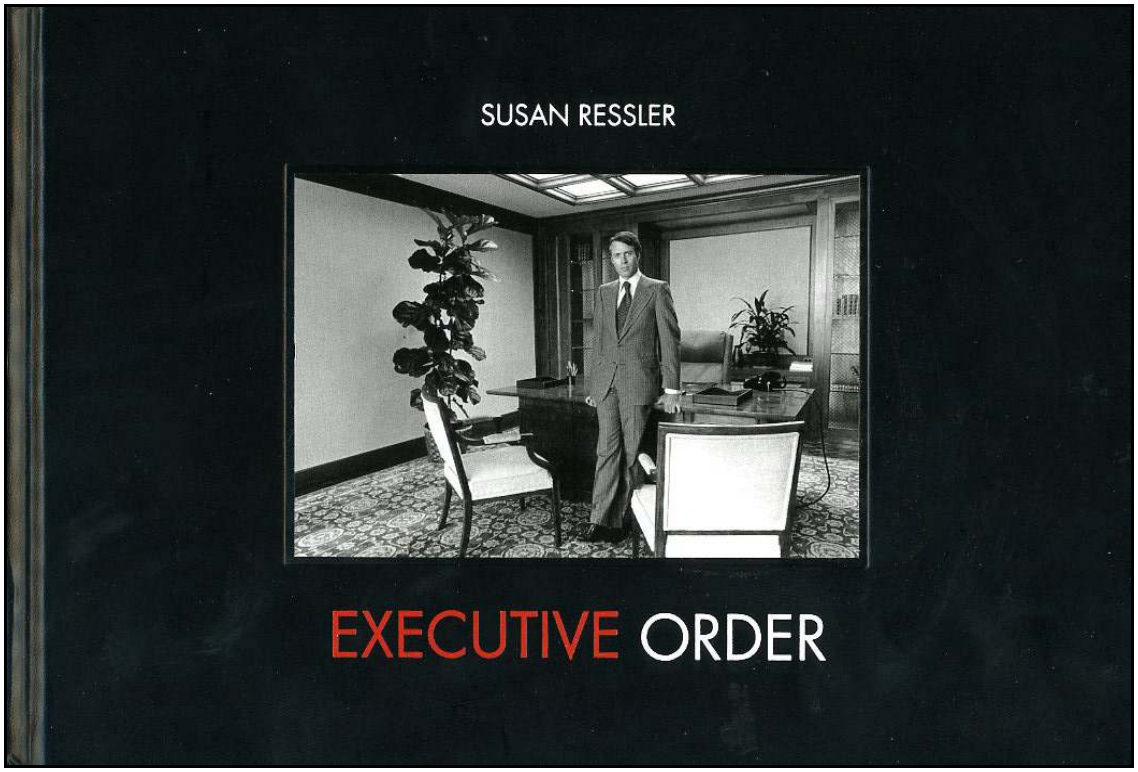
Review of Susan Ressler's
photobook:
Executive Order: Images of 1970s Corporate America (Daylight Books, 2018)

