’ve certainly never relied on the emotional power of the single image. Your pictures are usually presented in sequences. The earliest piece presented here, *Untitled Slide Sequence* (1972), is sequential in a very direct, almost primitive way.

ALLAN SEKULA: The work consists of every picture I made while standing on a pedestrian overpass leading from a big aerospace factory at the end of the day shift. I was standing more or less where a militant selling newspapers would stand, but actually inside the company property, so that my project ended when the guards detected my trespassing. The roll of black-and-white positive film was cut into individual transparencies and projected in the same sequence, like un-edited motion picture footage, but different in that I had chosen to make individual exposures on a somewhat “physiognomic” basis. The workers—machinists, assemblers, managers, foremen, engineers, office clerks—are tired from the day’s work and winded from climbing the stairs, so there is often a kind of inwardness to their momentary postures. This was more “selective” than just letting a motion picture camera roll, although obviously one could use framing and zooming in a similar fashion during a continuous cinematic take. It’s really a work between still photography and cinema. This has always interested me about slide projection: it’s a kind of primitive cinema, unable to synthesize movement. The slide projector is a quasi-industrial apparatus, similar to what one finds in many assembly lines: bottling machines for example. The rhythm of the slide projector is the rhythm of the automated factory, but the individual frame individuates both the photographer and the subject. The sequence effects a bracketing of the invention of the cinema: Muybridge pushed in the direction of social movement, away from the



Figure 7. Installation view, *Untitled Slide Sequence*, 1972. Munich Kunstverein, February 1998. Photo: Wilfried Petzi.

space of the laboratory or test track, and the Lumieres pushed back toward the still and the portrait. The work exhibits a certain nostalgia for working-class pedestrian space, the brief massed interval between the vast functionally dispersed interior of the aerospace factory and the isolation of the private automobile: the interval between work and home. Later in the mid-70s, I looked at Dorothea Lange's proof sheets at the Oakland Museum, and discovered an affinity with her second world war photographs of shipyard workers in Richmond and Oakland, which stressed this mass and individual movement from the space of production to the space of consumption.

DEBRA RISBERG: From that point on labor became a consistent theme in your photo projects and also in your historical writing on photography. In "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning" (1974) you contrasted Alfred Stieglitz's cultivation of photography as a high art with Lewis Hine's social documentation of labor.

ALLAN SEKULA: History-writing has been for me a way of indirectly posing problems to be taken up by photographic practice. The essay you mention was my first serious effort to think about the history of photography, and in a way, my first discovery of the tension between the "gay" and "dismal" sciences. I imagined Stieglitz and Hine as mythical partners in a binary semiotic system, a meta-discourse of photography which pitted the "art photograph" against the "social document." Stieglitz's model of metaphoric neo-symbolist photography led to an autonomous modernist art, while Hine's realist reportage model extended outward to an ameliorative social project, the project Szarkowski had pronounced dead by the late 60s. I remember discovering, just after I had completed the essay and moved to New York from California, a MOMA wall label written by Szarkowski that confidently asserted that the crucial difference between Hine and Stieglitz was one of "stylistic motivation." To be provocative, I would say today that Hine was more willing to look modernity in the face than was Stieglitz, and was by this measure a more modernist figure, even if he lacked a modernist program. You could even say that Hine took Stieglitz's argument about the hand-held camera to heart, but became a wandering spy on the side of the exploited. One reason Hine seems anachronistic now is that his Progressive-era reformism was appropriated by the New Deal, and then forgotten during the Cold War assault on the American labor left. The sweatshop factory conditions that Hine documented have returned with a vengeance at the end of our century, but his niche in the pantheon is covered with cobwebs. Stieglitz gets a regular dusting, the elegiac tone of his lament for a corrupt business civilization is easier to emulate.

Taking a bitter lesson from the exposes of Hine and the early "muckraking" journalists, capitalists learned to restrict the circulation of images of the inner life of the factory. Socialist bureaucrats learned the same lesson, as allegorized by Krzysztof Kiésłowski's film about a curious worker with a camera, *Camera Buff* (1979). So transparency is restricted. But transparency, when achieved, is also illusory, as Brecht famously suggested



Figure 8. Installation view, *Aerospace Folktales*, 1973. Palmer Art Museum, January 1997.

when he said that a photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG tells us "next to nothing" about the actual relations of production, requiring instead that something "artificial, posed" be "built up."

