

exposure



Deborah Bright, Richard Bolton,
Judith Crawley, Diane Neumaier,
Connie Hatch, Steve Cagan,
Deborah Small, Elizabeth Sisco,
Louis Hock, and David Avalos on

Socially Motivated Photography

Jan Zita Grover on

The Photography of Invention

Mary Warner Marien on

Documentary

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Volume 27 Number 3

Society for Photographic Education

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Preface

Deborah Bright



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"New Options/Working Solutions," Conference Panel and Participants, April 29, 1989 at Boston University.

This issue of *exposure* is devoted to a consideration of issues, problems, and strategies for thinking about socially-motivated practice in photography today. The images and essays by the individuals that follow originated at a one-day workshop, "New Options/Working Solutions," held on April 29, 1989 at Boston University. The workshop was co-sponsored by the Boston Center for Photography and Criticism and the Photographic Resource Center and partially funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.¹

Over 100 photographers, historians, educators, and students attended the workshop which featured presentations by invited speakers in the morning, with organized small group discussions and question-and-answer sessions in the afternoon. Richard Bolton and I planned and conducted the workshop and the invited presenters were Steve Cagan, Judith Crawley, Connie Hatch, Diane Neumaier, Elizabeth Sisco, and Krzysztof Wodiczko. These speakers kindly consented to revise their papers for publication and the views expressed in each paper, of



Elizabeth Sisco and Steve Cagan.

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course, are solely those of its author.²

Ultimately, the aims of "New Options/Working Solutions" were modest. Original applications to the National Endowment for the Arts and the Massachusetts Council on the Arts had proposed a much more extensive three-day program, covering a wide range of contemporary social issues and diverse territories of photographic practice, including race, sexualities, economic stratification, education, the role of direct action, neoconservative cultural policy and its impact on arts education and funding, current art market conditions, and alternative forums and networks for exhibiting/publishing critical works in an era of shrinking public tolerance and support for diverse cultural expressions.

The funding we secured compelled us to shrink our "dream conference" to a one-day affair and we decided to focus on the more practical issues of "fieldwork" and distribution for photographers who were interested in doing socially critical work and getting it shown in an unfavorable (and now, overtly censoring) climate. It was taken for granted by the workshop organizers and speakers that all

practices in photography, including those defined as "artistic" or "self-expressive," are also always socially instrumental—an assertion that still frustrates many art photographers and has produced major philosophical rifts among SPE's constituencies, as those who have attended recent national conferences can attest.

The workshop organizers were neither interested in rehashing that issue nor engaging essentialist arguments about "art" versus "propaganda" that continue to police so effectively the boundaries of liberal discourse and practice in photography. Rather, we wished to move beyond such questions to examine specific case histories ("new options") of useful strategies ("working solutions") for critical practice, recognizing that any such practice is provisional and contingent, useful for an immediate historical moment and an archaeological artifact thereafter (perhaps to be gallery-fied and museumified if market standards of visual novelty and collectibility are met).

For socially-conscious artists who also teach from a critical perspective, the contradictions

of working within the belly of the culture industry "beast" are unavoidable in late capitalist society. Yet rather than being paralysed by them, it seems more productive to see the beast as itself a contradictory creature, driven by conflicting interests and productive of conflicting truths. To be an artist and a teacher with a critical vision is to see one's cultural privilege as a tool of access to a site where power and knowledge are produced and where opportunities to interrupt their flows may be seized. One must pay the rent and support one's work, after all, and the ideal (if not the practice) of liberal education in the western democracies still provides a more generous shelter for free dialogue and criticism than the corporate and state-run mass media. However the price to be paid for engaging such criticism is uncertain employment; the guardians of institutional discourse keep the doors revolving for those whose speech and work is deemed "too political" and not sufficiently "artistic." Of the six presenters and two organizers of this workshop (all of whom teach), none at this time holds a permanent faculty position and many have endured constant relocation and long periods of exile among the exploited ranks of the part-time.

But employment issues (though by no means trivial) were but a secondary concern to the participants in this workshop. More pertinent were the ways in which these artists identify their diverse constituencies and put their skills and image savvy to work within and for those communities. This kind of knowledge-sharing and networking is generally absent in art education programs where it is often assumed without question that photographers and artists-to-be will produce work for one venue only—the commercial gallery and the fine art museum. Students are rarely acquainted with alternative practices, nor are they encouraged to create or seek out alternative networks for production and dissemination.

The artists represented here have been engaged in socially-motivated photography and/or interventions in diverse public settings for a number of years. To varying degrees, art-market discourses and fashions are ancillary to their interests, and when these have intersected with their work, the results have often proved as troublesome as beneficial. The colonization of their practices for liberal pluralist aesthetics is a fate these artists have managed to

elude, either because they work resolutely in extra-art contexts or because their work is just too barbed and explicit in its references to be politely absorbed. (The discourse of liberal pluralism is nothing if not polite.)

What unites these individuals is that their work proceeds from a conscious politics and not vice-versa. Their art is "engaged" because they are already engaged as feminist, socialist, gay straight, pro-choice, anti-militarist, white, black, chicano, pro-civil rights women and men, as voters, radical educators, and organizers of the evicted. They are coalition-builders who also happen to be artists.³ The claiming and deployment of identities may change from person to person, issue to issue, practice to practice. One artist can work simultaneously on several "fronts" and in different styles/media, doing a "gallery piece" about federal officials' treatment of migrant workers while at the same time constructing a public poster or documenting a partisan political rally for a much more targeted constituency.

This multi-front activity has been most visible in recent work around the AIDS epidemic where artists' collectives like *Gran Fury* produce posters, T-shirts, and other "zap" paraphernalia for street actions, while designing front window installations at the New Museum and the Whitney. Krzysztof Wodiczko provides another example: his polemical slide projections for elite art institutions restore an image of resistance to those he calls "evicts" (rather than the usual victim-term, "homeless"). At the same time, he designs and attempts to market functional prototypes of his *Homeless Vehicle* to industrial manufacturers. Elizabeth Sisco, Louis Hock, David Avalos, and Deborah Small have taken on San Diego's "city fathers" with their acerbic photomontages on bus posters and billboards, exposing the city's hypocrisy toward its racial minorities. Meanwhile, in gallery spaces, they use the publicity and media hype surrounding their public interventions to address the mass media's and the artworld's abilities to marginalize and coopt critique.

Along with pursuing their own personal projects, Steve Cagan, Judith Crawley, and Diane Neumaier offer their "documentary services" to activist groups, declining the role of "artist/author" in favor of the needs and concerns of the collective. In

an art market that rewards only bankable signs of individual authorship and "mastery," these commitments have been costly in the conventional terms of exhibition opportunities, job retention, and grant-getting. But the rewards in terms of personal integrity (another term debased in formalist art criticism, where "integrity" refers to the work, not the maker) are far greater

Finally, in response to those who will insist that these sorts of practices have nothing to do with "photography" or "photographic education,"⁴ (and I only engage this issue because this is *exposure*, the journal of the Society for Photographic Education), it is worth noting that most of us who organized and participated in this workshop are graduates of M.F.A. photography programs of the 1970s, the heyday of Szarkowskian aesthetics. Among our former teachers are some notable members of the art photography world, including the late Garry Winogrand, Paul Berger, and Carl Toth. If it appears that we reject "Photography," that is, the reductive notions of photographic practice we were taught, it should not be construed as a market-oriented stylistic maneuver nor as some sort of oedipal rebellion against "the fathers" (which only matters in the case of the white sons, anyway). For we were also affected by the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s (civil rights, the antiwar movement, the women's movement, gay liberation) which coincided with our socialization as artists and which made agonizingly clear, if only retrospectively, the importance of acknowledging those other personal and political identities that we had been taught to deny "as artists."

Now, as teachers ourselves, we often find ourselves addressing a new generation of students whose birthdates coincide with those very years and whose understandings of "the Sixties" have been formulated during a period of conservative backlash and liberal retrenchment. The political environment has become harsher for those who challenge the status quo and there is little popular sympathy for those who try. If nothing else, the results of this changed climate were brought home to artists this past year with the mandated incorporation (by a Senate vote of 96 to 2) of Senator Helms' obscenity restrictions into the National Endowment for the Arts guidelines.⁵ Shortly thereafter, Endowment director

John Frohnmayer withdrew funds for a show on AIDS curated by Nan Goldin, "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing" (though funding was restored due to public pressure).

Indeed, Nan Goldin's exhibition title took on an unintended irony, for "vanishing" is precisely what is at stake in the works and practices represented here, both literally as in the case of Connie Hatch's work, and implicitly. No longer a luxury, it becomes a necessity to integrate social identities and experiences with artistic practices and pedagogies—not to get *rid* of the historical contradictions as the neoconservatives pretend in their appeals to Art's universality, but to acknowledge them and use them as a weapon against our silencing.

Endnotes

- 1 The Boston Center for Photography and Criticism is an *ad hoc* group of photographers and critics interested in issues of social practice in photography, and in heightening awareness of this activity in the Boston area.
- 2 Krzysztof Wodiczko's presentation and remarks are not included here, but extensive documentation and discussion of his work may be found in *October* 38 (Fall 1986), pp. 3-51.
- 3 This, as opposed to the commonly-heard formulation, "I am an artist who just happens to be a woman, black, gay, etc." The fact that the diverse identities listed here are commonly associated with "left progressive" rather than "right" political tendencies in the U.S. only indicates that the very claiming of these identities as fundamental to one's vision and work is itself a profound challenge to conservative orthodoxy.
- 4 See Bill Jay, "The Fascism of the Left," *Shots* (January/February 1989) and reprinted in *PhotoMetro* (April 1989); and Richard Margolis, "The Battle at the SPE Conference," *Images INK* 4:2 (1989), pp. 39-42.
- 5 And that wake-up call came late. The neoconservatives, led by Hilton Kramer and Samuel Lipman, have been chipping away at artistic and critical freedom at the NEA for many years under Frank Hodson's tenure as director. Remember the abolition of NEA critics' fellowships during Reagan's first term because of alleged "left bias" in peer review panels? What is so frightening in retrospect about the Helms "obscenity" amendment is not only that it was proposed and passed, but that so few artists and liberal intellectuals found the outright censoring of undefined "homocrotic" or "sexual" content in publicly-funded artworks problematic or even worth protesting.

Introduction

Richard Bolton



"New Options/Working Solutions," panelists (left to right) Diane Neumaier, Connie Hatch, and Judith Crawley.

What can we say about social experience after the Reagan era and the renewal of patriotism, and after the decline of voter participation? What are the conditions of representation, public expression, and participation to which artists must now respond? What does it now mean to work for social change through the visual arts?

Further, what can we say about the *representation* of social experience, after postmodernism, after the fame and fortune of its leading artists, and the accompanying decline of this once socially-engaged critical approach? Over the last decade, postmodernism has been considered by many to be synonymous with critical practice. Now the term "postmodern" fades from usefulness. For example, postmodernist appropriation was once considered in

and of itself to be a sufficiently critical strategy, but now it is an accepted part of the language of the status quo, from MTV-ified television commercials to the Hollywood-soaked pastiche that informed President Reagan's wildest foreign policy ruminations. Methods once thought to encourage critical thinking are now put to work colonizing consciousness. This outcome is not so hard to understand, given that many postmodernists refused to articulate in any detail the relationship between their theories of simulation and inauthenticity and the social world to which these theories referred. Many postmodernists, deep down, seemed to believe that social communication was impossible—a point of view that often seemed nostalgic for rational order, and if not nostalgic, then still constructed upon a kind of absolute, now the abso-

lute of *incoherence*. But whose interests are served when we declare the impossibility of communication?

Not all postmodernist practice accepted this cynical view of communication, or its accompanying quiet despair. Postmodernism has been a complex movement, with productive as well as pernicious strands. In the last ten years we have seen many works that speak deliberately and specifically about social conditions. These works have helped us to understand a great deal about public speech and the institutions that frame speech, about the character of the audience, and about the struggles many of us face. These works have at times laid bare the contest of power that informs representation.

Yet I doubt that socially-motivated artists any longer have a need to refer to this work as "postmodern"; I doubt there is any longer much point in discussing the term. For socially-motivated artists, the greater question lies in the relationship of artwork to everyday life. There was always talk in postmodernism of worldliness, but if we are to take worldliness seriously we must move into a realm of ethical analysis and decision-making that lies beyond the scope of postmodern practice. Looking at art in this way we don't find a movement, or a style, or even a typical set of beliefs—instead, we discover a collection of temporary, particular, contingent practices that speak to a variety of issues, chosen for a variety of social and political ends.

This variety is evidence of a fundamental shift in our thinking about the audience, a shift in our understanding of the public itself. Over the last decade, conservatism has emphasized the unity of the American public. A citizenry has been fashioned out of patrician and patriotic rhetoric, out of a myth of reenergized economic and democratic participation. Against this, of course, we can point to a steady decline in voting (the last election decided by only 50% of the eligible population), and we can point to the emphatic reassertion of class and educational

differences that characterized the Reagan years. Further, the public is not simply split along class lines; it is a complex heterogeneous public organized across a variety of issues and sites of contest. We are learning to pay attention to these diverse struggles, and learning to appreciate the differences and complexities they represent. One group might concern itself with issues of sexuality, another with health issues, a third ecological issues, and a fourth group might work to solve homelessness. These groups may work through accepted political channels, but they probably try as most grassroots organizers do, to invent new forms of public participation, to find ways to change lives outside of the electoral process. We must recognize the necessity of bridging these diverse struggles to arrive at a larger program for social change. We as citizens must learn to see ourselves as part of a larger emerging political structure, one based on local initiatives, and on coalition politics, on the creation of common bonds drawn across diversity.