by
James R. Hugunin



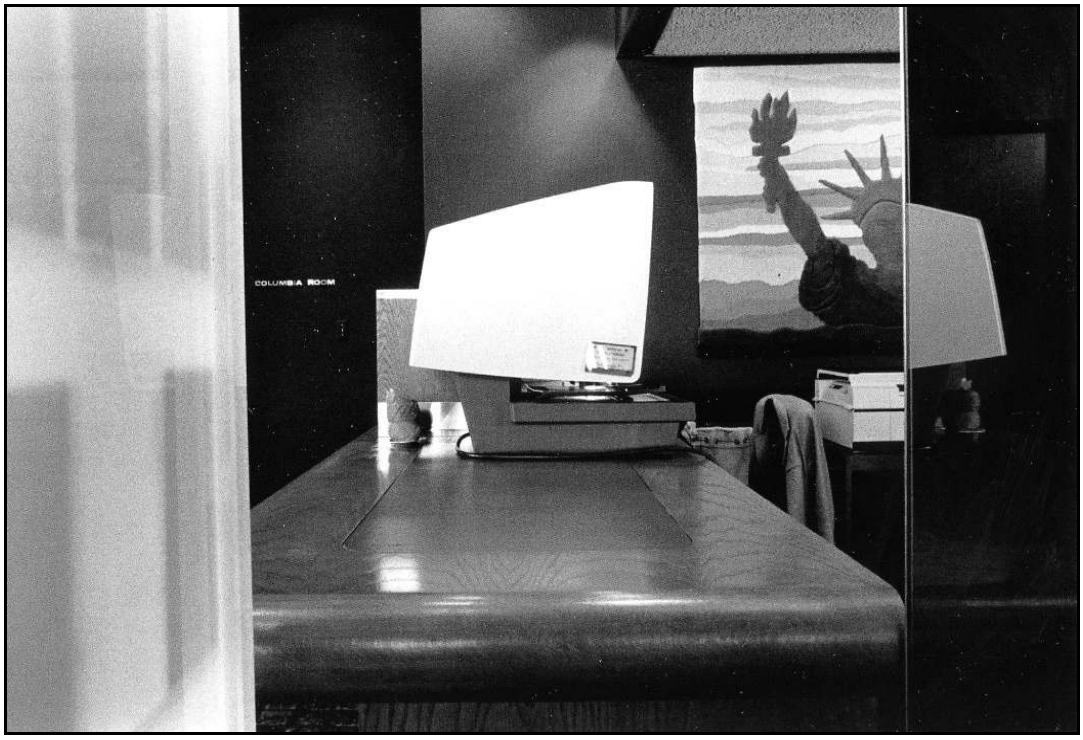
In 1977 I entered a bank to make a transaction.
What I withdrew was a photograph.
— Susan Ressler

After Andy Warhol, Marshall McLuhan, the advent of post-modernism, surface was no longer superficial — face value had value. The surface signified, because people existed in, and as, images to themselves and to each other.
— "Cindy Sherman," in *The Complete Madam Realism and Other Stories*, Lynne Tillman

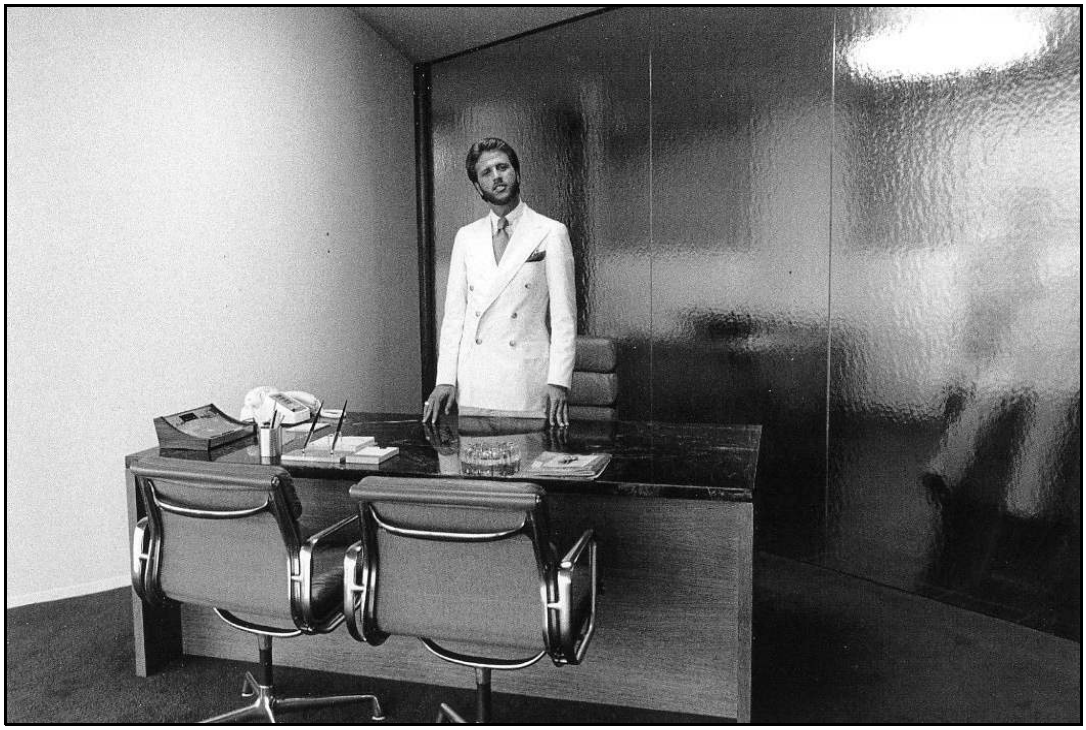
By the 1990s Los Angeles, "The Nowhere City" (the title of Alison Lurie's 1965 novel) that has continued building and rebuilding, was being used by theorists as the exemplum of postmodernity. A city with an array of multiple and confusing centers, Lurie early on wrote: "Los Angeles obviously expressed everything towards which our civilization was now tending As one went to Europe to see the living past, so one must visit southern California to observe the future" (Lurie, 8).