The social documentary tradition is strongly anchored to a utopian claim for the positivity of labor: its productiveness, its "human dignity," and so on. This tradition is nowadays most explicitly sustained by the photographer Sebastião Salgado, in a spirit that owes a great deal to liberation theology. My path, on the other hand, has been to follow the always present shadow line between work and non-work, between work and unemployment, which is also non-leisure. In other words, how can one regard work as a positive self-sufficient "presence"—for the camera or otherwise—when every moment of work is haunted by capital's ability to move anywhere else in the world?

This brings us back to an old and largely forgotten complaint by Roland Barthes, from his 1958 review essay on the Paris showing of MOMA's early blockbuster, *Family of Man*. He spoke disparagingly of "an eternal esthetics of laborious gestures" and went on to suggest that this repetitive iconography could only end with the abolition of the profit system. The interesting thing about these remarks, especially from today's vantage point, is that they ran counter—even then—both to a sentimentalized view of labor found within the discourse of liberal capitalism, and to the heroicization of labor characteristic of socialist realism. (Remember that in the United States *Family of Man* was well received both on Madison Avenue and in *The Daily Worker*.) In short, Barthes implicitly links the gestural "fullness" of the image of labor to the incompleteness of the value returned to the worker as a wage. Both private capital and state ("socialist") capital might require such "full" images to compensate for the fact of the deficit, though it is clearly the latter—the putative "workers' state"—that had the stronger ideological need for this image. Unless pressured by workers' movements, Western capitalism can more or less do away with the image of the worker as a producer of value altogether. The American case is the most extreme in its arrogance and representative of the pattern being established for the rest of the developed world. The exemplary worker on American television is now the cop, the street guardian of private capital against the random depredations of those displaced by the system. The products advertised in the intervals are increasingly made elsewhere. It's a problem even of language: we are encouraged to believe that we live in a "post-industrial society," when in fact the industrial function has been globalized.

This slippage of work into a negative register—into a kind of ghostly absence—poses challenges for photography. How is an everyday task haunted by the compulsive patterns of a productivity that has ceased to bring home a wage? How is a service or maintenance worker—in certain spectacularized public spaces—forced to embody the image of an otherwise obsolete or redundant industrial or agricultural labor?

DEBRA RISBERG: You've spoken of *Aerospace Folktales* (1974) as a "small micro-history from within of a white-collar family under siege." It's



Figure 9. Installation view (detail), *Aerospace Folktales*, 1973. Atlanta College of Art Gallery, October 1998.

an early example of your discursive method of combining overlapping narratives with sequenced photographs. Three voices clash. Figuratively speaking, this clash is amplified by the crowded space of the apartment shown in the photographs. The very arrangement of the living quarters gives evidence of the family's attempt to sustain a middle-class identity despite the harsh realities of unemployment.

ALLAN SEKULA: I was looking at the collapse of the separation of the two worlds of the factory and the house. If the house is a factory, always the factory of housework, and with unemployment it becomes the factory of waiting for work or working to get work, everything spirals inward. My idea was that social documentary had tended always to look downward, and not straight across at the social circumstances of the author, in this case at the world of college-educated intellectual labor. *Aerospace Folktales* is actually a veiled autobiography, embedded in a distanced, "objective" style, and yet the subjective tensions are there to be detected. I had spent a couple of years looking at photography books, and hoped that the clapboard sidings visible behind my parents' backs might call up uneasy memories of Walker Evans' portraits of Alabama sharecroppers. Taken as a whole, the work consists first of a picture sequence describing the domestic space of a claustrophobic working-class apartment inhabited by a white-collar family. This was the apartment where I grew up. The montage is punctuated by silent-film style intertitles, and accompanied by a triangulated, overlapping cacophony of audiotape recordings: my voice, my mother's voice, my father's voice. Only by sitting in red canvas director's chairs adjacent to the speakers can the listener discern the individual voices. So there is a logic of individuation at work, the audio equivalent to the way individual frames individuate in *Untitled Slide Sequence*. I described the work as a "disassembled movie," lacking the "dictatorship of the projector." The polyphony of the three voices and the paraliterary mixing of verbal and visual elements provided a loose model for future work.