When we consider what visual practices are best suited to such a conception of politics, we discover that we must give up the notion of art as a unified or even a coherent field. We must instead stretch our thinking to include a wide variety of cultural practices, including practices that may be so integrated into their communities that they do not strike us as art at all. The important question is not "Why is this art?", but "Does this representation enlarge social experience?" Since representation remains crucial to the exercise of power it also remains crucial to challenges to this power. Visual work can be an important part of larger projects of social analysis and change, helping to create forms of political engagement more complex than those usually tolerated in the electoral process. Cultural work can help create a forum for public analysis and definition, and thus provide a partial corrective to the diminishment of democracy that we have witnessed in recent years.



**Giving Birth is Just the Beginning:
Women Speak About Mothering**

**Donner naissance n'est qu'un début:
Les femmes parlent de maternité**

Judith Lerner-Crawley

Judith Crawley, cover. *Giving Birth is Just the Beginning.*

Giving Birth is Just the Beginning

Judith Crawley



Judith Crawley, from *Giving Birth is Just the Beginning*.

My photography is not about Art or the Simulacrum or the Semiotic Rectangle (a term I picked up at the 1989 SPE conference in Rochester); it's not about Appropriation or Reappropriation or Postmodernism or any of the other trends currently dominating the art scene and passing me by. My approach uses photography to make public and concrete the isolated experiences that are shared by many women within my own cultural context.

Mothering has a "bad rep" in our society. And that's not "MOTHERHOOD AND APPLE

PIE," a casual expression I frequently hear tossed off by administrators (and often by fellow teachers) to mean something we can take for granted, a foregone conclusion, something we can always depend on, like a dish rag or a door mat. When I hear this, I stop the discussion right away and interject: "HEY what's so easy about mothering?" Mothering is not the simple, natural, spontaneous, and delightful experience it's cracked up to be. If it were, why aren't men doing it at home (silently suffering and poor) or at the day care center or elementary school? Mothering, a socially constructed role, is a low status job



Judith Crawley, from *Giving Birth is Just the Beginning*.

with little social support; yet women who are mothers have three or four jobs: childcare, housework, wife/partner work, and often salaried work outside the home.

Single parenting has been a main factor in my life for almost 12 years, since the father of my two teens died in a motorcycle accident. I love my kids. But depending on isolated women to do this job alone is an absurd way to ensure the survival of humanity. And an unequal way, too. My imagery is all about showing the effects of this social imbalance. That's my "new option," my "working solution." My camera is not pointed up at the rich, nor down at the poor, nor at the sensational or the foreign. Rather I document my immediate community of friends, work, and family. I look to our lives to understand how social forces function and how the personal and the political are interconnected.

I interviewed women whom I had been photographing for years. Here, in the photograph above, Shirley has spread my photographs around

her and is organizing them. Note the tape recorder. In the interview, we talked about what was included and what was missing in these images about mothering. I printed extracts from our discussions beneath the images—first as an exhibition, *Giving Birth is Just the Beginning: Women Speak about Mothering* and later as a book of the same title. The book is divided into five sections: "A Rude Awakening," "Single Parents," "Unpaid Labour," "Role-modeling," and "Women are Going on Strike."

To raise money to self-publish this project, I tried a "new option," a "working solution." A committee of friends wrote to all of the participants in my project, friends and contacts, family, the Women's Caucus of SPE, co-workers, and so on. Many supporters, already familiar with the exhibition, were very generous and made it possible for me to convert the project into book form. The process was very demanding, exciting, and finally gratifying, since the audience for the work now stretches beyond the art gallery and friends. I spent a lot of my own energy



I worry more about Sarah because women have a rougher time. There are more opportunities for men, they are led to expect to take care of themselves. Girls are raised to look for the best husband who will give them the best life. So they don't have to go out there and do anything except look beautiful and attract one of the male species to take care of them. I was led to believe that. I can't remember any other message, just attract somebody wealthy enough to keep you. That's what I did, only I happen to be from the working class, so I ended up attracting and being with somebody from my own class. Which is ok, but you don't serve caviar in the working class.

Judy

Je suis inquiète pour Sarah parce que c'est plus dur pour les femmes. Il y a plus d'opportunités pour les hommes, ils sont élevés à penser qu'ils devront se prendre en mains. Les filles sont élevées à chercher le meilleur parti qui leur offrira la meilleure vie. Ainsi elles n'ont pas à sortir à agir. Elles ont à être belles et à attirer un spécimen mâle qui s'occupera d'elles. C'est comme ça que j'ai été élevée. Je ne me rappelle d'aucun message autre que: "accroche-toi quelqu'un d'assez riche pour t'entretenir". C'est ce que j'ai fait, sauf que, de classe ouvrière, j'ai fini par accrocher quelqu'un de ma classe et...ça va, mais tu ne sers pas de caviar dans la classe ouvrière.

Judy

Judith Crawley, page 52, *Giving Birth is Just the Beginning*.



If I could change my mothering situation, I wouldn't make radical changes. I'd extend what I like best about it—sharing it with other people. Not exchanging kids so that you can have free time, but spending time with kids and other people; it takes care of a lot of the boredom. I like the noise and confusion and kids running all over the place, getting together meals.

I hate coming home and facing a meal alone with the 3 kids, which I do regularly. You know that 5 to 7 blah, I just hate that time.

Arlene

Si je pouvais changer ma condition de mère, ce ne sont pas des changements radicaux que j'apporterais. Je mettrais l'emphase sur ce que j'aime le plus, sur le partage avec les autres. Pas échanger les enfants pour avoir plus de temps, mais passer plus de temps avec des enfants et d'autre gens pour éliminer le gros de l'ennui. J'aime le bruit, la confusion, les enfants qui courent partout et les repas tous ensemble.

Je déteste rentrer à la maison et avoir à faire face à un souper seule avec les 3 enfants, ce qui m'arrive régulièrement. Vous savez, le flou entre 5 et 7 heures, je déteste ça.

Arlene

Judith Crawley, page 67 *Giving Birth is Just the Beginning.*



Cover of publication from Montreal Health Press.



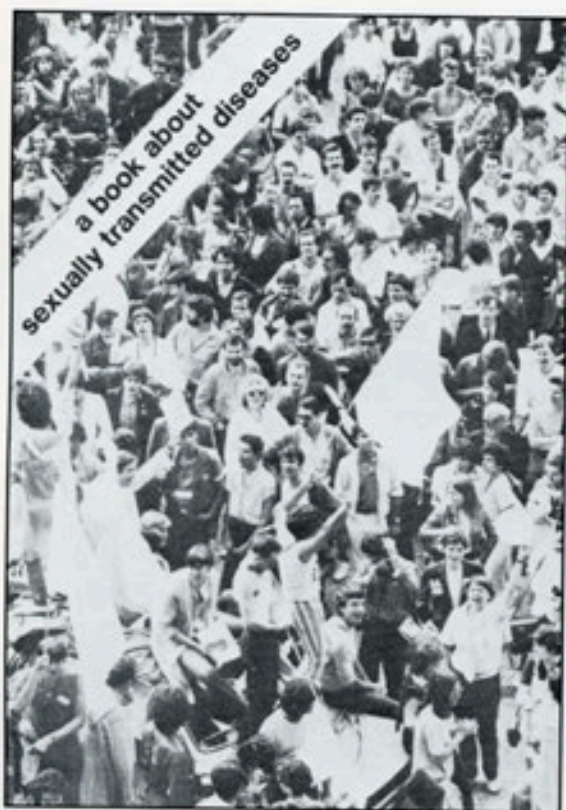
Cover of publication from Montreal Health Press.

packaging and mailing books before I connected with several small press and art book distributors: Inland Book Company Bookpeople, and Artexte. Publicity is still in my lap and takes away time from new projects.

This kind of approach to photography brought me to the attention of The Montreal Health Press, a collective of women who write, mass-produce, and mass-distribute information books on issues of health and sexuality. The Press has its roots in late 1960s student activism at McGill University, at a time when publishing information on birth control was illegal in Canada. *The Birth Control Handbook* preceded *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, published by the Boston Women's Health Collective, our sisters in survival over the years. Now we have four books—about birth control, sexual assault, sexually transmitted diseases, and menopause. These books appear in English and in French, the dominant language in Quebec. We continually update them and print edi-

tions of 50,000 copies each time. We worry when our sales dip to only a few thousand a month. In fact, we probably sell more books than any other publisher in Canada. But you don't buy them in a bookstore. Standard in size and weight to simplify shipping, the books are sold in bulk to schools, clinics, community groups, doctors offices—and even to the U.S. Army for distribution. Our audience is broad and North American. The writing style is clear and direct. Sensitive medical illustrations and photographs are combined with the text.

The production work of research, debating of positions, writing, revising, editing, layout, proof reading, and so forth is done in various combinations by all of us—sometimes supported by government grants, but usually unpaid. Two part-time workers who run the office and ship books are paid through sales. The collective meets monthly and at least once yearly for a long planning and review meeting. We fondly call this the May Meeting since it occurs in the



Cover of publication from Montreal Health Press.



Cover of publication from Montreal Health Press.

Spring, away from the city, jobs, kids, and husbands (where they exist). Collective decision-making and crisis resolution have long been a basic principle of the group.

The basic orientation of the Health Press is to challenge the medical establishment's monopoly on health delivery services by providing people with information and strategies for approaching and dealing with the medical world. Information is not neutrally presented, but within a feminist political perspective. We call into question male authority which so strongly governs people's lives. We attempt to create expectations for people about appropriate health care. Problems are understood within a social and political framework. But while the context is always social, decisions and choices are faced in private and are made, or not made, individually. Thus, both individual and collective solutions are

discussed.

In 1973, the Health Press caused a scandal at Princeton University. This was not because birth control information was being disseminated, but because the Health Press called for basic social change. The book was charged with being "a Maoist political tract masquerading as a how-to sexual pamphlet." That same year in Florida, student government distribution of the *Birth Control* and *VD* handbooks came under similar attack. In an important sense, the charges are true—we're not just distributing how-to information. We want to understand the social context that leads us to make certain decisions.

I became involved with this group when the Health Press called me in 1980 looking for photographs hours before press time. Surprised that photos were a last-minute concern, though so integral to establishing the meaning of the text, I urged them to

pay more attention to the use of visual material. Months later, I was invited to join as Photo Coordinator to work throughout the whole production process. My first project for the collective was a rewrite of the *VD Handbook* into a book about sexually transmitted diseases. Now we are involved in preparing a new book about birth control.

The Health Press moved from lifting photos uncredited out of *The Family of Man* in 1968 to knocking on local photographers' doors for last-minute photographs to sending out posters and notices to newspapers, feminist journals, community and women's centers all over Canada. We invite photographers, both amateur and professional, to send us photographs for use in our material. I try to use images from everyone who contributes and to pay for each photo used. Local photographers are delighted to open their files to me and welcome the opportunity to see their images reproduced in the Health Press context. This continually pulls more people into our work, both as photographers and subjects. For instance, friends like to joke about being the "gonorrhoea girl," not just as a joke, but as a way of expressing pride in their participation and drawing attention to the book.

In summary, my socially-motivated photography emerges from a socially-committed, feminist outlook on life. It affects everything I do—as a parent, friend, teacher, union member, women's studies activist, and so on. Now I am working on a project about single parenting, using as a starting point imagery of my own two children that I have been making since the death of their father. Future plans include a series about the volunteer work of those who organize the Women's Studies program where I work and another about single women over 40. Both use photographs I have been making for years.

*Giving Birth is Just the Beginning Women
Speak About Mothering*

by Judith Crawley is available from:

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available on request.

Photographing AIDS

Diane Neumaier

A principle underlying current government policy is that one of the best ways of exerting social control is through sexual control. One way that sexual repression is effected is by withholding the medical care necessary to healthy sexuality. In our society today, the withholding of healthcare on two critical fronts—AIDS and reproductive rights—reveals a policy of sexual repression that must be understood in the larger context of political repression. These legal, economic, and social healthcare policies specifically wage an attack on socially and economically marginalized groups: gays and lesbians, women, people of color, and poor people.

During the last few years, there has been an energetic response by artists to the social crisis brought on by the AIDS epidemic. Throughout the country, there have been many exhibitions and other cultural events promoting an enlightened discussion of AIDS.¹ These activities seek to interrupt commonly existing (mis)representations of AIDS in the media that isolate and socially victimize people with AIDS, people who are often marginalized already for other reasons.

Consequently there has been a concerted political effort on the part of AIDS activists *not* to equate AIDS with illicit behavior, shame, secrecy, guilt, and panic; that is, to resist the hysteria to which the public has been subjected. The intention is to empower people, to learn to live with AIDS, to facilitate prevention, and to insist upon seeking and finding a cure. This is a liberation movement that ultimately promotes safe, healthy sex. The AIDS resistance movement has engaged with unrelenting vigilance in its public struggle against unreasonable AIDS policies, while at the same time providing

support for people living with AIDS. It has created a community that has suffered and grieved together; that has formed deep bonds and brought about profound personal changes under the most brutal conditions.

Within the AIDS activist culture there has been a wide variety of photographic production. The strengths and problems of this work reflect the strengths and problems of all contemporary photographic practices. Although I will avoid a discussion of the politics of representation, I am making the assumption that the critical debate surrounding the issue of representation is carefully considered by active photographers. Representations, including artworks, must be understood as social interactions rather than as isolated objects; all images—as well as the artworld itself—are part of a larger socio-political discourse.