Deindustrialization and reindustrialization were restructuring cities across the country. Geographer Edward Soja in *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (1989) argued L.A. was "a particularly vivid context from which to explore postmodern urbanization in virtually all its dimensions." L.A. was seen as a burgeoning urban stage upon which various postmodern-era architects — John Portman, Frank Gehry, Arata Isozaki, Thom Mayne, and Eric Owen Moss — could make their debut by taking advantage of this complexity to push their formal inventiveness to new heights, replacing modernism's logical forms, regularity, and simplicity with warped and excessive, "violated" formal elements, creating an extremely complex postmodern hyperspace. Populist architect Robert Venturi could laud Las Vegas as model for a vernacular postmodern architecture, which was sited particularly comfortably in Los Angeles. No wonder director Ridley Scott set his 1982 futuristic dystopian film, *Blade Runner* in L.A., with its humanoid simulacra (replicants) strolling the streets alongside a multicultural gaggle of ethnicities, talking in "City-speak": gutter talk, a mishmash of Japanese, Spanish, and German.

Southern California's Disneyland, with its recreation of the past, and projection of a supposed future, was examined by theorists such as Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard as a symptom of our times. Walt's nostalgic dream was reviewed as an attempt to re-enforce, a clear cut distinction between reality and imagination at a time



Columbia Savings and Loan



White Blazer

when such dualities were actually imploding. In his description of Disneyland in *Travels in HyperReality*, Eco also saw that behind the facade lurks a sales pitch: "The Main Street facades are presented to us as toy houses and invite us to enter them, but their interior is always a disguised supermarket, where you buy obsessively, believing that you are still playing." Put these ideas together and you have a succinct characterization of the age, which is forever offering us something that seems better than real in order to sell us it to us. For Baudrillard, this attempt at a distinction between the real and the imaginary in Disneyland was nothing but a desperate attempt to hide the fact that there is no difference. The same holds for another feature of the times, "Reality TV" shows, which are just another attempt to bring back "the real" even as it fades into pure simulation, the distinction between original and copy imploding.

Fredric Jameson, in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), examined from a Marxist perspective the emergence of postmodernist culture closely related to the emergence of the new era of late, consumer or multinational capitalism, theorizing that its formal features in many ways expressed the deeper logic of that particular social system which featured increasing income gaps, social fragmentation, and racial/cultural segregation. As Jameson writes in his 1991 book: "The post-modernisms have in fact been fascinated precisely by this whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader's Digest* culture, of advertising and motels, of the *Late Show* and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called para-literature with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery and science fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simply 'quote'; as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance." As these theorists envisioned during the 1980s and 1990s, we all now exist within the hyperreal as our society becomes increasingly 'Disneyfied' and globalized.

Today, in the era of Web 2.0 characterized by an all-pervasive social media, and now the menace of Donald Trump, this "Disneyfication/Reality TV" syndrome has thoroughly penetrated the political scene. Trump's denunciation of "fake news" (an attack culled from the Left — Adorno, Horkheimer, Althusser, Jameson, Debord — and rejigged to trump the mainstream media's simulacra with his own faked-fake old/news), is a dizzying *mise-en-abyme* of political (mis)representations confusing large segments of the electorate at a time when a small minority of the mega-wealthy and their global corporations seek total control of our society to their benefit, while convincing many voters the current powers-that-be seek just the opposite.

During the Bicentennial era (1979 -80), ironically the time President Jimmy Carter gave his “Crisis of Confidence” speech addressing the malaise of self-indulgence and consumption plaguing the country, and later, by 1981, when the Reagan era would see the richest-of-the-rich profit at the expense of the underclass, there were several NEA sponsored photographic surveys of a protean Los Angeles. Today these portfolios reside in the Smithsonian’s American Art Museum.