Figure 10. Installation view, *War without Bodies*, 1991/96. Atlanta College of Art Gallery, October 1998.

DEBRA RISBERG: You remarked recently that in retrospect only your mother seems to be talking sense. I find her stories to be particularly moving.

ALLAN SEKULA: My father is speaking editorially and I'm shifting between fiction and polemic, so we are both caught up in the madness of our differences. I think the lamp-straightening sequence gives a visual-sense of this. I'm photographing my father's activities, but he's controlling the lighting of the scene. My mother is, as you say, telling stories. You can hear the water running as she washes dishes. It would be easy to categorize her stories as somehow "linear" and merely consistent with women's traditional role as custodians of familial memory. But there is a gothic and even modernist side to my mother's stories, especially her wartime story about a Navy clerk of her acquaintance who mistakenly sent a sailor's records to "the office for dead people," did nothing to correct her mistake, and then wondered if he ever got "a resurrection." The story shares something with Poe, with Joseph Heller, and with Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener." Hers is a much more "truthful" and chilling story about bureaucracy and war

than that offered by Steven Spielberg's recent film *Saving Private Ryan*, which—for all of its vaunted “realism”—offers us the magical figure of a *mater ex machina* who realizes, amidst an avalanche of death notices, that three brothers by the name of Ryan have just been killed. This plot device is then mirrored at the end of the film with the saving air strike, the appearance of the *machina ex machina*, described by the dying Tom Hanks as “angels on our shoulders.” A true sentimentalist of the New World Order, Spielberg gives us both the magic of the folktale and the reassurance of overwhelming airpower. My mother's story is more radical than Spielberg's, not least because she doesn't have the same stakes.

DEBRA RISBERG: The feminist and psychoanalytical aspects of your work are often overlooked. Your remarks about *Aerospace Folktales* lead me to some observations about the much more recent work, *War without Bodies* (1991/96). Your photographs show men and boys fingering gun barrels in a disturbing intermingling of war and sex. Then there's the opportunity for the viewer to read the text of the work while reclining on an army cot.

ALLAN SEKULA: First, it's worth noting that with this project there is a big difference between the exhibition version and the published version. The work began with a class on social documentary and Los Angeles that the urban historian Mike Davis and I were co-teaching at CalArts in the autumn of 1990. With the coming of the Gulf War mobilization, the class decided to document the domestic, local drift toward war. As it turned out, I was the only one to really pursue this project, producing a kind of diary in slide-show form. This paralleled a talk I gave at political forums on the coming war. I remember one public event at CalArts that was organized by a socialist friend who worked in the construction trades in the area. I was asked to say something, as a token member of the faculty, and had just begun to predict that whatever the military outcome of the war, it was bound to be one big industrial accident. At that point, a group of burly male students from the local high school began to throw furniture.

The exhibition version of the work was developed both for this exhibition and for a show entitled *Face à l'Histoire*, at the Centre Pompidou in 1996. This version omits the photographic diary, and centers on the grid of nine images of men and boys touching gun barrels protruding from the snout of an American ground-attack aircraft that had just returned from the Gulf. (Over a period of more than an hour I saw countless men and boys and only one woman do this.) The fact that the grid is simultaneously a sequence and a series is important, since it suggests something about the serial repetition of a shared compulsion, and something else about stages of tactility. It struck me that this compulsive gesture had something in common with the acts recorded at a greater remove in Brassai's photographs of everyday “involuntary sculpture,” scraps of nervously folded and rolled paper, the “nasty” detritus of the pocket, to borrow Rosalind Krauss's adjective. And in an odd way, this led me to think about surrealism's connection to the gestural codes of neoclassicism.



Figure 11. Installation view, *War without Bodies*, 1991/96. Atlanta College of Art Gallery, October 1998.

