

**LEWIS KOCH:
TOTEMS AND OTHER PHOTO-
ASSEMBLAGE**



by
James R. Hugunin

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U-Turn Monograph Series
Santa Fe, NM
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Front cover / *Broken Oval (for R.L.)*, 1989 (80" x 72", 10 prints)
an early and rare abstract work among the assemblages, dedicated to fellow artist Richard Long

Title page / *Totem Pole*, 1986 (110" x 19", 7 prints)
Koch's first totem assemblage, the irony of environmental wholeness vs. disjuncture

Back cover / *osaycanyousee* exhibition keepsake, 2008 (7.5" x 5", offset printing)
printed assemblage designed by Koch, with double-page spread, including
Glyptotek, Copenhagen, 1986; WTC site, NYC, 2001; post-9/11, NYC, 2001



"Into the Heart of Darkness and Light: A Dream Sequence," Lincoln Galleries, Northern State College, Aberdeen, SD, 1986, partial installation view, Lewis Koch. One of several photo-assemblages in which Koch frames his work within the Surrealist concept of "dreaming."



From "Into the Heart of Darkness and Light: A Dream Sequence," (unpublished book pages 12-13), Lewis Koch, 1986.



Photographic assemblages installation, Ehlers Caudill Gallery, Chicago, 1992 (left to right): *Slender Thread Totem* (7 prints, 106 x 19 in., 1991) and *Dream Portal: The Manifestations* (13 prints, 100 x 106 in., 1992), Lewis Koch.



Transatlantic Dreamcycle (via Eurovision) (16 prints, 103 x 146 in., 1991), Lewis Koch, in "Confessions of an Animist", a one-person exhibition at Museet for Fotokunst, Odense, Denmark. In such arrays, the photographs become less and less their own subject and a new model suspended between the real and the surreal with a multiplicity of free associations.

... the fragment [is] not simply ... the static part of some once-whole thing but as itself something in motion. It is my understanding of physics that atoms behave in certain predictable, rational ways, but when they are shattered, their pieces go off in all directions to perform spectacular acts of creation and destruction. It is precisely this volatility, this unpredictability, these reverberations that I see in the fragment and in its effects in history. ... It is the fragment and the fragmentary state that are the enduring and normative conditions; conversely, it is the whole that is ephemeral, and the state of wholeness that is transitory.

— William Tronzo, "Introduction" to *The Fragment: An Incomplete History*



Totem of Unmeasurable Memory (7 gelatin silver prints, 106 x 19 in.), 1995, Lewis Koch.



Amnesoid (9 gelatin silver prints, 77 x 58 in., 1994), Lewis Koch.

A: It's like looking at a body in pieces. Deterritorializing the flows of the dominant imperialist discourse of . . .

B: Yes. Human body and social body. War tears apart flesh and societies. People and cities in ruins. The fragments of places and artifacts inside the images and the images as fragments of some larger whole that we, the viewers, have to fit into our own interpretation. Moreover, these images have appeared in other contexts in Koch's work; he recycles these fragments, uses them like words that can be assembled along both the horizontal chain (syntagmatic) of association and along the vertical chain (paradigmatic) of metaphoric substitution. Stand back here and look at his installation. . . . Notice both the horizontal and vertical emphasis throughout the gallery space.

A: True! It recalls John Baldessari's bare bones use of horizontal /vertical substitution in his various works, like his accordion artist book, Fable, but Koch pulls apart the images and text and places them in suggestive and unstable relationships. . . . Unlimited semiosis, the play of the signifier, . . . our immersion in a forest of signs. . . . The way Koch has arrayed the images across the wall, well, I can't help but think of a picture magazine layout in which all the text has been erased so that one must now re-imagine new text to surround them, generate one's own reading.

— *An Uncanny Apparition: A Dialogue*, from a review of *osaycanyousee* (2008) by James R. Hugunin



Installation view, 2008: Wright Museum of Art, Beloit, WI (archival inkjet prints and gelatin silver prints, the vertical *Tangled Web Totem*, 1994 is center right), Lewis Koch. Our lived reality, as suggested here, is incomplete, unbounded, revealing the indeterminability within the available immediacies surrounding us.



A Sentence in 13 Parts (with 12 alternative verbs) Ending in FABLE (accordion artist book, 1977), John Baldessari. This work defines the logical space of structuralism with its use of semiotic rectangles/Klein groups..