Photographer Susan Ressler’s contribution to one of these projects, The Los Angeles Documentary Project, was her formally elegant series “The Capital Group Porfolio”. Eschewing the downtrodden-as-subject and traditional documentary style (as still practiced by Chauncey Hare in his photobook *Interior America*), she turned her camera on the powerful, capturing in carefully staged performances (the stress on the profilmic event that photo critic A.D. Coleman would dub “the directorial mode”) the artifice of corporate interiors and their inhabitants, which “no matter how tasteful,” were “ultimately hollow” (Ressler). At this time, when the Southwest and West (the Sun Belt) expansion was shifting economic hegemony from the Northeast, the rejection of documentary emotionalism and the move to cool, restrained depictions of the “man-altered” environment, as broached in the significant photography exhibition *New Topographics* (1975), was becoming all-pervasive. But N.T. photographers like Nicholas Nixon and Lewis Baltz, and Robert Adams, and Joe Deal restricted themselves to building exteriors. Ressler’s approach to corporate interiors, which she viewed as microcosms of society’s gender, class, and racial divisions, showed that influence, but with a difference. So did Lynne Cohen’s photographs of interiors at that time, but they were devoid of people and were shot with a large format camera — Ressler’s were accomplished with a 35mm. Clues as to where the images were made can be gleaned from details in the shots or, as in Ressler’s current photobook, in the titles on the opposing page.


Interior, Lynn Cohen

In 2005, Mark Rice (a professor of American Studies) broached the L.A.-as-quintessentially-postmodern theme while critically engaging Ressler’s (as one writer for *The New Economist* recently put it) “playfully rebellious” images as featured in that survey, in his chapter “Bringing It All Together, The Four Surveys of Greater L.A.” In his astute examination of NEA sponsored social photography in

his first book *Through the Lens of the City: NEA Photography Surveys of the 1970s* (Jackson, MS: The University Press of Mississippi, 2005), Rice cited Ressler's comments in *Camera* (February 1981) that "Los Angeles seemed poised on the future," and that her conviction was that L.A. "would embody the sleek, modern look" that she wanted to photograph. He went on to make excellent formal analyses of her compositions, while observing: "Ressler's attraction to the city was complicated. She didn't ardently embrace the future that L.A. implied, nor did she condemn it outright. Instead, she adopted an ironic stance that coolly examined the intersection of technology, design, power, and wealth" (Rice, 170).

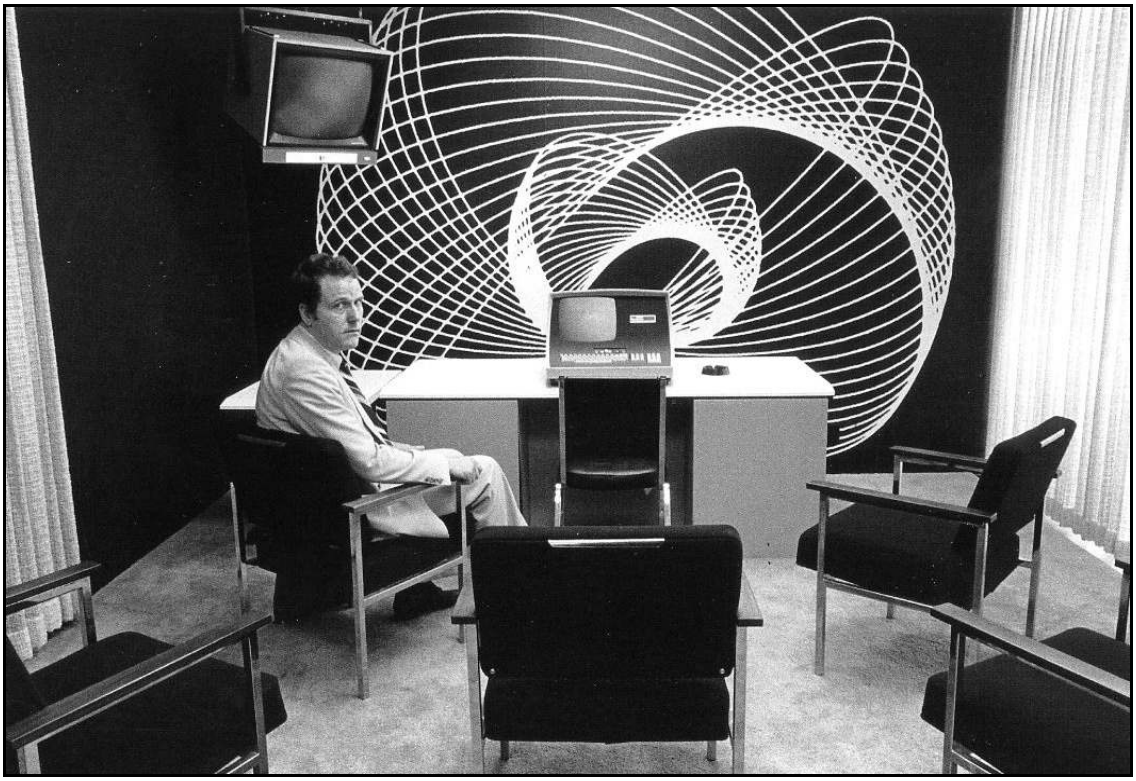
Thirteen years later, Rice once more engages Ressler's images in his essay "Executive Disorder" in the final pages of Susan Ressler's photobook *Executive Order* (Daylight Community Arts Foundation, 2018), which reprises the photographer's work from that earlier survey. In both the 2005 discussion and his current writing, Rice shows a keen eye for Ressler's superb compositions, her ability to use the actual interior space in an imaginative re-construction in optical space as a poetic device commenting on social reality.