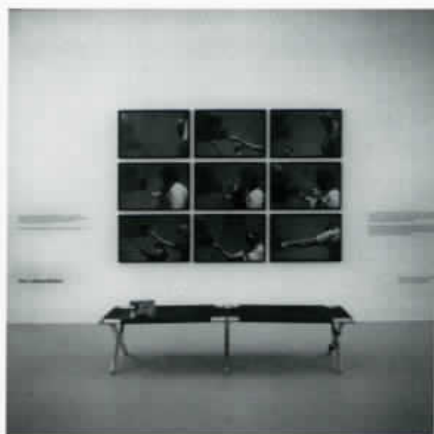


Figure 12. Installation view, *War without Bodies*, 1991/96. Munich Kunstverein, February 1998. Photo: Wilfried Petzi.

The mix of tactile caution and blunt aggression that one detects in this gun-touching becomes all the more ominous when we learn that these cannon fire armor-piercing shells made from depleted uranium, the radioactive material now suspected of being one cause of the mysterious bundle of afflictions known as "Gulf War Syndrome." The Gulf War "victory celebration" at which this aircraft was displayed turns out to have been slightly premature. A moment of high optimism and pride for employees of the declining aerospace industry of southern California, the event attracted more than 800,000 people over a single weekend, a veritable military-Keynesian Woodstock.

The text, and the grid of nine images, along with the borrowed covers from *Life* magazine, was first published in *Artforum* in November 1991. (Almost immediately afterwards, the editor who had supported my project, Deborah Drier, was fired.) Eventually, I made the pamphlet for the exhibition version of the work, incorporating the same text, and basing the design on a miniaturized version of the more monochrome *Life* magazine of the 1930s and 40s. (There actually was a promotional version of the first issue of *Life* from 1936 at just about this size.) I was thinking of the old media cliché of the American GI reading *Life* while lounging on an army field bed. But I was also thinking of the Dwight Macdonald's dissident anti-war journal from the 1940s, *Politics*, and in general of the rich American tradition of radical pamphleteering, which goes back to Tom Paine's *Common Sense*.

As far as the work's "feminism" goes, it seemed important at the time to try to unravel the complicated way in which the Gulf War was perceived, in the United States, as having opened up the can of worms of gender. Subsequent scandals in American military and political life have only made this line of inquiry seem more important, even if oddly displaced from the realm of geopolitics.

There is an important footnote to this story, which further complicates the matter. Now we also have to contend with the bizarre fact that there is a well-respected feminist voice seeking to discredit the argument that the war became, as I suggested it would, "one big industrial accident." This line of reasoning comes to us in a 1997 book, entitled *Hystories*, by Princeton humanities professor Elaine Showalter, who suggests that "Gulf War Syndrome" is really mass hysteria induced by irresponsible media coverage. Her final paragraph gives away the game: no "expensive studies" of medical causes will prevent "strong and heroic men and women, fighting for a just cause" from converting "strong emotions into physical symptoms." The paramount danger to the social order is "an epidemic of suspicion." Her psychiatric opinion here—and that's all it is—happens to coincide very nicely with the initial stonewalling response of the Pentagon to the medical complaints of thousands of veterans, a response that began to lose credibility as early as 1993, according to Seymour Hersh's book *Against All Enemies*. This suggests something of the way in which academic cultural studies can simultaneously serve power and be oddly out of synch with actual politics.

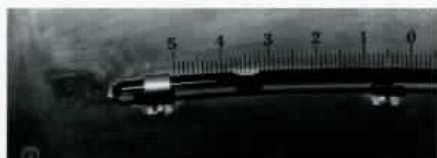


Figure 13. Detail, inclinometer, mid-Atlantic, 1993, from *Fish Story*, 1995.

DEBRA RISBERG: With its interest in mutinous acts and exploding battle-ships, the text of *War without Bodies* seems to lead directly to *Fish Story*. In the *Dismal Science* slide projection, which is the only part of that larger work in this exhibition, you pay a visit to the Holy Loch base for American nuclear submarines, in Scotland.

ALLAN SEKULA: By 1991, I was working on the two projects simultaneously. Actually, *Dismal Science* was first publicly presented as a slide projection in 1989, by chance on the night the Berlin Wall came down. This was the first of the nine "chapters" of *Fish Story* to be completed, although I revised the text later. I once mocked myself for performing, in the larger project, "a grotesque juggling act at a triple funeral for painting, socialism, and the sea." The Clyde riverfront was important for having been one of the great spaces of nineteenth and early twentieth century shipbuilding, but also for having been the militant "Red Clyde." And Holy Loch was one of the great spaces of Cold War anti-nuclear protest. Ultimately, I was trying to triangulate three spaces: the declining shipyards of the capitalist and state-socialist worlds—Glasgow and Gdansk—and the new shipbuilding towns of South Korea, which were giving rise to a new labor militancy in the late 1980s, just as Gdansk had been at the beginning of the decade the birthplace of Solidarity, the germinal site for the end of state socialism. My overriding interest was in the insurrectionary character of these spaces, in a democratic potential that was either forgotten, or frustrated, or eventually subject to more powerful external forces, like the International Monetary Fund.