Since 1985, photographer Lewis Koch (b. 1949) has been exploring themes of political and personal mythology in a variety of innovative forms and contexts. To do so he uses large-scale photographic assemblages that create temporal and spatial collapses and disorientations that allow for shifts in the logic of progression and conclusion. In some of these assemblages, Koch's prints, which derive from his "ritualistic prowling," are arranged in vertical configurations he calls "totems." Koch's sequences are non-linear. The typical photo-sequence is meant to be read from left-to-right, either as picture magazine photojournalism with its dogmatic conclusions as seen in *Life*, or as "poetic," as in subjective photographer Minor White's modernist photo-sequences, concerning which he's commented: "To engage a sequence, we keep in mind the photographs on either side of the one in our eye"), or as seen in Duane Michals's photo-narrative fables. What contemporary theory understands as incompatible methods — one materialist, the other idealist — Koch synthesizes in aesthetic terms. In so doing, he clarifies what is "totemic" (i.e., emblematic) of our contemporary social fears and political malaise through a keen eye for our surroundings and an astute sense of formal and conceptual linkages.

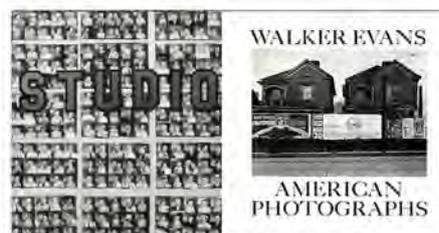
Koch's postmodernist-inflected assemblages use word-as-image and images-as-word, yet unfold as fill-in-the-blank sequences, rather than as journalistic stories or visual poems. His groupings of images explore our social codes — as did Roland Barthes in his seminal analysis *Mythologies* — but do so visually rather than theoretically. They are suggestive of system, but a system one must *think out*. Koch's assemblages linking disparate images are linguistic operations in which *position* becomes a signifier. Addressed is the human urge to subjugate nature, rampant militarism, and the tenuousness of our current social fabric. Evocative and invective "*detournements*" (hacks) of our cultural signs, our socially-constructed reality, these assemblages have been realized as wall installations, sequenced photobooks, and "Totems," three of which were published in 1993 by Nexus Press, Atlanta, as vertical accordion-fold artist books.

Koch's work bears comparison with other significant artistic production, especially as not a few of Koch's images pay respect to earlier photographers. *Photo Studio Store Front, San Francisco, California, USA* (1998) is an obvious homage with a twist to *Photographer's Window Display, Birmingham, Alabama, USA* (1936), an image in Walker Evans's classic photobook, *American Photographs* (1938). Whereas Evans's image presents a perfect grid with the word STUDIO clearly rendered across it, Koch's grid of studio portraits (also a found assemblage) is in disarray, the text fragmented, peeling off. Evans's subject has become a ruin.

Evans and Koch level a critical eye at commercial America during times of national distress. Both offer a new view of the American vernacular through minute particulars of the world. Koch readily acknowledges his debt, but Evans composes his subjects quite formally with a view camera, often frontally, while Koch's wields his hand-held camera in a freer fashion, like Robert Frank did in *The Americans* (1959). Evans's subject was the changing face of American society in his day, Koch's reach is global, referring to what Jason W. Moore calls "the Capitalocene," the spread of American late-capitalism's popular culture and



Minor White sequencing his photographs. Michelle Dunn Marsh has noted "White's definition of sequence involved his belief that the balanced merging of words and images formed a unique third medium."



Photographer's Window Display, Birmingham, Alabama and Billboards and Frame Houses, Georgia (covers, *American Photographs*, 1936), Walker Evans.



Photo Studio Storefront San Francisco, California (1998), Lewis Koch.



Thai Restaurant, New York, New York (1990), Lewis Koch. One of the images used in *False Profit Totem* (1994), it later appeared in *Touchless Automatic Wonder* (2009).

destructiveness across the world. This is suggested in *Thai Restaurant, New York, New York, USA* (1990), where such disparate symbols as the Buddha and U.S. currency are shoved up against each other. An underlying aspect of Koch's images are persistent hints that capitalism not only objectifies people, but also humiliates objects.