In order to produce effective work, photographers must conscientiously devise strategies. The audience must be identified; that is, artists must determine whether a practice will operate within the artworld or in a larger or different specific arena. Methods of distribution must be developed. Artists may choose to collaborate with other artists, activists, intellectuals, or political groups. Activist photographers must make formal choices regarding how their photographs will function—as illustration, as information, as research, as argument, as metaphor, as evidence, as bait, and so on. Ultimately, these strategic concerns are all embedded in the ideological struggle to make meaning that is at the heart of all contemporary art making.

Working in association with New York ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) is Gran

Fury, a collective of artists producing posters, billboards, stickers, T-shirts, installations, and performances that forcefully present a social analysis of AIDS. Using a variety of dynamic graphic approaches, their public interventions cite statistics and facts, target particular sources of repressive AIDS policy sometimes make fun and always call for direct action.

Employing more personal and experimental art strategies are the works of many art photographers including Doug Ischar and Joe Ziolkowski. Ziolkowski's *Beyond Boundaries*, a photograph that shows two naked men embracing, their penises touching, was the center of censorship controversy last year in Chicago. Ziolkowski's clever resolution of the problem was to display the work provocatively covered with a wrapper under which the viewer could choose to look.

Another way of using photography to address the AIDS crisis is the journalistic or documentary approach of Jane Rosett and others. Rosett has covered many movement rallies, demonstrations, civil disobediences, and other events. Her records protect actions from being forgotten and are useful for movement promotion and for catalyzing new energy. Portraits of people living with AIDS have also been an important part of the communal resistance to the AIDS epidemic. Ann Meredith has made an extensive investigation of women with AIDS that has helped recognize a problem not ordinarily acknowledged. These portraits and many others, including those made by Tom McGovern and Neal Rantoul, have helped disarm sensationalist media stereotypes that have unrelentingly plagued us. These portraits have also been important within the community in the mourning process.

In order to encourage the production of effective, empowering imagery and to avoid the paralyzing pitfalls of "victim photography," it is important to analyze some troubling photographic work that has received numerous accolades in the art marketplace. Nicholas Nixon's celebrated work-in-progress *People With AIDS* is not only voyeuristic at the expense of his subjects, but it actually constructs the image of AIDS victimhood for the viewer—a horrific freak-show that equates AIDS with morbidity and death.² The squalor of these pictures margi-

nalizes those PWAs put on display as well as the historical AIDS crisis itself. Meanwhile, Nixon is seen to take a personal risk in his willingness to expose himself to PWAs when just the opposite is true. It is the outsiders who put people with impaired immune systems at risk. Like most media representations of AIDS, these photographs are more invested in fear than in action or resistance.

Nixon's AIDS portraits are consistent with the rest of his personal fine art practice, a pre-requisite to artworld success. By photographing the visible surface of the flesh, his recent work consistently features the decay of the body. Nixon is well known for his fascination with the aging of the flesh of his wife and her three sisters, the newness of the flesh of his own children, the degeneration of the flesh of very old people in nursing homes who are identified only by their initials, and the wear upon the flesh of unnamed minority and poor people in various scattered cities. Nixon identifies categories of people but never addresses the social conditions that make the categories significant. He is the ideal Museum of Modern Art formalist: the artist is the subject, those he photographs are objects. Ultimately, Nixon's "vision" is a celebration of impotence and powerlessness.

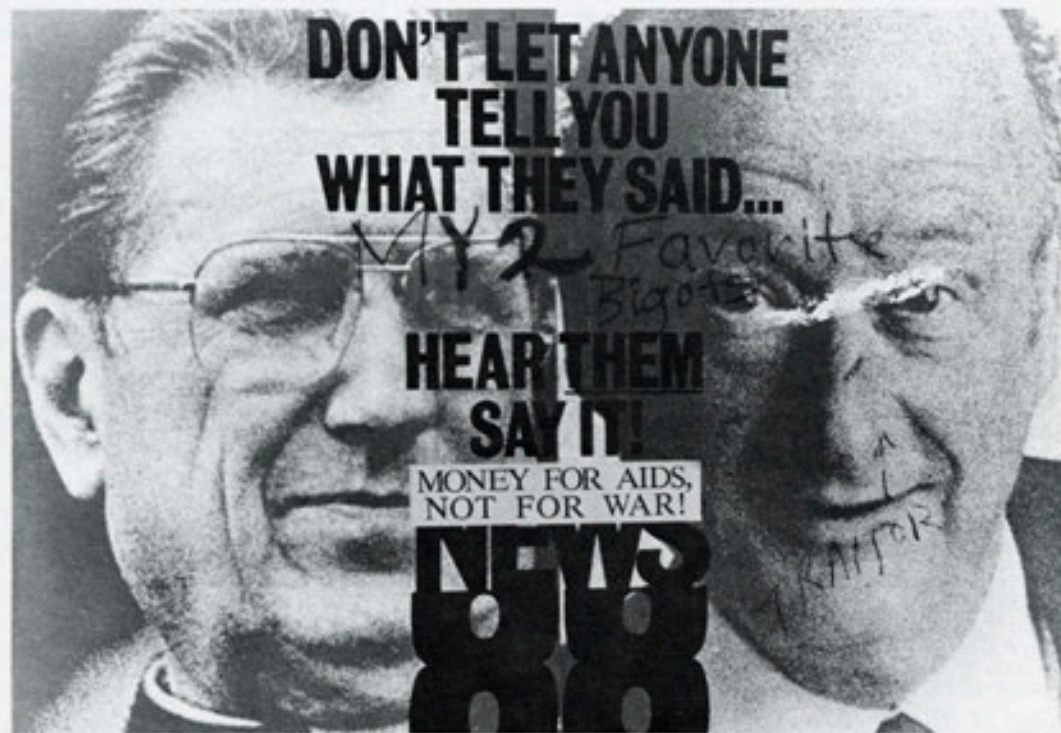
In developing an alternative strategy to such dominant photographic practices for AIDS, activist photographers must consider some limitations inherent in the medium. Many find a need for a verbal text to channel intended meanings. A further extension of the solution that language offers is proposed by video which operates in a narrative form and with an audio component. In fact, perhaps for these as well as other reasons, there is much more political cultural activity in video than there is in still photography. One of my favorite examples is John Greyson's *The AIDS Epidemic (Acquired Dread of Sex)*. Instead of constructing victimization, Greyson's entertaining and sexy videotape constructs erotic pleasure, convincingly arguing for safe(r) sex by advocating the use of condoms.

Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that instead of an alternative photographic practice, we need an alternative to photographic practice. After all, it's been 150 years!

Endnotes

- 1 A few of the many include: Jan Zita Grover and Lynette Molnar, eds., *AIDS: The Artists' Response*, exh. cat. (Columbus: the Ohio State University, 1989); Sunil Gupta and Tessa Boffin, *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1990); Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, a special issue of *October* 43 (Winter 1987 reprinted; Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988); and, Kim Abeles and Russell Moore, eds., *Living with AIDS: A Collaborative Reflection*. All of the artists discussed in this article are represented in these publications.
- 2 Peter Galassi, ed., *Nicholas Nixon: Pictures of People* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988). Nixon's work was uniformly well received in the popular press. For example, see Andy Grundberg, "Nicholas Nixon Seeks a Path to the Heart," *New York Times*, September 11, 1988, p. 37. For critical assessments of Nixon's work, see Jan Zita Grover, "Essay-review," *exposure* 26:4 (1989), pp. 35-39; and Anne McCauley, "The Body Photographic: Nicholas Nixon's *Pictures of People*," *Views: The Journal of Photography in New England* 10 (Summer/Fall 1989), pp. 14-16, 22.

STREET GRAPHIC INTERVENTIONS documents an informational poster campaign, anonymously and clandestinely posted throughout the New York subway system by the Metropolitan Health Association. This underground campaign protested discriminatory policy and misinformation on AIDS by hanging posters informing subway riders of concrete ways of preventing the further spread of AIDS. These "how-to" posters, which were quickly removed by transit authorities, instruct New Yorkers on how to properly clean drugworks and how to properly use condoms—for each campaign there were Spanish and English versions. Along the same lines there were anonymous campaigns of rubber stamp and bumper sticker types of messages posted on subway advertisements. My photographs document the short lives of these graphic displays. By capturing the clever juxtapositions that the activists establish, I ultimately seek to expand the audience of these witty subway interventions.



Diane Neumaier *Street Graphic Interventions*, 1988-1989.

2. If you're a man 25-50
 our game, send photo and
 I'll introduce you to my
 P.O. 9445

0—wants a game of love
 ser. I'm a tall blonde beauty
 nequet is all types of even
 seasonal game of mixed-
 P.O. 2139

EATE PROFESSIONAL—
 at I make six figures, seem to
 on on—at first—the it's for
 reason. Interested? P.O. 307
 ust! P.P.O. 9343

when we meet. I
 can't be beat. Looking for a nice man
 30-50 with a good body and a nice seat.
 P.P.O. 307

MYSTERIOUS, ADVENTUROUS,
 FUN—This 30-year-old professional is
 much
**MONEY FOR AIDS,
 NOT FOR WAR!** The
 each ride more exotic and thrilling than
 the last. You may never get another
 chance like this! Send note/phone.
 P.P.O. 3682

I HEAR AIDS
 is great, because I've never been quite
 sure what I am. If you'd like to help me
 in my research apply for a grant right
 away. Hurry, I may be out next year.
 P.P.O. 3314

MILE HIGH CLUB—Want an uplift-
 ing experience that makes you wonder if
 you're climbing or going? Join me and my
 Legs get and soar to heights and sights
 never reached before. Plane James wel-
 come. P.P.O. 3925

...PERSONALS...
 P.O. & CURE

"I got AIDS through the GOVERNMENT INACTION personals."

A great way to meet someone new?
 Well, someone new means someone you
 don't know. And no matter how tall,
 attractive, and successful someone sounds,
 he could be carrying the AIDS virus.
 And it's not just the Personals. Whether
 you meet someone in a bar, out late at a

music, or in your health club, they could
 be infected. And there's no cure or vaccine.
 So what should you do? Never leave the
 house? That would be stupid. But it's just as
 stupid to sleep with anyone whose sexual or
 drug use history you don't know.
 Remember, you don't have to have sex,

but if you do, using a condom is a must,
 because it's the one thing
 that can help protect you
 from getting AIDS.

AIDS
 ACTION = SURVIVAL

NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

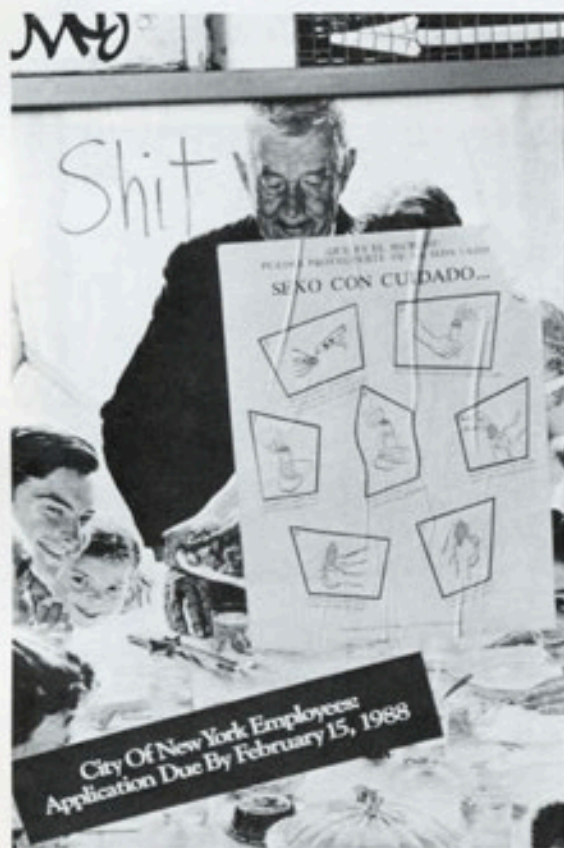
Diane Neumaier Street Graphic Interventions, 1988-1989.



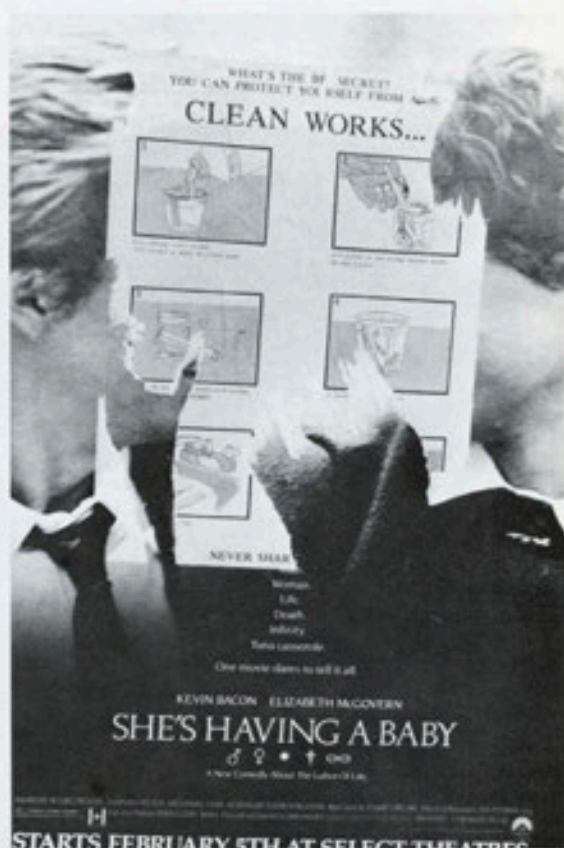
Diane Neumaier Street Graphic Interventions, 1988-1989.



Diane Neumaier *Street Graphic Interventions*, 1988-1989.



Diane Neumaier *Street Graphic Interventions*, 1988-1989.



Diane Neumaier *Street Graphic Interventions*, 1988-1989.