Given the dominance of powerful corporations and the marked social and economic inequality today, this book's aesthetic recoding of the nerve centers of global capitalism comes at, as Rice puts it, "an opportune time." He again engages with the historical and social context, with the changes American has gone through since the original NEA project. He notes David Frum's examination of the 1970s in *How We Got Here* (2000) and works his way to the Trump era and Frum's cover story seven years later in *The Atlantic* (March 2017), "How to Build an Autocracy," which assesses the current dire political situation. He goes on to mention key texts engaging the era of Ressler's project: Judith Stein's *Pivotal Decade*, subtitled *How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* and Jefferson Cowie's *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class.* Titles that provide an excellent background to situate Ressler's "signifiers of the new American economy" (Rice), which were made at a "pivotal point" in the postindustrial shift of the American economy and in the photographic community, then grappling with "questions of aesthetics and epistemologies" (Rice) as postmodernism began to supplant modernism.

Focusing on her images, Rice's elucidation of Ressler's efforts engages the photographer's choice to shoot interiors with and without people. He says the former "allows us to recognize that real human activity (in all its messy details) goes on in these sites," while the latter allows us "to focus on the hollowness of the heart of

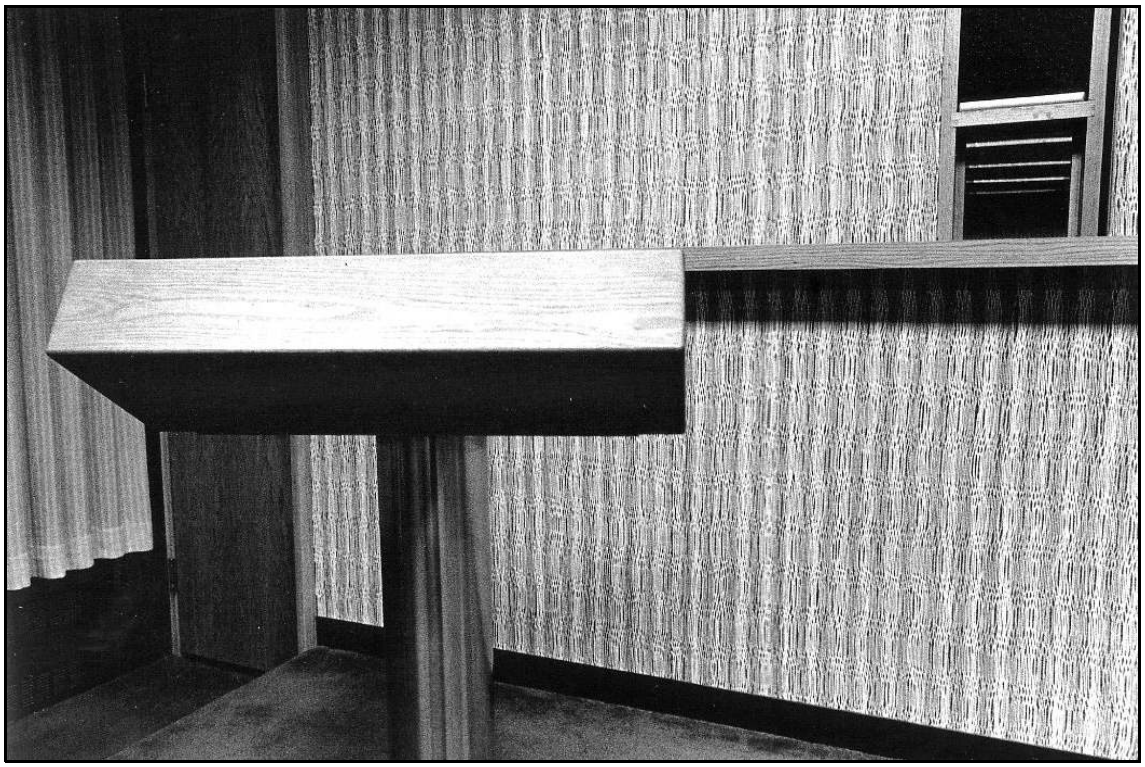
corporate America." I would add that the shots featuring women recall to mind Cindy Shermanesque black-and-white film stills; I can easily imagine Sherman staging shots of herself looking much like the women seen in Ressler's photos because what Sherman does is present herself costumed as a "function," not unlike Vladimir Propp's understanding of 'function' as adumbrated in his structuralist analysis of folk tales. In Ressler's images the people are presented as functional parts of a larger system, not subjective characters as one would find in traditional portraiture. These images with people were shot prior to the artist coming on to the NEA project; the interiors alone were done under the auspices of the project. In *Executive Order*, Ressler uses the interior images with people to frame those without people. Ressler says, "It's a sequence like a Bell curve, and by putting the L.A. Doc NEA series in the center, it's my hope it will change how one perceives the people in the photos sequenced before and after," that is, we see them more as having functions than characters.