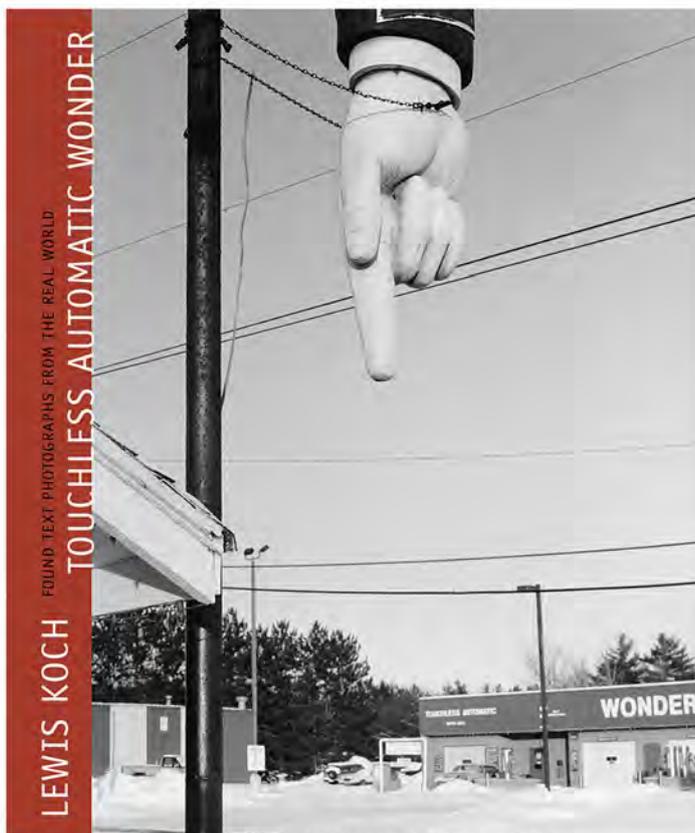
Working with visual fragments, the *ruins / runes* of our postmodern life-world, Koch constructs a linking of truths about our contemporary damaged world, a visual parallel to Theodor Adorno's insight that the "fragment is that part of the totality of the work that opposes totality," such that in our damaged world the "whole is the untrue" (*Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, Theodor Adorno). For instance, in an early single image, *Mount Horeb, Wisconsin, USA* (1981), a four-legged sign seems to graze like a cow on a rolling Wisconsin slope, its message jumbled, a creature babbling an attempt at speech. It exemplifies one of Koch's favorite references, a quote from naturalist and essayist Barry Lopez: "When I get to a new place... I want to learn what it is I didn't know I would see." Forms of art and life mingle here.

Formally, this image of discombobulated landscape is constructed out of various vertical and horizontal line segments: the arrow-topped sign with legs, telephone poles, that tall pole whose supposed sign on top is cropped out of frame, and the added touch of a jetliner's contrail far above; below, that gentle curve of the horizon contrasts nicely against all those straight lines. An incisive composition which asserts itself as a fragment made out of other fragments. A part *is* as it *combines*. Thus, even in earlier work, Koch is already looking at complex arrays of visual data. Later work will accomplish that complexity using multiple images. This earlier image is later found sequenced in his photobook *Touchless Automatic Wonder* (2009), which builds upon and extends the critical realist work of Nathan Lyons's seminal photobook *Notations in Passing* (1971). In *Touchless*, Koch expands his use of fragments *within* images to create assemblages of single images disported across double-spread pages, smaller versions of his installations. French curator and critic Marc Feustel has

written of this book: "Koch's photographs do not contain many people, or no more than a hand, a silhouette or a few shadows. Often the words that appear graffitied on a wall, carved into stone, or plastered across a billboard feel almost like direct pronouncements from some kind of God. ART, MODESTY, THE PROMISE, SEE, STOP. They don't combine into any form of coherent message, Koch is not trying to unlock the codex of life."