The thematic impulse behind *Fish Story* was to examine the contemporary maritime world, a world with an undeserved reputation for anachronism. How to counter the fantasy, common among elites, that information is the crucial commodity, and the computer the sole engine of our progress? The sea may be a forgotten space, but it's not an irrelevant space, nor is it simply the "in-between" space of capitalism. The maritime world is fundamental to late modernity, because it is the cargo container, an American innovation of the mid-1950s, that makes the global system of manufacture possible. The container ship and the oil tanker are the last dismal reincarnations of Ahab's *Pequod*. The American poet Charles Olson remarked presciently in 1947 that Melville had already discovered a century before "the Pacific as sweatshop." The maritime world was interesting to me because it's a world of gargantuan automation but also of persistent work, of isolated, anonymous, hidden work, of great loneliness, displacement and separation from the domestic sphere. For that reason it's interesting to find the social in the sea, as Melville did. *Fish Story* is also an "art historical" study, tracing a lineage of representations of the sea economy, from Dutch 17th century painting to the unacknowledged "objective correlative" of the cargo container found in minimalist and pop art, whether it be the *Brillo Box* of Warhol or the galvanized serial cubes of Donald Judd. The radical difference lies in the container's mobility, against the theatrical inertness of the art object. For shippers, who speak of "intermodality," the box is more



Figure 14. Installation view, *Dismal Science*, 1989/92. Santa Monica Museum of Art, July 1996.



Figure 15. Panorama, mid-Atlantic, 1993, from *Fish Story*, 1995.

important than the vehicle. So, the package begins to take on a life of its own, a kind of ghostly animation. Here we can revisit Marx's parable of commodity fetishism: the wooden table that stands on its head and begins to evolve grotesque ideas. I speak of the container as the "coffin of remote labor power," because the labor that produces the transported goods is always somewhere else, located in fluid, reassignable sites determined by the relentless quest for lower wages. This labor is no longer proximate or contiguous—that is, no longer accessible through the realist rhetorical device of metonymy—except through some great imaginative geographical leap, the uncanny ability to wear Nike sneakers and jump in the imagination to an assembly line in Indonesia.

The political urgency of the present moment lies in part in the fact that contemporary elites imagine a world of wealth without workers, even as they scour the world for cheaper and cheaper labor. The cargo container has become the very emblem of capitalist disavowal. The photographer, writer, or filmmaker can become the ally of those often very astute observers and social actors who handle the global movement of goods, and who know better. Should we be surprised that the key popular economic struggles within the developed world of the last few years have come from the transport sector: French railway workers, British and Australian dockers, American delivery drivers?

DEBRA RISBERG: Your installations ask viewers to engage in a kind of mental work. But this work has a political aspect. One arrives at a threshold of antagonism and cooperation. The challenge is to allow common interests to emerge from the clash of dissonant voices. Is there a model or metaphor of democracy to be found in this process?

ALLAN SEKULA: The intervals in the work are very important: the intervals between images, and between image and text. This affords a kind of freedom and responsibility to the viewer. But to really respond to your question I have to think again about the place of photography within the late modern system of the arts.

Photography is always positioned in a floating space bounded by literature, painting, and cinema. This intermediate zone cannot be resolved into a state of modernist ontological purity, as even Clement Greenberg recognized when he cited photography's "literary" character as its distinctive feature. Thus the overriding gravitational pull of the model of painting can be seen as the market pulling too strongly in one direction, upsetting the balance of forces. Maintaining the liminality and openness and democratic potential of photography for me means always working with the mundane hybridity of three types of space: the picture gallery, the reading room, and the projection room. The reading room evokes the idea of the library. In an American context, the library has immediate democratic associations that the museum, in its elitism, lacks. There is a dangerous irony in the fact that we are now witnessing the simultaneous atrophy of the public library and the hypertrophy of the privately-endowed museum. Hypervisuality is the complement of illiteracy.