As for those corporate employees, Rice comments on the air-conditioned, sterile architecture of corporate America within they work. Such structures isolate people from the outside world, sucking them into a simulated reality in which the real effects of economic decisions vanish and democracy is temporarily replaced by corporate



System Development Corporation (SDC) (from the Los Angeles Documentary Project)

hierarchy and discipline. They become functionaries. Recorded just on the cusp of the digital revolution, those interiors feature only a few computers. One instance is *System Development Corporation,* in which an early desktop, dead center, marginalizing the man working it, an afterthought next to space-age technology. Ressler uses geometry (squares, rectangles, ellipses) to figure a "rationality" and "calculatability" that edges out the human. Thereafter this technology will become ubiquitous and some people we see in Ressler's images will probably be replaced by these machines. Thereafter, due to the speed of technological development with its increasing reach toward global capitalism, one can date a photograph or film fairly accurately by the type of computer seen. Conversely, prominent in Ressler's images are ashtrays, items that have now largely vanished from the work environment.



Podium

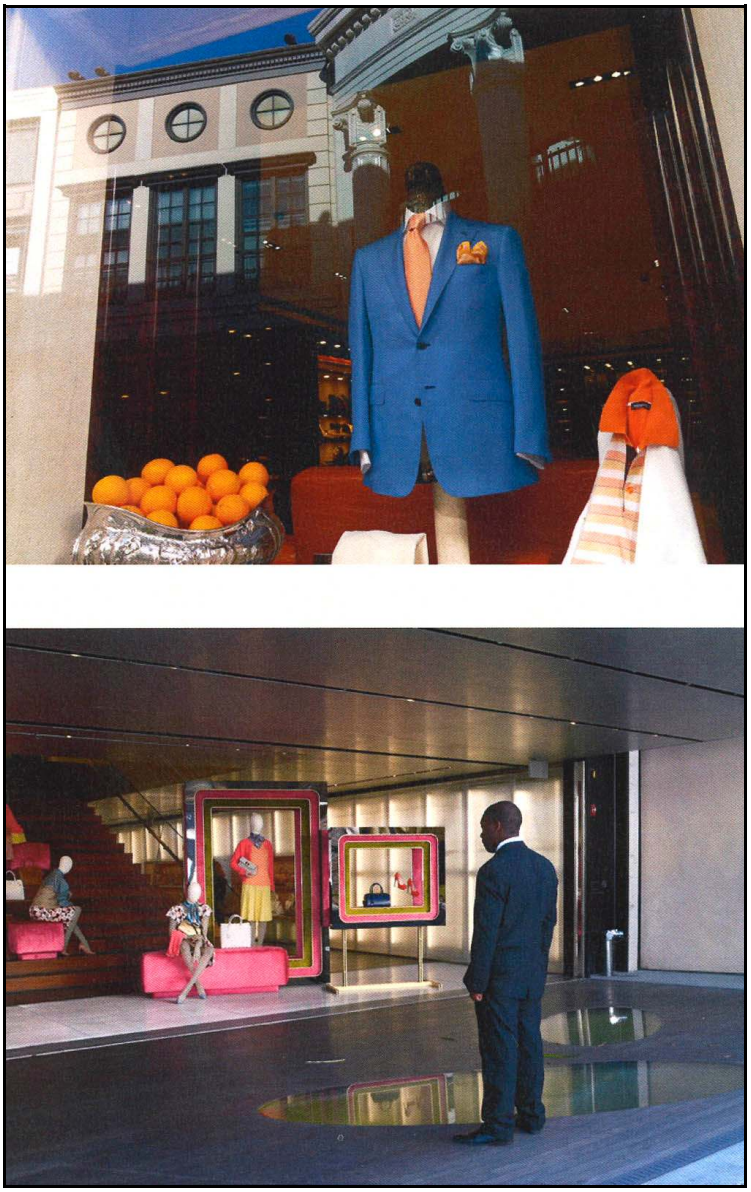
In *Podium*, formal geometry collapses actual three-dimensional space into a flat optical space, such that the ledge on the back wall appears continued along the horizontal plane of the podium. The dark shadows beneath each structure create voids