After the FACT ... Some Women

Connie Hatch



Connie Hatch, Installation view from *After the Fact ... Some Women*. Positive transparencies with shadows and legends.

After the *FACT* *Some Women* is an installation that pursues ideas initiated in my earlier projects, *Serving the Status-Quo* (1984) and *Forced to Disappear: A Display of Visual Inequity* (1987-89). Using published and personal documentary, I seek comparisons between the famous and the anonymous. Central to this investigation is the historical aesthetic of "woman" as constructed object of desire, while suspect and subject of contempt. Examining photographic portrait conventions, I've selected individual women who are either immediately identifiable or altogether unfamiliar. Each woman's portrait is printed as a fine-grain transparency and mounted at an angle from the wall. Carefully illumi-

nated, each transparency casts a distorted shadow. When the light is interrupted by the viewer's movement, the shadow momentarily quivers, shifts, and "disappears." Integral to the installation is the emphatic use of the viewer's body at self-conscious play.

There are several metaphors at work here. One is our collusion with the preferential editing of traditional history. Another is our complicity with something called "common knowledge," which censors by omission unpleasurable or less sensational facts. Crucial for me in this 150th anniversary year of photography is the continuing debate between photography as a tool of historical verity and a fantastic



BRIEFING/LEGEND

NAME OF SUBJECT: BESSIE SMITH
1898?-1937

NATIONALITY: United States Citizen.

SOURCE OF PHOTOGRAPH: The Bessie Smith Story-Vol.1, Columbia Records #CL 855 LP, liner notes by George Avakian 1951.

ORIGINAL PHOTOGRAPHER: Carl Van Vechten, 1936.

SUBJECT LAST SEEN: September 26, 1937
On a highway south of the Tennessee state line on the main road to Memphis.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF DISAPPEARANCE:

Bessie Smith was born in Chattanooga Tennessee, overcoming dire poverty to become the "Empress of the Blues." She left behind over 160 vocal recordings (every one of them, incidentally, the property of Columbia Records). A mistress of vocal inflection and an artist of impeccable taste, Bessie was also blessed with a huge, sweeping voice. Combining strength and even harshness with an irresistible natural beauty, every note she sang had in its interpretation the history and heritage of her people. In short, she combined a prodigious technique with the finest elements of folk art. At her best, she was the highest-paid black entertainer in the country, and her records were to outsell those of any other Columbia artist before her time. She died in circumstances so bitter that they became a symbol of the tragedy of her race. On September 26, 1937, Bessie Smith was in an automobile crash just below Clarksdale. Her right arm was nearly severed in the collision. Denied admission to one hospital because of her color, she died on the way to another.

Connie Hatch, *Briefing/Legend #3*.



BRIEFING/LEGEND

NAME OF SUBJECT: AMELIA EARHART
1898-?

NATIONALITY: United States Citizen.

SOURCE OF PHOTOGRAPH: Atlantic Wings by Kenneth McDonough,
Model Aeronautical Press, Ltd. 1966.

ORIGINAL PHOTOGRAPHER: Unknown, perhaps publicity portrait.

SUBJECT LAST SEEN: July 1937
New Guinea.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF DISAPPEARANCE:

Amelia Earhart was the first woman to make a solo flight over the Atlantic Ocean. Among her other achievements was a solo flight from Hawaii to California. During an attempt in 1937 to fly round the world, Earhart and her navigator disappeared mysteriously in mid-Pacific. A massive naval search involving government, commercial, and private vessels, failed to find any trace of either the plane or crew.

Connie Hatch, *Briefing/Legend #4*.

device to conjure the visceral. I present both a photographic transparency faithful to a past reality, the "face value" of objectivity, and its distorted shadow, an exaggeration of the connotative aspect inherent in even the "straightest" photograph. In exploring this paradox, I wish to elucidate a range of vexing contradictions, juxtaposing the trivial with the profound, and the famous with the forgotten.

Across from each transparency is a legend sheet and photograph in the style of a police report.

These "briefings" disclose pertinent information about each of the images: name of subject, birth and nationality, source and original photographer, when and where the subject was last seen, and the story of the circumstances of disappearance. By "disappear" I do not mean to refer only to those who have vanished without a trace. Important are the women "not allowed to appear" in the major activities of their lives—those who were exiled, banished, imprisoned, or silenced by violence, fear, or coercion.



Connie Hatch, 1898?–1937? 1898–1937? Installation view from *After the Fact ... Some Women*. Translite on acrylic panels with legends.

My versions of the circumstances of disappearance attempt to reproduce as closely as possible the written style and emotional tone of the media source. This varies widely from the chatty gossip of *People* magazine to the somber reports of Amnesty International. The physical distance between these documents and the life-size portrait transparencies again “plays” with the viewer’s knowledge and recollection of women seen only in the print medium. (Viewers must walk to the opposite wall to see the briefing documents, either substantiating their first impressions or correcting them.)

Memory, mistaken identity, and the subject-

ive construction of what constitutes legitimate history, work with and against this display of the illusionistic quality of photography. Common knowledge and public information are cultural blind spots; full disclosure is limited by the information inequities displayed through *the media* and consumed by our collective memory. *After the FACT ... Some Women* proposes a visual dialectic that interrogates that ghost of historical oversight—our own unconscious prejudice.

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Notes on "Activist Photography"

Steve Cagan

Not so long ago, a dean at my school looked at my resume and professional activities, sniffed, and said, "This looks more like labor education than art."

This official was telling me clearly, if obliquely that he doesn't intend to let me get tenure at the school. This is obviously an important personal concern for me. But his remark indicates a broader, more significant problem as well—the enforced distinction between photography as art and photography as social communication. This is a distinction which all of us who are working for a socially significant photography run into. A given set of images, if shown in a gallery or published in the "correct" places, are seen as "socially engaged" "political" *art*, but if the same images are used for their communicative value in publications or other venues which are overtly political, then these images lose their value; they are seen as less significant.

This distinction, deeply rooted in the dominant understanding of "art" (an understanding promoted not only by the art establishment but also by some on the Left who disdainfully dismiss what they call "instrumental" activities), raises for me a crucial question: Are those of us who are interested in having a political impact through our work really served by photography's acceptance as art?

To put this another way: what I wanted to say in response to the dean's comment was "Thank you." The problem is that such a response would have hurt my chances to stay in my job; I also fear that it would hurt my standing among Left critics.

Another story: Like many Left photographers, the development of my theoretical position was strongly influenced by articles and statements by

people like Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula. I particularly remember an interview between Martha and a Mexican journalist during a 1981 colloquium in Mexico City on Latin American photography. The writer asked her how political photography is repressed in the United States—a serious question, considering the physical repression experienced by progressive photographers in some countries in Latin America. (One Guatemalan woman scheduled to participate in the colloquium was "disappeared" shortly before the event.) Rosler's answer was, "In the United States, it's repressed by being hung in galleries and museums." It took a moment for me to realize what a good answer that was.

In those days, I didn't have many problems with the distortion of political photography in the gallery since I wasn't being shown in any galleries. Recently I've begun to exhibit in art spaces, and so I've started to think about the issue again. I've begun to ask myself: Given the problems inherent in exhibiting political photography in galleries, why not go with my original impulse and recognize that my work is most effective outside the art world? Given the problems of the gallery, why *do* we keep showing there?

One more story: At a recent national SPE conference, I presented my own political practice by giving a slide-talk about the situation of Salvadoran refugees in a camp in Colomoncagua, Honduras. A friend and colleague congratulated me in very complimentary terms on the talk, and her enthusiasm made me uncomfortable. It took me a while to understand why. Finally, I realized that my friend was treating my presentation as something unusual and new *within art*; for me, active in political organizing,

such talks are standard, normal activities.

These three stories illustrate the dilemmas I encounter when I consider what my work is really about. My first and fundamental goal is to contribute to political movements for social change. The question for me is not whether photography is "good" enough to be considered art, but whether the received notion of art is good enough—broad enough, serious enough—to encompass much of what is valuable, important, and worthwhile in socially conscious photographic practice. I'm not saying that art theory and criticism have nothing to offer us—on the contrary, I think they do, and they have been important in the development of my own practice. But art theory and critical writing have a way of pushing themselves to center stage. Rather than engage radical political photographic practice on the ground and on its own terms, they draw political or social practices into a debate within the terms of the art world, ignoring the conditions and goals particular to the production and distribution of political work. Unfortunately, this re-writing of political practice is done not only by main-line critics, but also by those who are on the same side of the metaphorical barricades as political photographers.

Now, I am not saying that political photographers should never see themselves as artists or engage in art-world activities and struggles. On the contrary, I think that such work is a real and serious part of the spectrum of political photographic practices. But I *do* want to insist on two things.

First, that artists and art critics take an adequately modest stance with respect to the importance of their work. Exhibits and publications that deconstruct the function of photography, or that criticize and undermine dominant art-world ideas and values, are certainly contributions to the struggle to change our society, but they are not particularly *central* to that struggle. Certainly they are not so important that they should be allowed to totally displace content-oriented activist practices addressed to a wider audience. Not all political photography can be, should be, needs to be, or wants to be judged by art criteria. Thus, for example, the criticism that my own images are not viable because they recall Lewis Hine (whether or not this is true is another question) is based on the totally false assumption that most, or

even a substantial part of my audience knows who Hine was, thinks about the way Hine fits into the history of socially-conscious photography, or cares about these issues.

Secondly, we should recognize that any attempt to prescribe which activities are real or serious or acceptable or (God save us!) "correct" is probably a big mistake. Consequently I'm not calling on anyone to abandon the art world or the gallery scene. Rather, I'm asking that we recognize that we can deal with the problems art presents to politics simply by working in other areas. If we encourage such thinking, I believe that the category of photography will end up broader, more interesting and more useful than the category of art. Such thinking will also in the end lead us to a discussion of audience—who we are addressing, what we are trying to say to them, and what we want the consequences of our communication to be. Radical criticism, to be more broadly useful, might consider the meanings and approaches of political work produced for audiences beyond the art world.



I like to think of my own work as "activist photography." I came to this activity not as an artist concerned with social issues, but as a social activist who decided to work with photography. For more than fifteen years, most of my photography has been done within the framework of political campaigns and activities. While I don't have the space below to provide a detailed autobiography, I would like to outline the major areas in which I have worked. For a long time, my work had essentially two outlets—it appeared in various publications of the political movements I related to, and it was exhibited in street fairs and peace fairs in my own community. The political goals of my activity were pretty clear if somewhat unexamined. I wanted to provide visual material for the periodicals, leaflets, and posters of the movements in which I was working. The intended audiences included both the constituencies of those movements and people to whom we were trying to reach out. I also wanted to help develop a cultural current within these political movements. I still believe very strongly in this kind of activity—



35¢

Is your job



dangerous?

Volume 1, Number 3

April, 1981

Steve Cagan, illustrations for *The Cleveland Beacon*, 1981



50¢

GUNS or BUTTER



VOL. 3, NO. 2 SPECIAL ISSUE MARCH 1983

Steve Cagan, illustrations for *The Cleveland Beacon*, 1983.

again, an activity which has not received much attention from the art world.

My earliest political photography was done for the movement against the war in Indochina, a movement in which I was active for many years. In the late 1970s my attention shifted to other areas. Although I remained interested in foreign policy questions, and did produce a slide show for the Coalition for a Democratic Foreign Policy I spent nearly a decade focusing more closely on issues in Ohio, the state in which I live. I began to examine the consequences of factory closings, working with a major community organization on this issue. At the same time, I began to do freelance work for progressive publications and for unions and other organizations. Out of this work came an exhibit on plant closings, a photo-and-text display on laminated panels, which I have shown both in the art world and in more activist environments.

In the late 1970s I was also part of a group of "culture workers" in Cleveland. Our work included the production of a multi-image slide show on

the Rosenberg case, some posters, and a series of concerts and cultural activities in the area. This group failed to attract more than a handful of members, and we eventually drifted apart. One activity which I drifted into was the production of an outreach magazine called *The Cleveland Beacon*. Although this was a very interesting project, it, too, ultimately failed after a few years, due to lack of funding.

The decline of these projects, and the increasing prominence of Central America after the Sandinista victory in 1979, along with the profound effect of a personal visit to Havana that same year, helped turn my attention to the Central America solidarity movement. I have been active there, both as an organizer and as a photographer, for about a decade.

The solidarity movement has had great effect on the conditions under which my images have been produced, and on the ways in which my images have been disseminated. In the first place, projects are taken up not only because I am interested in them, but sometimes because they fit the needs of the movement. My work on the project "Let Nicaragua



Steve Cagan, illustrations for PROCARES brochure, n.d.

Live" (which involved photographing in Nicaragua in an effort to raise money for local development programs) and for the Salvadoran project PROCARES (which runs social services and training programs for refugees) was in response to the needs and requests of the specific organizations involved. Some of this work fit closely into what I was personally interested in, some less so. A year ago, I photographed the first New Song Festival in El Salvador because it was needed and useful for the movement; unlike my students, I'm not especially interested in concert photography. That's not to say that it wasn't a wonderful experience for me; it's just that it wasn't particularly important to me *as a photographer*. However, it *was* important to me as an activist.

One of the very positive consequences of this approach to my work is that when I am in "the field," my relationship to the people I am photographing is that of an activist, rather than that of a sympathetic artist. Questions about my right to pho-

tograph, and my relationship with my "subjects," are cast in a very special light. I am less of an outsider. This is a double-edged sword—my participant status often means that I must devote time to other activities, such as translating. I'm ambivalent about this because I want to "be a photographer," but even more I want to be an *activist/photographer*.