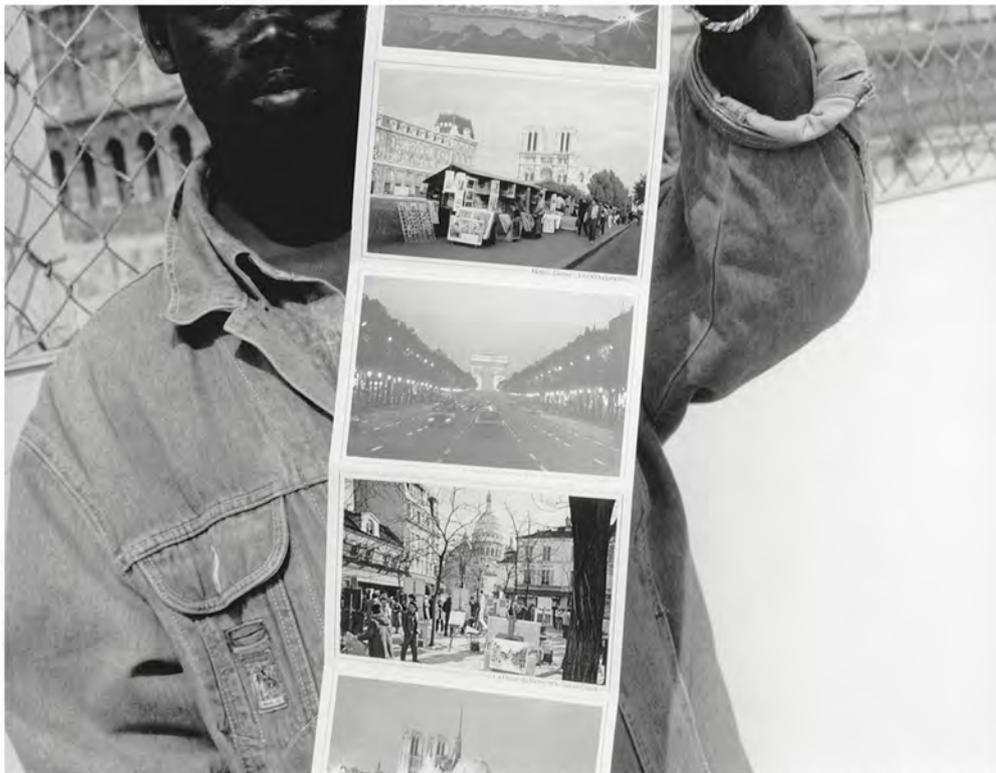
Mount Horeb, Wisconsin (gelatin silver print, 1981), Lewis Koch. Fragments within an image.



Touchless Automatic Wonder (photobook, 112 pages, 2009), Lewis Koch.



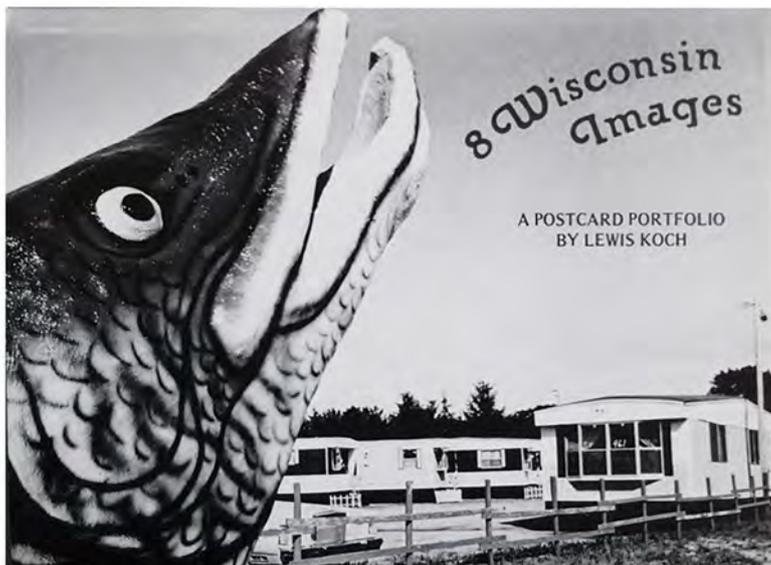
“Brussels, Belgium,” 1988; NY, NY, 1988; “Culver City, CA,” 1991. Double-page spread from *osaycanyousee* (exhibition keepsake, self-published, 2008), Lewis Koch. Brussels photo (left) also appeared in *Touchless Automatic Wonder*.



“Street vendor, Paris, France,” 1991. Page from *Touchless Automatic Wonder* (photobook, 2009), Lewis Koch. A visual metacommentary on 8 *Wisconsin Images* postcard portfolio.