Figure 16. Installation view, *Meditations on a Triptych*, 1973/79. Munich Kunstverein, February 1998. Photo: Wilfried Petzi.

What are the political and esthetic implications of rooms and published works designed for reading and looking? How is it possible to resist the double temptation of reducing the image to the model of the text and the text to the model of the image? Within the intersection of the three spaces, my first solution is to organize pictures sequentially. The photographic sequence is an alternative to the dominant institutional model for organizing photographs in re-sortable groups: the curatorial and bureaucratic model of the archive and the series. Sequences can in fact contain series, can even be organized from the interweaving of serial elements, but the opposite is not the case. Series introduce a metronomic regularity to the parade of photographs, allowing individual images to be bought and sold with no compunction about loss of complexity of meaning. This is in fact one pleasure of the series. Sequential organization, and the parallel construction of textual elements, allow a photographic work to function as a novel or film might, with a higher and more complex level of formal unity. However, the openness of the sequential ensemble constitutes a crucial difference with cinema: again, there is no unilinear dictatorship of the projector. Thus it is easy to mistake a sequence for a series; for example, beginnings and endings require special marking if a sequence is to be recognized as such. And the visual-verbal heterogeneity of elements marks a difference with the novel. Sequences also allow one to register time according to intervals of varying duration, and thus invite, for example, the absurd challenge of a work about the fluidity of the sea and capital by means of a static medium. Still photography slows things down, and thus gives pause to Captain Nemo's restless slogan "*mobilis in mobili*."

My second solution is based on respect for the distance between word and image, respect for the physiological differences between the experience of reading and that of looking. This is clearly the case with *Meditation on a Triptych*, where the reading table and chair are placed a distance from the images that makes the viewer/reader acutely aware of the relay between reading and looking. A more dramatic and deliberately perverse staging of this separation is found in the design for the projection room for the slide sequences. An illuminated reading alcove—resembling a telephone booth, a confessional, or an upright coffin, depending on your threshold of claustrophobia, sits to the side of the projection screen. Its placement is such that the viewer of the slide sequence can see peripherally the booklet containing the text component of the work, including the captions to the eighty or so photographs projected over a twenty-minute interval, but cannot actually take it in hand without losing site of the projected image. Reading can either precede or follow the projection. The experience I intended was akin to that of entering a theater for a film screening and being handed the program notes as the lights dim. Thus, the work depends not only on distance, but on a certain frustration of the linkage between word and image, posing as well the old problem of pictorial memory, the problem that photography supposedly rendered obsolete. At the same time, the projected images have a fleeting luminous pictorial presence and scale that, with the proper projection conditions, pose a modest alternative to the more static commercial hyperbole of the light box.



Figure 17. Installation view, *Meditations on a Triptych*, 1973/78 and *School Is a Factory*, 1978/80 (excerpt). Palmer Art Museum, January 1997.

One reason for the primacy of the phrase and the list in textual works of contemporary visual art is that these are easy to read and remember in spaces and bodily postures conducive to looking. For longer or more complex texts, comfortable and unpretentious chairs are a good idea, and I've used them for some time in installations. Ideally, if a discursive text is to be read while standing, it must draw the reader in, perhaps with the unfolding of an enigmatic or even absurd proposition; and it must be presented in a graphic form that is conducive to clear, undistracted reading. This is a way of respecting the reader/viewer's comfort and intelligence. Remember that one of the pleasures offered by the picture gallery is the "escape" from the everyday, functional insistence on reading. Overall, my strategies are also intended to "make strange," as Victor Shklovsky put it, the relationship between reading and looking on a very direct phenomenological level. To use terms introduced in Roland Barthes' early writings on photography, the goal is not a semantic "anchoring" of the indeterminacy of the image through a news-caption-like instrumentality of the text, but rather a "relay" between text and image that raises the work to a higher power of complexity. And now I wonder, thinking about his choice of terms, this play with imaginary chains, is the relationship between text and image like that between sea and land, or that between slave and master?