My images have been used in numerous publications of the movement, both in this country and abroad. Such use implies an acceptance on the part of the audience, the users (sometimes that means me), and the photographer (which always means me), that despite the insights of critical theory, photography continues to assert itself as a fairly transparent and direct representation of a world which really exists. Such use also demonstrates little concern with the image as an "autonomous" work of art. Decisions about the use of my images are made frequently in collaboration with editors, writers, and others, sometimes without any serious input from me as photogra-



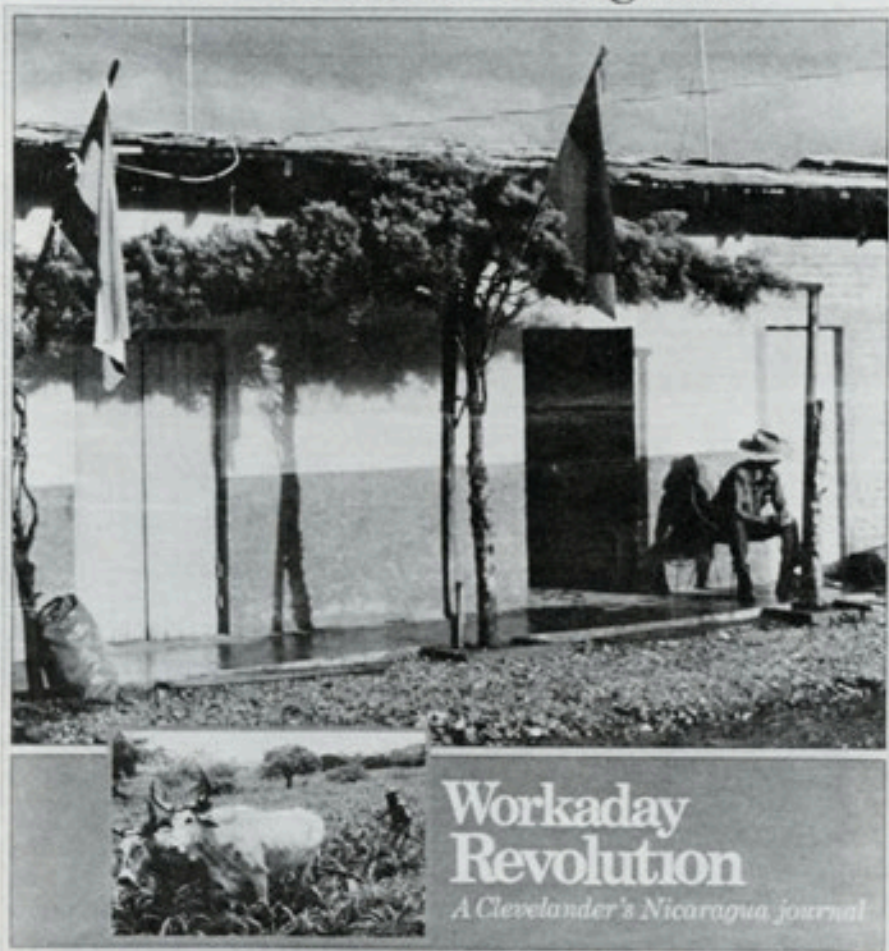
Steve Gagan, postcard of Esteli, Nicaragua, 1984.

pher (which is fine with me).

In other words, in the distribution or display of my work, explicitly political criteria play an important role in determining both what I will do and how I will do it. This does not mean, however, that I always work according to a group decision-making process. There are some forms of presentation over which I have more control. I give many slide talks in

schools, churches, and other places. I've already referred to a recent talk I have been giving about the refugee camp at Colomoncagua. This work closely integrates the photographic and organizing impulses which motivate me. The slide talk is the only form of practice that competes with my publication work, and in fact it has probably overtaken my publications. I have not thus far created audio tapes to ac-

The Plain Dealer Magazine



Steve Cagan, *Cleveland Plain Dealer Magazine*, 1984.

company slides, because I like to go myself into various environments, representing and speaking for different organizations. (For example, in the case of Colomoncagua, I work with a group called "Voices on the Border.") This allows me to shape my presentation according to the occasion and audience. Still, I am interested in the possibilities of producing and distributing slide/tape programs, and may soon create one about Colomoncagua.

Another form of alternate display for me has been the production of posters and postcards.

The first set of postcards I did was for the tourism office in the Nicaraguan town of Estelí. There exist very few postcards in that country, but they are a useful thing for Nicaraguans to have, both to give away and to sell, and postcards are especially appreciated by people who visit out of motives of solidarity. I was also asked by the Nicaraguan Ministry of Culture in the northern Atlantic coast area to produce a set of cards for that region. My postcards have been distributed by other Nicaraguan agencies, and sold in the United States as well to raise money for solidarity

DIARY OF
AN ENDLESS WAR

Return to Nicaragua

BY STEVE CAGAN

Steve Cagan first wrote about the fighting in Nicaragua for the magazine in July 1984. He returned to the war-torn country to report on the war in Nicaragua. He has been to the front lines in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and in the mountains of Guatemala. He has also written for the magazine about the situation in the mountains of Guatemala.

The first time I saw Steve Cagan was in the mountains of Nicaragua. He was sitting on the ground, looking at the camera. He was wearing a patterned shirt and a hat. He was smiling at the camera. He was looking at the camera. He was looking at the camera.



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Steve Cagan (left) and a woman (right) in Nicaragua. Cagan is sitting on the ground, looking at the camera. The woman is sitting next to him, looking towards the camera. They are in a rural setting with simple buildings in the background.



Steve Cagan, *Cleveland Plain Dealer Magazine*, 1986.

organizations. Most recently, I have been involved in the production of postcards for the campaign in support of the Salvadoran refugees.

I have also produced a display of photographs and text about the situation of Salvadoran refugees in the camp at Mesa Grande, Honduras. This display, called "How Sad My People Seem," was created for an international campaign to support the refugees' desire not to be relocated from the border zone into the interior of Honduras. The display is traditional in many respects. It was erected at a spring street fair in Cleveland, where it was used to encourage people to join in a postcard-writing campaign. When a slightly more developed version of this same display was shown in a political art show at the art gallery of SUNY-Binghamton, the postcards in support of the refugees were also put out for the gallery audience to sign.

Recently, I have had two articles printed in the Sunday magazine section of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. This work lies close to what is traditionally thought of as journalism. I want to emphasize that

here again I do not seriously challenge the notion that photography is a transparent, accurate medium for representing the world. I think the benefits of publishing articles that report positively on some of the developments of the Sandinista revolution and negatively about the crimes of the *contra*, and publishing these articles in a form which reaches half a million people, are so great that it is better for me to be direct and trusting about my words and images, so as not to make *them* the issue.

Finally I want to describe briefly a way of distributing images in which I recently (and unintentionally) engaged, and which remains unique in my personal experience. I have mentioned photographing a recent music festival in El Salvador. It took place in three major cities, all of which were under government control. Afterwards, it was important to these revolutionary artists and culture workers to be able to share their experiences with people in zones under the control of the FMLN. I found out several months later that the set of black-and-white contact sheets I had provided to the organizers had been

circulating in these zones. Later, when I visited, I discovered people who had seen them and described them (and through them, the events) with great enthusiasm. It was a great moment for me.



Serious political activity always involves a set of goals and criteria for success. These vary widely. Consequently, as I've already indicated, I think that there is not a single correct line or a single correct activity that Left or radical photography must take. How are we ever going to move serious numbers of people in this country, or support a spontaneous movement, if we restrict ourselves to a struggle against hegemonic ideas within the tiny, class-based world of art?

But even with a broader concept of practice, we still must contend with the problem of establishing reasonable goals and criteria for political work. Intentions alone are not sufficient, nor is clearly identifiable political content enough. We need to know what happens to content, what purpose it serves, and whether our intentions can be realized by the forms, methods, and arenas we choose for our work.

If we do work which is intended primarily for an art world audience, work which will be dis-

played in art galleries or published in art journals, and if we ignore issues of concern to that art world audience, then we are being irresponsible. On the other hand, if we are concerned most of all about having a political effect in the world, about building and supporting a popular movement, we may ask ourselves about the political efficacy of doing this work in galleries. And if, in our concern that the art world is too small or too restrictive, we turn our attention to a wider audience, but address that audience with only our art world concerns, we may only create further barriers to communication. It is a principle of radical educational theory as well as radical organizing theory that you have to address people about issues which are of interest to them, in terms which they can understand. This principle might also be applied to radical art and cultural work.

We must develop a deeper understanding of our political intentions. We must understand our own social positions, and the social positions taken by our work. Work within and for the art world will invoke a certain set of goals and criteria. Work within an activist movement will invoke a different set. We should try to understand, control, and expand the limitations and possibilities in whatever context we choose to work.

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Public Art at Work: Democracy Untested is Democracy Denied

Deborah Small, Elizabeth Sisco, Louis Hock, and David Avalos

Through our collaborative work as public artists, we have engaged the narrative of power which governs San Diego. We not only seek to make visible the network that creates this narrative of power, but also to make clear how civil rights in our city are subverted by corporate agendas and the tourist industry. We wish to participate in the definition of our city, and to encourage the presence of other voices and perspectives. In the pursuit of this aim, while working to create a genuine public space for our work, we have revealed the city's practice of limiting constitutional liberties, especially freedom of expression.

All of our projects raise questions relevant to the current debate surrounding public art, *de facto* racism, and censorship. Our work lays bare sensitive areas that the local interlocking power structure of government, industry, and press would prefer to ignore. This power structure attempts to delegitimize us as political actors, and therefore we must create new ways to control the meaning of our work and its presentation. The press frequently attempts to shift the focus of our work from politics to personality from societal racism to what some commentators see as our hypocrisy as middle-class critics of the power structure. To defy these attempts to trivialize our work, and to increase the public that our artwork serves, we have found it necessary to improvise constantly.

Our first public project was the bus poster, *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation* (1988), which addressed the role of undocumented workers in San Diego's tourist-based economy. We then created *Welcome to America's Finest a) City*

b) Tourist Plantation or c) Convention Center (1989), a billboard which addressed the city's relationship to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Our most recent project was the media campaign and street performance *Welcome Back Emma* (1989), an historical reenactment of the I.W.W.'s (Industrial Workers of the World) struggle against racism, and the fight for free speech in San Diego in 1912.

In September 1989, several San Diego artists organized a large group exhibition, *No Stomach*, to address the then-pending Helms amendment. We created the following essay for the show to articulate our opposition to censorship in the arts, including the censorship of the gallery which sponsored our billboard project.

Censorship and the San Diego Connection

Every time I hear the word culture I reach for my pistol.

—attributed to Hermann Goering

Jesse Helms and Company have their six-guns loaded, pointed, and ready to fire, and their bullets aren't blanks. Congressional recommendations to punish organizations that have funded and exhibited artwork by Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe are extraordinary acts of *ex post facto* censorship, but no more dramatic than what is happening in San Diego. The abuse of power by politi-

cians who restrict and control art that is controversial, provocative, and critical is already the status quo locally

In San Diego, politicians have what Helms can only dream of—final approval on funding to artists and art organizations. San Diego doesn't need six-guns, not with Mayor O'Connor and her eight City Council cohorts who approve or reject funding to protect the city's corporate agenda and tourist industry. In May, the San Diego Council's Public Service and Safety Committee (PSSC) "just said no" to a recommendation by the city's own Commission for Arts and Culture to fund San Diego's Installation Gallery. The PSSC withdrew \$42,000 in funding intended for Installation, hoping to punish the gallery for sponsoring a controversial work of public art, our billboard addressing San Diego's relationship to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Later, when the full council narrowly overturned the PSSC's decision and restored \$37,500 to Installation, the Council still restricted the use of those funds, thereby retaining control over the arts.

II *Politically, the crusade against the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] displaces scandal and charges of dishonesty from the attackers to those attacked.*
—Carole S. Vance, "The War on Culture," *Art in America* (Sept. 1989)

The Helms Amendment is not about censorship vs. freedom of speech. It is about adding to the level of censorship that now exists. Congressional attempts to limit artistic freedom of expression constrict participation in already narrowed debates. (Witness, for example, the absence of social critic Noam Chomsky from the editorial pages of major American newspapers, or the continued banishment of novelist Gore Vidal from network television twenty years after his on-the-air skirmish with William F. Buckley, Jr.) Our access to information will be even more limited in the near future. According to media analyst Ben Bagdikian, five to ten corporations will control production of most of the world's information, including newspapers, magazines, books, data bases, broadcast stations, movies, recordings, and video cassettes. The people who would

limit artistic freedom of expression in the name of decency, morality, and the American way are the same crew who support the corporate agenda of maximized profits. Helms finds "evil" in government funding for the arts, but "good" in government subsidies for the tobacco industry. Anyone who suggests otherwise—that what's good for corporate America is not necessarily good for the community—is automatically labelled disloyal and subversive.

We live in an era when it is far more respectable to restrict constitutional rights than to defend the liberties guaranteed by the Constitution. But pointing the finger exclusively at Helms suppresses inquiry into the social climate that makes the elimination of First Amendment rights possible. It absolves Helms' congressional partners of their complicity in undercutting freedom of expression, their responsibility for eroding democratic values, and their culpability for undermining institutions like the NEA. Freedom of expression is already diminished by the censorship implicit in corporate funding for the arts. Now the government, in lock-step with corporations, wants to tighten the noose of censorship by eliminating funding for dissenting voices.

The ease with which we focus on the point man for the conservative agenda can blind us to the need to look critically at the very institutions we are supporting against congressional attack. Museums and galleries are already in the business of censoring art. Demonization of Helms diverts attention from the fact that museums and galleries are not bastions of free expression. Museums still promote racial separation, social hierarchies, and cultural hegemony. The challenge to artists is not merely to defeat the Helms Amendment, but to restructure cultural gatekeeping institutions so they fully represent the diversity of our society.