Koch's *Totem Pole* (1986, see title page), his first use of that form, is rooted in an immense tree stump and grows upward with various vertical substitutions until it reaches a trapezoidal "head," a mysteriously cloaked YIELD sign. The prints that make up the totem are straightforward fragments culled from our world. This totem array is more explicit than his later totems, which become increasingly ambiguous in their selection of odd, disjointed bits of the real. The effect is to draw the poetry out of everyday things around us, inviting us to solve Koch's visual dreams.

An early formal precedent for Koch's "Totems" and his *Totembooks* was created a decade earlier — his 1977 "hack" of the typical tourist accordion-fold postcard compilation — titled *8 Wisconsin Images*. Long residing in a



8 Wisconsin Images (fold-out postcard portfolio, 4.25" x 6", self-published, Beloit, WI, 1977), Lewis Koch.



Double Caution Totem (Book One, unfolded, of three individually slipcased artist books, Nexus Press, Atlanta, 1993), Lewis Koch.

state whose natural beauty and water sports offerings are legendary — "Escape to Wisconsin" reads one ad promotion — it seemed appropriate to Koch's critical sensibility that he deconstruct the myths that his state is an ideal "vacationland," just as Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* did for our contemporary social value systems (photographs in the news, cuisine, wrestling matches, tourism, etc.) as cultural texts that create modern myths. Now, as critic Craig Owens commented, and Koch's work exemplifies, "In postmodernist art, nature is treated as wholly domesticated by culture; the 'natural' can be approached only through its cultural representation" (see page 11).



Northwest Pacific Coast tribal totem, Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, BC, photo by Lewis Koch. Early on, Koch has had an interest in studying native cultures, especially their totems.

Koch's *8 Wisconsin Images* evokes a particularly Proustian response. My mother lived in northern Wisconsin and up until my birth avidly collected postcards sent by her relatives on their many travels. Many of those cards celebrated vacationing: lakes, fishing, noted tourist sites like Yellowstone National Park (a site Koch will later explore, tongue-in-cheek, in his photobook *Twentyone Yellowstone Parking Lots*), local monuments, and so forth. But the *crème de la crème* of mother's collection were the accordion-fold compilations featuring the highlights of specific areas, fragments of vacations. Over time these accrued nostalgic associations, why she collected them. Later, inheriting them, I appreciated them as pop culture.

By manipulating these playful "devices," you can view one postcard at a time, or place in juxtaposition different images or, unfold completely and view them all as a vertical stack. This introduces active viewer participation, changing the contexts within which the images are seen. The postcard no longer simply says "This was," but now the viewer asserts "Thus I will it so." Due to this hands-on capability, the accordion-fold has since become a favorite image manipulation device for many artists. Edward Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) and John Baldessari's *Fable* (1977) being among the most noteworthy examples.

While Ruscha's dumb snapshot "systemic art" approach heralded a conceptualist use of photography, Koch has persistently maintained careful control over his compositions and the crafting of his prints. Ruscha's linear sequence of images follows the logic of street numbering, reducing any "aesthetic choice." Koch's postmodern approach in his accordion-fold book rejects *a priori* social-based systems. His use of horizontal and vertical associations in his arrays of raw fragments is internal to the work itself.



Every Building on the Sunset Strip (book, 1966), Edward Ruscha.

The language of totems is one that speaks of the many mute or incomprehensible voices among us in the world. Totems, in any of the myriad cultures which have fashioned them, are the touchstones of one's connection to the inexplicable forces beyond the individual and family. Totems have traditionally honored this relationship with symbolic elements drawn from immediate reality. The photographic assemblage presented here reconfigures the idea of totems in a contemporary context. Following the traditional pattern, it offers sincere respect to the mysteries of our existence in its many manifestations. It also become a tool of critical discourse by suggesting the connectedness we all implicitly have to the pressing issues of our time.