Figure 18. From *This Ain't China: A Photonovel*, 1974.

DEBRA RISBERG: So in a way it comes back to a question of the "freedom" of the image and the "necessity" of the text. In a lecture at the first showing of this exhibition, in *Normal*, you spoke of the "slavishness" of photography, and the paradoxical way in which this was linked to freedom. Knowing that you were strongly influenced by Herbert Marcuse, one of your early teachers, I was struck that he also seems to have thought about the "dismal science." In the 1966 "Political Preface" to his book on Freud, *Eros and Civilization*, he speaks of his "optimistic, euphemistic" hope that "the achievements of advanced industrial society would enable man to reverse the direction of progress, to break the fatal union of productivity and destruction, liberty and repression—in other words, to learn the gay science (*gaya scientia*) of how to use the social wealth for shaping man's world in accordance with his Life Instincts, in the concerted struggle against the purveyors of Death."

ALLAN SEKULA: My debt to Marcuse is complicated. He was an extraordinary moral and philosophical presence in San Diego when I was an undergraduate, but his esthetic ideas clashed with the prevailing neo-Duchampian attitudes of a number of the more interesting artists on the faculty. I also owe a debt to John Baldessari, who was my first art teacher. You can imagine the sort of inchoate, imaginary dialogue that a seventeen-year-old from the LA industrial-harbor suburb of San Pedro might have made from simultaneous courses with Marcuse and Baldessari. As a teacher, Marcuse paid careful and patient attention to the fact that the University of California was devoted to the training of young scientists who would ultimately work for what the student rebel Mario Savio had described as "the machine." The machine was particularly evident in San Diego, with its huge concentration of military force aimed at Southeast Asia. To help dispel the illusion that the university was merely an "ivory

tower" on a beautiful mesa overlooking the Pacific, the campus was routinely buzzed by low-flying Marine Corps jets, most notably after demonstrations. At the same time, one of my fellow art students was a former Navy Seal, another was the estranged wife of a pilot who had, along with a number of his squadron mates, mutinied aboard the aircraft carrier *Kitty Hawk*, refusing to bomb the Vietnamese: both these students were dissidents. Being a student at that time and place meant helping young Marine Corps deserters on their way to Canada, and staging sit-ins outside laboratories suspected of researching aerial reconnaissance techniques. As a first year undergraduate, I read Brecht's *Galileo* in Marcuse's course—along with Kafka and Freud and Sartre and Fanon—and recognized something of the complicity of science, the line of responsibility that stretched back to the Manhattan Project. This led, in a way, to my decision to be an artist, and eventually to *Aerospace Folktales*.

I suppose indirect credit should go to Marcuse for a certain dime-store Hegelianism in my thinking about photography. The everyday tension between necessity and freedom is doubled and repeated in the very character of the photographic medium, in its subservient relation to the other arts and to broader institutional demands for documentation and recording. According to the method of art historical connoisseurship advanced by Bernard Berenson and Giovanni Morelli at the end of the nineteenth century, it was the photographic document that provided the technical basis for authenticating works of art. It was photography, with its capacity to render precisely otherwise neglected details, that ferreted out fakes and provided the empirical evidence necessary for constructing plausible narrative accounts of the stages of an artist's stylistic development. And upon this particular empirical base, the more universal and transcendent experience of the ineffable could be built.

It is not surprising that photography is frequently described, throughout the middle decades of the nineteenth century, as "slave," "servant" and "bondswoman." Without belaboring the point, I would argue that the practice of photography allows for the possibility of a radical consciousness from below of the relation between esthetic servitude and esthetic mastery. In this case, as with Hegel's dialectic of the master and the slave, it is the slave who comes to comprehend the true nature of freedom, a freedom embodied in the person of the master. By contrast, the master is unable to comprehend through externally-directed desire the very condition that he already so comfortably embodies. For this reason, I find the endlessly repeated mantra that photography has finally, or yet again, arrived at the status of a fine art, to be completely beside the point. What is much more interesting is the modesty of this medium, and the radical wisdom that follows from close and sustained attention to observation. This is a schematic philosophic argument for photography's special aptitude for depicting economic life, for what used to be called "documentary," and for an affinity between documentary and democracy.



Figure 19. From *This Ain't China: A Photonoel*, 1974.