III *I kept giving them credit for being our kind of people, but they're dictators! They're people who will try to hold power even if they have to poison the town to do it.*
—Dr. Stockmann in Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*

In San Diego, the narrowing of diversity at the national level is mirrored in the local trend to-



Elizabeth Sisco, Louis Hock, David Avalos, *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation*, 1988.

ward homogenization of thought. City promoters aim to further the entertainment model of discourse, viewing all issues through the twin lenses of public relations and consumerist marketing strategies. City officials rationalize existing social, economic, and political relationships by constantly referring to San Diego as "America's Finest City," a rhetorical mantra that sanctifies the status quo. Thus art that is critical of San Diego, according to city officials, subverts America's Finest City. The city council wants to promote civic pride and consensus through fabricated postcard images of San Diego rather than through extended discussion about pressing local issues.

As public artists, our work seeks to preserve and expand constitutional liberties in general and freedom of expression in particular; in addition, we aim through our work to expose the local power structure that subverts these rights in favor of corporations and the tourist industry. We insist on participating in the definition of our city rather than accepting the fantasy image conjured for marketing. As part of our commitment to the real issues San Diego confronts, both as a major border region and as a growing metropolis, we have created a series of public artworks. These artworks have had broad repercussions, including censorship by the city.

1987 was a pivotal year in San Diego. The city began construction on the West Coast's largest convention center. It also won the bid to host the following year's Superbowl, to be held on January 31, 1988. On January 4, 1988, our poster with the greeting "Welcome to America's Finest Tourist

Plantation" appeared on the back of half the buses operated by San Diego Transit.

This appropriation of the city's self-aggrandizing slogan was superimposed on a triptych of photographs. The central image was of a Border Patrol agent handcuffing two Mexican men arrested on a San Diego Transit bus. To the left and to the right of this image were photographs of the hands of a dishwasher and a chambermaid, representing the undocumented and invisible workers of the tourist industry.

The image was unavoidable. Clearly intended to provoke controversy and media scrutiny, the poster was delivered to people's homes via television, and radio, and the daily newspaper. San Diego's self-promotion apparatus exploded with criticism and the news media jumped, fueling the controversy and activating the artwork.

The poster served as a catalyst for public debate. Our intention was to focus this debate on the racism implicit in building a tourist economy by exploiting an undocumented labor force. However, in San Diego, the city hotel-motel tax is used to fund works of art; the fact that our work was in part sponsored through this tax created the loudest protests from the warden's of San Diego's official image. "I have trouble using taxpayers' dollars to put down this beautiful city of San Diego," said Councilwoman Gloria McColl.

The city's repressive apparatus was mobilized through a series of behind-the-scenes and public actions designed to censor our examination of the underpinnings of the local economy.



Newspaper coverage of *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation*, 1988.

1) Pressure by the mayor's office on the Metropolitan Transit Development Board (MTDB) to remove the poster

2) Calls from San Diego Channels 8 and 39—broadcast over each station—demanding that the MTDB remove the poster.

3) Reassurances from the city council that, through the establishment of a Commission for Arts and Culture, city money would never again be allocated for such artworks.

4) Revision of MTDB policies to allow the rejection of any images critical of any law enforcement agencies.

5) Investigation by the California Legislative Council, at the request of State Assemblyperson Larry Stirling (R-San Diego), to determine whether public funds could be used to support opinions critical of the city (No illegality found.)

In April 1989, with a \$100 budget from Installation Gallery in San Diego and billboard space

donated by Gannett Outdoor Advertising, we created *Welcome to America's Finest a) City b) Tourist Plantation c) Convention Center*. The project addressed the city's inability to find a fitting tribute for the Rev Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. City officials proposed that the new convention center be named after King, but later changed their minds when their Port Commissioners voted against it. In this effort to avoid controversy, city officials clearly demonstrated whose voices matter—certainly not those of the African-American community or those who want the city to acknowledge its diversity.

In our effort to contribute to this public debate, we experienced yet another attempt by the city to stifle controversy, and we were threatened with corporate censorship. Declaring that the billboard was not art, Gannett tried to get Installation Gallery to remove the artwork. Two months later, city officials voted to defund Installation. When City Council member Ron Roberts was asked by *The San*

The San Diego Union

A Daily Newspaper
Thursday, January 1, 1988



The work of local artists on display on several transit buses from San Diego officials against the controversial artwork.

Bus art takes a controversial route

By Steve Schmitt, staff writer
The group's artistic statements for transit advertising violate regulations established by the Federal Transit Administration. The San Diego Transit Authority has been placed with a choice: either shut down "Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation" or face a \$100,000 fine.

The horizontal poster shows what is supposed to be an unaccompanied worker sitting in a wheelchair, another man working on a wheel, and two people being handcuffed to a U.S. Border Patrol agent.

"I don't think it's a good idea," said Ted Barone, president of the San Diego Street Artist Association. "It's prejudicial to our city image and it's not in our best interest."

Newspaper coverage of *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation*, 1988.

Diego Union if Installation's money was cut because of budgetary problems or because of his opposition to the billboard, Roberts replied, "I guess I would have to admit to both. I'll be stupid enough to do that." In the debate surrounding the denial of funds to Installation, Roberts stated, "The First Amendment says that there should be free speech... It doesn't mean that the City Council has to be paying for that."

Although part of the funds slated for Installation were eventually provided to the gallery, the fallout from this project has blanketed the art community with worry over future funding and self-censorship. Asked by the *Village Voice* if he would work with us on a billboard project in the future, Hugh Davies, director of the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, stated that if "[they] don't get anyone to pick up their next billboard, it'll be because we're all cowed by the prospect of censorship."

IV
The lords of the global village have their own political agenda. All resist economic changes that do not support their own financial interests. Together they exert a homogenizing power over ideas, cultures, and commerce that affects populations larger than any in history.

—Ben Bagdikian, "The Lords of the Global Village," *The Nation* (June 12, 1989)

We see ourselves as participants in a democracy, not as an audience in a San Diegoland version of our city. We feel that a multiplicity of voices and perspectives are basic to the health of any democracy. But instead of a dialogue contributing to the planning of upcoming San Diego events, we hear the single voice of Mayor Maureen O'Connor. In keeping with the trend toward cultural engineering,



Deborah Small, Elizabeth Sisco, Louis Hock, David Avalos, view of *Welcome to America's Finest a) city b) tourist plantation c) Convention Center*, 1989.

the Mayor has taken it upon herself to become lord of the city's cultural village.

For the San Diego Arts Festival, local politicians have gone beyond censorship. Censorship restricts the right of expression. In San Diego, the arts community has not been restricted, but eliminated. The Mayor, as corporate raider, has appointed herself the board of directors, the museum administrator, and the curatorial staff for the entire upcoming Festival, which will celebrate the "Treasures of the Soviet Union." She did not seek approval for the Festival from the City Commission on Arts and Culture. She used the machinery of her office to establish a separate corporate entity, San Diego Festivals, Inc., and convinced the city to give this corporation \$3 million of taxpayer money, and gained a commitment from the city to raise a matching amount from local corporations. O'Connor also appointed all festival executives, who report to her. She has extended this bureaucratic purview by incorporating the staffs of all cultural institutions that will participate in the Festival. And finally, she has assumed dictatorial authority in decisions about which events will or will not be a part of the Festival. She has formed her own San

Diego Ministry of Culture to centralize and control the content and character of a festival that should involve full community participation.

V *In the year of a Soviet arts festival, it's particularly ironic and depressing that a form of censorship we associate with totalitarian regimes should be visited on a San Diego institution [Installation] that has pioneered free speech in our community.*

—Hugh Davies, "America's finest censors or just plain budget cut?"

The San Diego Union (June 5, 1989)

Some politicians want us to believe that because they are able to appropriate funding for the arts, they should be able to appropriate the rights of artists. We must resist the sophisticated organizational tactics of those who would impose a conservative agenda. In San Diego we must take concerted actions to eliminate the abuse and censorship that exists within the local process of public funding for the arts. The City Council of San Diego must get out of the censorship business, and must trust their own

Commission on the Arts and Culture to establish a fair and equitable process of review which avoids politicization. The Commission should evaluate the problems created by Mayor O'Connor's San Diego Festivals, Inc., and individual politicians must be discouraged from forming their own cultural apparatuses. Finally, the arts community must define its rightful place in the creation of San Diego's cultural identity. Democracy untested is democracy denied.



In keeping with our commitment to participate in San Diego's cultural identity, we applied for and received a 1989 Inter-Arts NEA grant to create a series of works addressing San Diego's historic struggles for freedom of expression. In the first of these works, the full-page advertisement for a street performance was censored by San Diego's largest newspaper, *The San Diego Union*. It subsequently ran in a local weekly paper, with a new headline declaring: "THE AD *THE SAN DIEGO UNION* DOESN'T WANT YOU TO SEE." The performance went on as planned, drawing 200 people out into the

streets of downtown San Diego to commemorate the 1912 Free Speech movement. In the fall of 1990, our group will address the relationship in San Diego between migrant labor and urban development.

Shortly after the ad was censored, Elizabeth Sisco, a member of the collaboration, resigned from an NEA Visual Arts Organizations panel review, claiming that the peer review process had been subverted by internal censorship of so-called controversial grant applications. In an effort to expand community awareness about current NEA practices and to foster a climate hospitable to dialogue and debate, we recently organized a forum in San Diego to discuss censorship issues. (This forum included Philip Brookman, curator for the Washington Project for the Arts, the gallery that sponsored the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition after the Corcoran's cancellation.)

To continue to participate in the community's cultural identity, we, like people in all communities, must develop strategies to address the censorship of ideas, the stifling of diversity, and endemic racism.

Essay-review

by Jan Zita Grover



Krzysztof Wodiczko, Projection on the Balboa Park Museum of Man, San Diego, California, 1988.

The Photography of Invention: American Pictures of the 1980s

Essay by Joshua P. Smith

Introduction by Merry A. Foresta

Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989

HB, \$39.95

editors are active shapers of the canon, whose differing aims and assumptions determine what will seem central and what peripheral!

Artists bucking for tenure or dependent on the marketplace are caught between a rock and a hard place. Acquiring recognition and making sales often depend upon a not-too-close scrutiny of what uses curators and dealers and critics make of one's work;

it's difficult to refuse showing because the curator is a jerk or the critic has it all wrong. The end—tenure, a name, sales, a place in history, whatever—is used to justify the means. It's a tradeoff for which no artist I know, save those with private incomes and/or tenure, has found a satisfactory solution.

I bring this up because I have in front of me a 2.5 lb., hardbound, full-color catalogue that proposes itself as "The photography of invention. American pictures of the 1980s." The catalogue includes most of the photographs that appeared in the National Museum of American Art/Smithsonian Institution show (28 April–10 September 1989), which I didn't see. What we're offered here is one photograph per photographer, title, medium, dimensions, source of the photograph, photographer's birthdate, place, and current residence.

My 20 year-old daughter asked me about that. "Why do they only give you the birthplace and residence of all the photographers?" she asked.

Why indeed? The most obvious answer is that this is a catalogue organized around the principles of collecting. According to Joshua P. Smith, the collector who wrote the introduction, the criteria for *choosing* work were

- "photographers and other artists who use photography extensively"
- "[photographers] who did not receive curatorial or critical attention before the eighties"
- "[photographers] who did their first (or very different) nontraditional work in the eighties."

The criteria for *ignoring* work were

- "similar earlier photography, however significant"
- "work by artists for whom photography is not a major activity"
- "works that literally incorporate other media: photographs whose surfaces are marked with other materials such as paint or ink; photographs combined with other forms in one piece or as part of an installation; and photosculptures."

If this system of inclusions and exclusions leaves you wondering what else (if anything) the photographs inscribed by these conditions share, here is Smith's answer: "A useful approach to the pictures in this exhibition is to see them as made, not taken." Got it?

A more ahistoric basis for selection would be difficult to imagine. It excludes manipulative work from the past simply because it was produced before 1980; earlier work by the same photographers because they produced it before 1980; other work by the exhibited photographers if it "incorporate[d] other media"; work by anyone, including the exhibited photographers, produced before their photography became "a major activity." In other words, the work shown in *The Photography of Invention* is presented as *sui generis*, as sourceless. This is the sort of shallow marketplace value—*it's completely new!*—that moves prints among uninformed people, but it is not a connoisseurial value, which savors the lineage of art, and it is not a curatorial value, which draws connections between present and past works and their makers. It is above all not a critical value, which seeks, in the words of Jane Tompkins, "the notion of texts as doing work, expressing and shaping the social context that produced them."

Tompkins, who was discussing American literature when she wrote this, went on to say that she "wish[ed] to substitute" this idea of texts as doing work "for the critical perspective that sees them as attempts to achieve a timeless, universal ideal of truth and formal coherence."²

Foresta and Smith pump for a formal coherence among these photographs based on the "made" versus "taken" thesis. They propose these photographs as a radical departure from photography's history. And because they have radically excised the photographs *from* history, they encounter no internal contradictions to their argument. But in telling us that the exhibited photographers "often are unaware of or deny the medium's own history," that the "artists violated the limitations imposed by critics and historians [who are] invested in categories and a formal approach to the medium," that "They make photographs that are *nontraditional* in size, style, appearance, and presentation," that their artists are "Freed from *traditional constraints*,"³ they continually raise

the spectre of history-as-straw-man. *Whose* history, if not collectors', curators', historians'? *What* limitations are or can be imposed by these people? *In what sense* are these photographs nontraditional "in size, style, appearance, and presentation?" Freed from *whose* "traditional constraints"?