Geometry and figure, film still from *Alphaville* (1965)

that play on the voiding of meaning in this image of a space that is used to proclaim meaning. The bizarre wallpaper reads like some kind of EKG read-out turned vertically. Overall, the image gives off a chilling, dystopic feeling; like a conference room set designed for the 1965 film *Alphaville* or the 1971 film *THX1138*.

Olympia

Olympia (a Shermanesque film-still), named after the typewriter brand the secretary (a functionary) uses behind her sterile corporate desk, alludes to the site that functioned as the ancient Greek sanctuary of the gods. Perfect Platonic forms (various rectangles) populate the composition, incarnated as desk, hole-puncher, typewriter, stacks of paper, and what looks like an ashtray on the left. Corporate CEOs *are* the new gods, global capitalism the new mythology. The abstract painting behind the woman (meant to connect high culture to corporate culture) figures as both “X marks the spot” (where it’s at) and an “X-ing-out” (obliteration of history?).



Two photographs from Ressler's "High End" series

Rice's essay does an excellent job in presenting the importance of Ressler's work both from a formal point of view (the Szarkowskian proverbial "intelligent eye" of the photographer who creates "a picture") and its continuing relevance as social commentary. He even asks an interesting question: "So what has become of these markers of 1970s economy *[the actual corporate entities]* that Ressler preserved so meticulously for us in *Executive Order*?" He lists the economic fates suffered by several corporations as they moved from boom to bust in an unstable post-911 economy, which left in its wake abandoned work spaces, what architect Rem Koolhaas aptly termed "Junk-Space". He ends his discussion by asking how our global economic system is being imaged today, noting that our work culture hasn't gotten any more humanistic, nor less greedy, referring us to collaborative artists Paolo Woods and Gabriele Galimberti's book *The Heavens* (2015) which documents tax havens around the globe,. Not mentioned is *Volatile Smile* (2014), a photobook by Chicagoans Beate Geissler and Oliver Sann featuring photos of the blank severity of computer stations in Chicago's futures exchanges devoid of human operators. Four superb essays in the book elucidate these images within the context of the impact of this technology on the systems of global commerce (see review by Chicago critic Janina Ciezadlo).

Interior, from *Volatile Smile* (2014) by Geissler and Sann

Rice goes on to mention that Ressler continued her probing into the global economy, but in digital color, recording L.A. street scenes in her series “High End” (2011 - 12) which I engaged in my own essay on that body of work, “ ‘High End’: Susan Ressler’s Photographs from L.A.” I ended with the comment: “ ‘High End’ offers us a tragi-comic visual tour through a cross-section of a quintessential post-industrial urbanscape that is intriguing enough as an allegory of our fractured, code-infested times to resurrect (during the so-called Zombie Apocalypse) a data-hungry Walter Benjamin. Can’t you just see him? — muttering in German, staggering, eyes-glazed, notebook and pen in hand — coming your way?”

Executive Order is available through the artist, Susan Ressler (susanresslerphoto.com), as well as Daylight Books and other sources.

— The End —