— Lewis Koch in the introduction to his 3-volume *Totembooks* (Nexus Press, Atlanta, 1993)



8 Wisconsin Images (1977, unfolded), Lewis Koch.

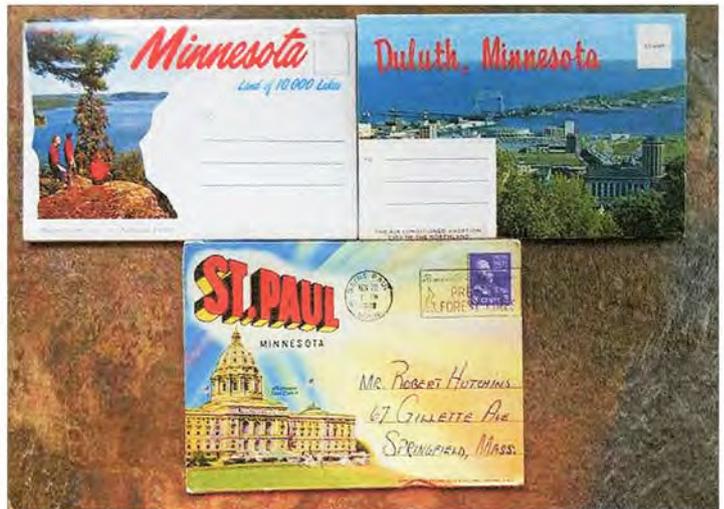
Whether situated up and down and across on a gallery wall (see page 18) or arranged wholly vertically as seen in his “Totems” and *Stacks* (a later project consisting of color photographs of stacked books), these assemblages encourage plural interpretations that play with the continuities and discontinuities staged within the whole composition. He makes no attempt to disguise the manipulation behind these constructions. As a critic writing in *Artweek* (April 1995) said of Koch’s work: “These totems function as antidotes that, because of their ingenuity and humor, help take the edge off, or out of, the ever-present simulated landscape.”

There is also the mythic element to these totems and not merely their obvious roots in Native American belief. Koch once titled a show of his work “Confessions of an Animist,” referring to his belief that all things have an animated spirit, a belief confirmed by his residing for a year in north India in the mid-1990s. Interestingly, each vertebral totem consists of seven prints, the same number of our body’s spinal *chakras*. Moreover, in the ritual enactments called Teyya, practiced in the northern parts of Kerala in south-western India, to materialize a god one speaks the



Roadside Stalls, Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh, India (1996) from *Touchless Automatic Wonder* (photobook, 2009), Lewis Koch.

formula: “By thinking about [or attending to] your presence [*tottam*], I invoke you into manifestation.” *Tottam* implies emergence, a move from subtle, hidden, and potential space into external, visible space. I see an analogy here and think of Koch’s totems as fragments allowing us viewers to invoke a new emergence of meaning from the subtle potentials of the artist’s assemblage.



Minnesota-themed folded postcard compilation.



A page from Koch’s photobook *Twentyone Yellowstone Parking Lots* (2013). A photographic scene painted on a recreational vehicle. Both an homage to Edward Ruscha’s *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* (1967), and a broaching of environmental issues by showing the “violated perfection” of our National Parks by excessive tourism.



Double-page spread from Koch's artist book *Twentyone Yellowstone Parking Lots* (2013). The array of "frames" on this vehicle recalls Koch's wall assemblages.

Koch's riff on Edward Ruscha's *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* (1967) collapses the nature/culture divide.



A concluding photograph from *Twentyone Yellowstone Parking Lots* (2013). Another example of Koch's wry meta-commentary on nature vs. artificial, real/unreal, photo-within-a-photo.



Blind Justice: The Supreme Court (17 prints, 72 x 70 in., 1987), Lewis Koch.

The conflict between totality and fragmentation in cultural practice appears to be an ongoing one. . . . Both George Lukacs and Theodor Adorno believed avant-garde art should reflect alienation under capitalism, but Lukacs preferred the unified organic work (realist novels) while Adorno believed the fragmented montage best exemplified capitalist societal contradictions.

—“Fragmented Meanings,” Alfred Jan, *Artweek* (November 9, 1989)

The fragmentation of culture in post-industrial society has left a void of lost or forgotten meaning. . . . [Koch] make[s] use of a language of signs that is simultaneously coded and revelatory, . . . explor[ing] the breakdown of our reality as it is manifest in the symbolic image.

—“Lewis Koch at Stephen Cohen,” *Artweek* (April 1995)



False Profit Totem (7 gelatin silver prints, 106 x 19 in., 1994), Lewis Koch.



Surplus Koan Totem (1991). Book Two, *Totembooks*, (1993), Lewis Koch.

Fragmentary and discontinuous, Koch's photoworks are organized across gallery walls; they intimate (rather than illustrate or narrate) psychic spills, politics, halts and breaks.