Neither Foresta nor Smith grasps the fact that simply because they repudiate history or reduce it to a straw man, it doesn't cease to exist or to be less determining of their own thinking. Each of the photographers in their show has a history and has produced photographs outside their procrustean curatorial limits. Each of the breaks-with-history that they celebrate—ignorance of photography's past, huge size, fabrication for purposes of being photographed—has extensive historic precedent. It is only by ignoring these, by celebrating their own ahistoricism, that Foresta and Smith can begin to make their inflated claims for this work. A dead giveaway to this kind of ungrounded thinking is their use of that locution, the agentless process, in which abstractions rather than people do things: "The *medium's* ability to produce direct images satisfied *modernity's* desire to confront the present."⁴

So where does this leave the artists in the show? In very odd company, most of them. Krzysztof Wodiczko, for example, is characterized as an artist using "nontraditional supports"—in his case, "even real environmental displays." Wodiczko is represented here by a photograph of his projection on the Museum of Man in Balboa Park (San Diego).

In that projection, the demanding, "feed-me" gesture of the white (Euro-American) world contrasts with the shackled, food-bearing gesture of the colored (colonial) world, played out on the *faux* Spanish colonial facade of the museum. In *The Photography of Invention*, Wodiczko's work is represented as being *about* making photographs on "nontraditional supports." At least a dozen other artists who have written or spoken widely about the commitment of their work to a variety of causes are reduced here to an exploration of purely formal issues.

In return for an unremarkable—and certainly reductive—curatorial premise, the artists in this exhibit received credit on their c.v., the very real—and not to be underestimated—chance to have a wide audience see their work, and a four-color illustration in a *luxé* catalogue. What they did not receive was a serious consideration of their work "as doing work" in the world, except insofar as it provides opportunities for collectors to carve up their output. A Solomon's choice, and one that did not serve these artists well.

Endnotes

- 1 Jane P. Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: the Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 188.
- 2 *Op. cit.*, p. 200.
- 3 *Emphasis mine.*
- 4 *Emphasis mine.*

Essay-review

by Mary Warner Marien

Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth



FSA Photography Reconsidered

James Curtis

Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered

by James Curtis

Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989

HB, \$29.95

Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950

by Maren Stange

New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989

HB, \$34.50

A decade ago, *Mind's Eye Mind's Truth* could have been an important book. In conjunction with the theoretical questions posed by writers like Allan Sekula, John Tagg, Wendy Kozol, Sally Stein, Andrea Fisher and Maren Stange, James Curtis's evidence that the realism portrayed in Farm Security Administration photographs "was deliberate, calculated, and highly stylized" would have been more illuminating.

But today, the documentary premise that once equated seeing and knowing is in tatters. Moreover, the propagandistic uses of FSA photographs

has become a scholarly commonplace. Even the solemn and weighty photography sesquicentennial catalogs mentioned it—without so much as an apologetic hiccup. For the popular press, like *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U. S. News & World Report*, the 150th birthday of photography was an occasion to unmask the frequent duplicitousness of documentary. In the special issue that chronicled "150 Years of Photojournalism" (Fall 1989), *Time* magazine's writers acknowledged the "autocratic hand of Roy Stryker," director of the FSA historical unit. Further, the issue's epilogue cautioned "it is possible to be entranced by photography and at the same time disquieted by its powerful capacity to bypass thought."

At the outset, then, Curtis's assertion that there is "academic praise for the FSA collection as a repository of revealed truth", or an unsullied understanding of FSA work as objective reporting in the culture at large, must be questioned. Just as Marcel Duchamp drew some facial hair on the *Mona Lisa*, critics have put a moustache on the *Migrant Mother*—and a great many of her relatives.

Yet the battle fatigue of Curtis's thesis is not its most fundamental flaw. In the book's four essays, on Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, and Russell Lee, and in its introductory chapter, Curtis's commentary tends to move haphazardly between the private and the political. Unmoored by a theory that might relate the two, his observations fluctuate unpredictably.

For example, in the chapter on Dorothea Lange, which narrates the production of images leading up to the *Migrant Mother*, Curtis contends that "the power of Lange's work came directly from her own personal values and from her heartfelt need to communicate with her contemporaries in terms they would understand" (p. 47). To his credit, he does discuss the social iconography of the *Migrant Mother*, now familiar from Wendy Kozol's "Madonnas of the Field: Photography, Gender and the 1930s Farm Relief."¹ But he continually returns to elements of Lange's biography to amplify the work, as if the photograph were a more or less simple example of self-expression.

The concluding paragraph, devoted to Florence Thompson, the woman who was the *Migrant Mother*, typifies the mood swings of the chap-

ter. It is guardedly sentimental in the manner of a PBS documentary. In the end, Curtis's emphasis on the personal occludes the political aspects of the picture.

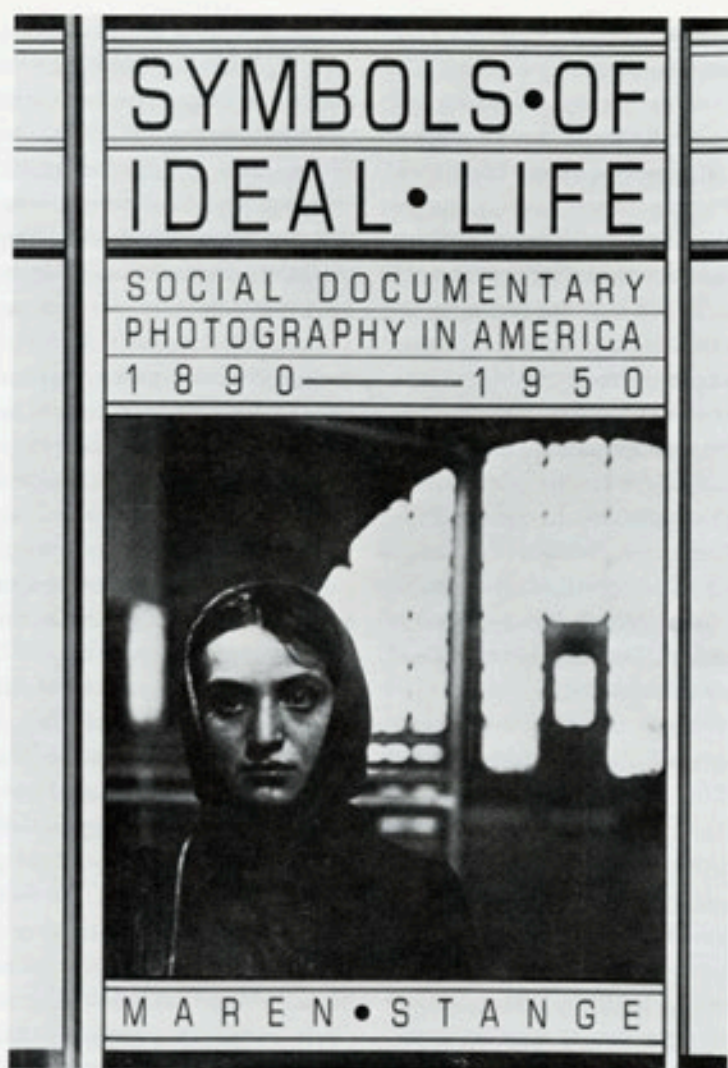
The chapters on Walker Evans and Arthur Rothstein, though filled with intriguing anecdotes, have been upstaged by a decade of books, articles, and doctoral dissertations on the FSA. Ironically, neither they, nor the section on the *Migrant Mother* prepare one for the sharp political analysis offered in the concluding chapter on Russell Lee and his photographs of Pie Town, New Mexico. Here the personal and the political are interrogated and interrelated, yielding a powerful scenario.

Curtis wisely does not accept Lee's recollection that his Pie Town pictures were the result of a chance assignment. Instead, he examines the visual and textual evidence to prove that this series "was the culmination of more than four years of FSA focus on American community life" (p. 94).

In Pie Town, both Roy Stryker and Russell Lee believed that they had located an environment that combined rugged individualism and community cooperation—the symbolic tonic needed during the Great Depression. After the limited success of the Hightstown, New Jersey cooperative community and the Greenbelt new towns, both New Deal projects, Stryker needed an emblem of communalism so unquestionably American that it was beyond red-baiting. Pie Town fit the bill.

Further, small-town life worked as an intellectual counterweight, a nagging exception, to sociological critiques like that presented in Robert and Helen Lynd's influential study, *Middletown* (1929). Where *Middletown* recorded the decline of traditional values in the wake of urbanization, the small town implicitly argued for their persistence. After a meeting with Robert Lynd in 1936, during which Lynd mused about the American small town as a bastion of American values, Stryker returned to Washington and worked out a shooting script for his photographers that centered on family, church, home, self-sufficiency, and frontier enterprise.

To accord with Stryker's shooting script, Lee selected his subjects judiciously, taking care, for instance, to eliminate the many vestiges of Native American culture in Pie Town. Log homes were



featured, even though they had mostly served as temporary dwellings and were now either abandoned or used as out-buildings. Relatedly, Lee did not give much attention to the new homes that Pie Town's initial settlers built to replace the log buildings. Eventually Lee's pictures of church suppers, community sings, and square dances were published in an abbreviated version by *U.S. Camera* (October 1941), the largest collection of a single FSA photographer to be published in a major print outlet.

Curtis's chapter on Russell Lee achieves many of the goals Maren Stange professes in *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950*. Stange's purview is wider, of course, extending from the social reform photo-

graphs of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, through the FSA, to the prologue of "The Family of Man" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955. Like Curtis in his writing on Russell Lee, Stange refuses to stress individuality and invention. Far more than Curtis, she attempts to sketch the systems of production, dissemination, and use that create photographic meaning.

Stange sets Jacob Riis's work in the context of the pre-existent visual imagery of how the other half lived. She shows that Magic Lantern exhibitions like Riis's had previously been used for amusement, instruction, profit, or a mixture of the three. Moreover, Riis's photographs of saloons, police precincts, flophouses, and the like echo both iconographic pat-

terns and ideological connotations available in the popular press. Riis was recapitulating current ideas when he explained that "the beauty of looking into these places without actually being present there is that the excursionist is spared the vulgar sounds and odious scents and repulsive exhibitions attendant upon such a personal examination." Far from being unique, this justification was shared by a great many writers and illustrators as well as by the police, settlement workers, and social reformers. As Stange concludes, there is a close practical and ideological relationship between description and surveillance.

Stange's work on Lewis Hine and the Pittsburgh Survey is principally a review of American reform movement developments during the early part of this century. The newest methods of scientific inquiry and fact-gathering were allied to progressive humanist endeavors. Where Jacob Riis appealed to the heart (and the hankie), later reformers phrased their mission in more rational terms.

Hine's "human documents" were sometimes circumscribed or even contradicted by the text of other writers working on the Pittsburgh Survey. To Stange, the resultant tension and irresolution of meaning have an important function. Inexplicitness avoids the triteness and voyeurism of work like that of Jacob Riis. She argues that in effect the Pittsburgh Survey managed to deconstruct and critique the prior dominant documentary tradition. The Survey showed subjects-in-progress, not permanent victims. That may well be so. But any picture editor who has struggled in vain to match text and image for a publication could offer a more mundane explanation for the variance of caption, text, and photograph than Stange offers. Her assertion begs additional supporting research.

Clearly, Stange values Lewis Hine and his work. She applauds his "masterful and controlled camera practice [which] presented a concatenation of social and human meaning" (p. 86). While Stange cites "Hine's belief in the authority of exact information about people" as inevitably "fragile," Hine, unlike Riis, is never judged complicit in the manufacture of the social engineering mentality that eventually came to characterize the charities (p. 86). Her critique only goes so far as to observe that The Survey yoked Hine's admirable documentary style to an

antithetical social practice.

Likely enough, the differences between Curtis and Stange are most apparent when Stange tackles the analysis of FSA photography. Because of her wider range and coherent methodology, she can interpret New Deal photography in the context of social changes and documentary modes that exist outside the focus of Curtis's study. Stange traces Roy Stryker's values to those of his mentor Rexford Tugwell, Resettlement Administrator director, and through Tugwell to the progressive philosophy of John Dewey. Where Curtis is anxious to show that individual photographs were staged and manipulated by FSA photographers, Stange sets out to demonstrate how the conventions of the documentary style were employed to legitimize corporate capitalism.

The last chapter of *Symbols of Ideal Life* delineates the museumization of documentary photography in America. In the 1942 "Road to Victory" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Edward Steichen, director of the photography department, revived Jacob Riis's blend of photography and entertainment. The relabelling of photographs and other decontextualizing strategies that Steichen proudly practiced in "Road" formed the practical and philosophical foundation for the 1955 "The Family of Man" show.

It is tempting to see these books as antagonistic. With the exception of his work on Russell Lee, Curtis's writing extends the humanist values that have drenched FSA photography for fifty years. The definition of the mind's truth that he pursued extends to, but not far beyond, the mind's eye. Having revealed that many FSA photos were not taken spontaneously, but were "deliberate, calculated, and highly stylized," he frequently falls back on tacit assumptions he might have critiqued. When, in the course of his chapter on the making of the *Migrant Mother*, he gets to that "one final picture," the faucets really open:

A beautiful metamorphosis occurred in the next few moments. Migrant Mother surrendered herself to Lange's expert direction, striking a pose that would burn itself into the memory of American culture. (p. 65).

Curtis's work rests on the notion, popularized by John Szarkowski in *The Photographer's Eye* (1966), that the medium, poor at narrative, moves beyond pure description to find its principal and defining strength in symbol-making. For Szarkowski, the real and the true are not synonymous in photography. At root, the integrity of the photograph rests on the integrity of the photographer, not as the collector of little verities, but as the creator of important symbols.

By contrast, Stange sees the photographer as just one component in the making of photographic truth. She follows out the network of institutions and ideas, as well as personalities, responsible for the photograph. She argues that documentary has been "a central mode of communication," assisting "the liberal corporate state to manage not only our politics, but also our esthetics and our art" (p. xv).

But does looking closely at the production of pictures necessarily exclude looking broadly at their production? In the last decade, exposing the socio-political values encoded in photographs has been instrumental in uprooting unexamined humanist assumptions, like the transparency of photographs, and in exposing the role these assumption play in the wider culture.

At the same time, however the macro-view has resulted in an inadvertent and subtle devaluation of initial archival research. While it would be cavalier to suggest that the world does not need one more book on Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, or the FSA photog-

raphers, it is important to remember how much photography is unconfigured, unknown, or both. Most photographic history slumbers outside the usual museum collections of masterworks.

A rough parallel from art history might be instructive. Even those whose admiration for Leonardo DaVinci is unbounded grudgingly admit the socio-political importance of the lesser lights, like Bernardino Luini and the host of epigones who feasted on DaVinci's reputation for decades.

As Allan Sekula pointed out over a decade ago, revealing the myth of documentary is a prerequisite for reinventing the genre. The dismantling of documentary is not an end in itself, but a "preliminary detour"² In the 1980s, critics examined how documentary's DaVincis came to prominence in the academy, the museum, and in the culture. Building on that work, the fundamental challenge for photographic studies in the 1990s continues to require that the field advance from the deconstructive analysis of masterworks to a multivalent political/cultural analysis of epigonic and anonymous photography

Endnotes

- 1 Wendy Kozol, "Madonnas of the Field: Photography, Gender and the 1930s Farm Relief," *Genders* 2 (July 1988), pp. 1-23.
- 2 Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)" in Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain. Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), pp. 53-75.

Opportunities Abound: Inquire Within

Jeff Gates

Recent events surrounding censorship in the arts have highlighted the suspicion and marginalization that accompany artists in this culture. That artists are finding themselves in a defensive position today should not be surprising. Our society has long valued the art product rather than the process of being an artist. No simple solutions are forthcoming, in part, because the issues are deeply rooted in our culture's social, political, and economic fabric. Even within the art community there are various lines of thought and competing ideologies.

It is important to understand that this art community is not a homogeneous group of people, but rather a stratified conglomeration of entrenched institutions, burgeoning non-profits, and individual artists, both conservative and liberal, all with their own agendas. The museums, for example, are concerned that high price tags and present tax laws have forced them out of the art market. Non-profits, while not directly affected by the market, have become more vulnerable to its effects because of increased dependence on the private sector as government aid is reduced. Some artists are concerned that a narrow vision of what sells plus our culture's limited idea of what constitutes art and art practice have severely restricted their support. In the past all of these groups have looked to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to counter these effects.

The Right has made art funding a moral issue. Like flag burning, homosexuality, and abortion, they would like the public to believe there is only one way to look at the work of artists like Robert Mapplethorpe and Andreas Serrano. The cultural contexts in which their work was made is never discussed. Many, like Congressman Richard Arney (R-Texas) and *New Criterion* editor Hilton Kramer, claim that eliminating NEA funding for art it consid-

ers "obscene" and art that is not deemed to have "serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value" is not censorship as no one is limiting an artist's right to make art, just to what the government will fund. Arney has stated: "This is not a matter of censorship, it is a matter of judgment, of values. In a way I'm asking the NEA to live by the same standards that I set for my daughter. He who pays the bill, sets the standards. My daughter wanted to go to college. I told her you'll go to a school I approve of and major in an area I approve of. I didn't want her to major in art or history or literature or anything else that would leave her unemployed."¹ Arney assumes we all share his values.

As we enter a new decade, the importance and strength of photographic images to affect as well as to incite is becoming clearer. Yet many questions remain for us to consider. What values are important to us as a society? Does the government have the right to enforce those beliefs? And, if so, to what degree? Should the government support cultural diversity or make value judgments? How are we as a society going to deal with the cultural texts and implications of the images we are making and using? And what are we, as photographers, going to do with this power to create something that appears to be a direct reflection of reality, yet is full of nuances and layers of meaning?

The English cultural critic Raymond Williams has stated: "The true crisis in cultural theory, in our own time, is between the view of the work of art as object and the alternative view of art as practice."² Specific to our positions as teachers, what is our responsibility to our students—are we cultural as well as technical and aesthetic educators? If so, how can we effectively deal with these ideas? While Congressman Arney's desire to see his daughter gain-

fully employed is understandable, why is art practice so undervalued in our society? Why is the art community under attack at this time? What are the real agendas here? And why are we on the defensive? Most importantly, what are we going to do about it?

Jesse Helms' attack has accelerated the reevaluation of art practice begun by the clash between Modernism and Post Modernism. By galvanizing the arts community, Helms is providing us with an opportunity to work for an expansion of art practice into other communities we are part of. This goes beyond the present fight over censorship and free speech. As artists and teachers we have the chance to counter the present notions that good art represents only beauty and successful art is only art that sells by developing programs and practices that seek to widen these definitions to include questioning, controversy, audience, and dialogue.

In a recent editorial in *The Washington Post*, Jonathan Yardley questioned why a "struggling young artist [should] be entitled to a government subsidy when the struggling young mechanic or accountant is not."³ We must be prepared to answer questions like this. It is important to establish a link between the creative process artists understand and its value to a mechanic, an accountant, or anyone else. By going beyond the traditional art viewing audience, we can present our images and practices as ways to empower ourselves, our students, and the communities we inhabit. This is the time to build coalitions within those communities for what we think and do has much greater value than what society chooses to hang over its sofa or sell at auction.

Helms, Arney, et al. are not interested in a vibrant multi-layered culture and its implications. Rather, they would like to eliminate the Endowment and all government support of culture. Put simply, knowledge is power and this is a struggle for that power. Now that the Cold War is winding down, these reactionaries must resuscitate the spectre of the enemy within. This attack on the arts is a convenient cover for not dealing with the real issues we face, such as poverty, drugs, the environment, the homeless, AIDS, and issues of race and gender.

As artists, we must be willing to expand the parameters of art practice by broadening our societal

base of support and by building alliances with people who can use our expertise. The attempt to control artists by discrediting them has happened before. If we miss this opportunity, what we do and what we think will remain suspect. History will continue to repeat itself, and, like Sisyphus, we will be doomed to forever rolling that rock uphill, only for it to roll back over us.



In November of last year, the National Board of SPE sent a letter to John Frohnmayer, Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, supporting the NEA and the peer panel review process. After polling the membership and through discussions held during the censorship panel, the plenary session, and the Board meeting at the National Conference in Santa Fe, the Board sent letters supporting the Endowment to members of the Senate Subcommittee on Education, Arts and Humanities, the House Subcommittee on Post Secondary Education and to those NEA Review Commission members already appointed. At this point, full congressional hearings on the Endowment's reauthorization are taking place. It is vitally important to let your Representative and Senators know your views on this subject.

In March of 1990 The National Campaign For Freedom Of Expression was formed as a lobbying organization to strenuously and politically fight for artists' rights to freedom of expression. Their first effort will be to insure that reauthorization of the NEA is without restrictions. They will also be working to increase legislative backing by helping to elect Congressional supporters and defeat opponents. The Campaign is interested in promoting the political empowerment of artists and is in the process of hiring a political organizer and strategist who will direct and collaborate with many of the coalitions, organizations, and individuals who are fighting censorship issues. For more information they may be reached at P.O. Box 502245, F Street Station, Washington, D.C. 20004, (202) 393-ARTS.

SPE is working with the National Association of Artists' Organizations (NAAO) to keep you informed on issues concerning the NEA and censor-

ship. In addition, the National Board has enacted an advocacy policy in order to effectively deal with important social and political issues which directly affect us as photographers, educators, and artists. It is printed below in full.

As Chair of the Advocacy Committee, welcome your input and suggestions on issues pertaining to SPE's involvement in advocacy issues. Please send correspondence to me at 1440 E. Baltimore Street, #2E, Baltimore, MD 21231 1404.

Endnotes

1 Mary Battiata, "NEA Porn Ruckus," *The Washington Post* (September 12, 1985), pp. C1-C6.

2 As quoted by William Olander, "Material World," *Art In America* (January 1989), p. 127

3 Jonathan Yardley, "The NEA Debate, Derailed by Drama," *The Washington Post* (April 9, 1990), p. C2.

This is an expanded version of Gates' opening remarks for the panel "The State and the Arts. Funding Censorship, and Artistic Freedom in the 1990s," presented at the 1990 SPE National Conference, Santa Fe NM

Advocacy Policy

I When determined by the membership and the National Board (as indicated below), the Society of Photographic Education will advocate certain positions on national issues pertaining to photography, education, and art.

II The National Board will set up a standing Advocacy Committee (AC) for the determination of issues of advocacy

A. This committee will consist of two National Board Members (one of which is the AC chair) and three people from the general membership.

1) The members of the AC will serve for one year

III The AC will periodically poll the membership on which issues of advocacy SPE should be involved in. The membership is also encouraged to make suggestions directly to the AC Chair

A. From this input the AC will develop a general membership questionnaire/ballot which will be used to determine issues of advocacy

B. The *SPE Newsletter* will be used to distribute the questionnaire.

C. The *SPE Newsletter* will also be used to report the AC's findings to the membership.

IV When membership has been polled and specific issues identified, the National Board can speak for the membership and take action.

A. Of the ballots returned by a determined

deadline, a 60% majority in favor of advocating for a particular issue is required for the National Board to take action.

V At certain times, and with certain issues, immediate action by the National Board will be necessary in lieu of polling the membership.

A. In order for the National Board to take action and speak for the membership, without a membership vote, a majority of the National Board (9 votes) must vote to take action.

1) National Board members can give a proxy to other Board members when they will be incommunicado for a short period of time.

VI Methods of Action

A. Long term

1) After a vote of the membership, the AC recommends specific action to the Executive Committee which will report to (but not have to get approval from) the National Board.

B. Short term

1) The AC will recommend specific action to the Board Members (as stated above). After approval of the Board the vote results will be reported to the Executive Committee prior to taking action.

C. After action is taken a report will be sent to the National Board, Caucus Representatives, and Regional Chairs.

Contributors

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Jan Zita Grover is a critic and historian living in Oakland, CA. She is a recipient of the 1990 College Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather Award for distinguished art criticism.

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Deborah Small, Elizabeth Sisco, Louis Hock, and David Avalos are a collaborative group of public artists living in San Diego.

Back Issues

Listed below are the issues that are still available. Some of these (in particular, the earlier issues) are in very short supply; the more recent issues may be obtained in quantity for classroom or other uses. Back issues are \$3.00 unless otherwise noted.

- 27:2** Kaplan on Hine's Photo Stories, Kester on Documentary in the Great Society Era
- 27:1** Meiselas on Appropriation and Documentary Photographs, Wilson on The *Los Angeles Times* Series, Stein on Appropriation, Colorization and Feminization
- 26:4** Johnston on Steichen's Commercial Photography, Underhill on NEA Fellowships, *Special Report* on Faculty Hiring, Grover on Photographers and PWAs
- 26:2/3** DeGenevieve and Bright on Teaching Theory, Hornsby on Photography in Secondary Education, Matthews on Barbara P. Norfleet, *Special Report* Survey of Women and Persons of Color in Post-Secondary Photographic Education
- 26:1** Biesele on Anthropological Photography, Chris on Witkin's Others, Rule on Julia Margaret Cameron, Campbell on Surrealist Photography
- 25:4** Seigel on Synthetic Color, Maddow on PhotoBiography, Blakeney on Archetypes, Stokes on Representation
- 25:3** Sites from the National Register of Historic Places
- 25:2** Jacobs on Adams and Lange, Stein on FSA Medical Photography

- Index** 1980-86, Volumes 18-24
- 25:1** Pomeroy on photo genefication, Smallemburg on celestial photography, Lord on Nocturnal Emulsions, exposure index
- 24:4** Rosenblum on Women in Photography; Miller on Itinerant Photography
- 24:3** Special Issue on British Alternative Photography
- 24:2** Sweetman on Clark; Ruskin; Lesbian Representation
- 24:1** Stott on Evans, Cook on Frank, Stark: MFA Bibliography
- 23:4** Bright on Landscape, Ong interview, Aiken on Dinesen
- 23:3** Lord on Arbus, Arnheim interview, Bolton on Berger
- 23:2** Milanowski on Color, editorials, Weegee
- 22:4** Cook on graduate reviews, Andre on dialectical criticism
- 22:2** What You Staring At? Feminism and Photography
- 21:4** NEW HISTORIES
- 21:2** Samore, Photography and Industrialization, lantern slides, Postmodernism, flash photography
- 20:4** Sex as Subject, John Kouwenhoven
- 20:3** Color Stability, Jacob Riis, John Pfahl, MFA Survey
- 20:2** John G. Morris Memoir, Van Deren Coke Interview
- 19:4** Pencil of Nature II, Imo's Photographers, Bibliography
- 19:3** WOMEN IN PHOTOGRAPHY Lacy, Clarke, Bibliography, Portfolio
- 19:2** Black Stereotypes: Wright Morris, Bravo, Reflections Portfolio
- 19:1** Varnadoe, Joe Jachna, John Divola, Marked Landscapes Portfolio
- 18:2** R. Adams, Greeting Cards, West Coast 50s, Steichen
- 18:1** Brumfield, Schlereth, Searle, Estabook
- 17:4** Snapshots, Advertising, Polaroid, Walter Benjamin
- 17:2** Shorr, Siegel, Heinecken, H.H. Smith
- 17:1** B. Davidson, Rosler on Audience, Bonfils
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