Internal formal design becomes a key element, as in *Blind Justice: The Supreme Court* (1987, see above). Inspired by an ominous nomination to the Supreme Court, it presents a grid of Roman portrait busts (photographed at Copenhagen's Glyptothek), printed normally with some also printed in reverse to suggest their repeatability. Located within the grid is a cruciform of images (a jab at Fundamentalism?) depicting a television set in a Springfield, Missouri motel room. On television is the 1949 movie *All the King's Men*, concerning the rise of a Trump-like demagogue, scenes depicting: a loud speaker, a woman being slapped, and at the bottom "The End." The latter image can be read as ominous, referring both to a headless Roman statue (loss of reason? execution?) in the upper left and, at the lower right, an image of masses transfixed, watching their demagogue. These flanking images suggest an unbalanced Scales of Justice, weighed down on the right by rampant Populism. The piece is uncanny in its prescience of the Trump Era, especially given the current President's appointment of two Associate Justices to the Supreme Court, assuring a strong neo-conservative bias.

The arrangement of photographs in Koch's "Totems" also makes use of formal associations, but between increasingly disparate images. This was not the case in the earlier *8 Wisconsin Images*, where the photographs remain discrete, only becoming associational when the viewer manipulates the accordion fold. Later, the vertical array becomes unified and positioned into a format for sustained looking by use of the totem model derived from Native American totems. As in Northwest Coast Indian totems, image builds on image, each separate but connected, to create a single work. Yet each image offers multiple interpretations as well, such that these artworks oscillate between whole and part in thought-provoking ways.

Robert Rauschenberg, often viewed as a postmodernist *avant la lettre*, made a *Photom* series (begun in 1981, not finished until 1991: large-scale totemic works mounted on aluminum derived from his own stash of black-and-white photographs. Both Rauschenberg and Koch share the starting point of a belief in an impalpable, poetic, illogical totality of experience, and an acknowledgment of the difficulty of making a single revelation of such. Nevertheless, comparing a Rauschenberg vertical assemblages with a Koch, it becomes apparent the latter offers a more complex relationship *between* the images. Koch could not substitute just any image for one in his construction without wholly changing the whole assemblage's meaning.



Slender Thread Totem (1991). Book Three, *Totembooks*, (1993), Lewis Koch.

... along this promenade where the ends of days joined to the ends of nights succeed to detach themselves to drag miserably adrift of tunnels, from wreck to wreck, castaways of blindness we perceive the period of life, the period of joys and greatneses, of despair and of slaveries within reach of our fixed looks, within reach of compact and fine masses, infinitely sweet to the doubt that follows us along, we perceive objects. By dint of going from sea to mountain the dress is finally torn apart like the wave, henceforth dwells therein the secret of certitude. Imperceptibly profound are the perspectives of this rent, for it calls forth sorrow, its constant companion, and it is only around it, in the flowing circles caused by a stone in clear weather of water and moon, — or by the eddies of a train launched at full speed in the sky, — that life no longer seeks its wherefore and resigns itself to its combustion without shadow nor after-taste. It is not so much the reality of matter and its problematic solidity, as its representation of land marks to designate space, making us conscious through it of time and our own existence which attaches the thing of representative form to our mental life. Submarine views, stone of clouds, flights of sharks by waves of applause, retinas of veils, auroras of crustaceans in glass tables of direction, watches of lightning, crumpled papers that trouble the stars and the thousand eathers of resentment, all that which awakens tenderness out of all reason, unstable flames sisters of love (the very indifference we often show towards them is the guarantee of a great peace, certitude), from childhood until death do you people this ocean which you accompany with your supreme silence, the feeling which selects you according to the indestructible appearances and the infinitely varying forms of the laws of nature. Things to touch, to eat, to crunch to apply to the eye, to the skin, to press, to lick, to break, to grind, things to lie, to flee from to honor, things cold or hot, feminine or masculine, things of day or night which absorb through your pores the greater part of our life, that which expresses itself unnoticed, that which matter because it does not know itself and spends itself without reckoning on the thousand load-stone placed along the edge of the unanimous road, your slumbers fixed in a case of butterflies have cut the diamond under all the aspects of the earth, in our childhoods lost inside of ourselves an unspeakably loaded with dreams like the geological layers that serve us as bed sheets.

Flight opened in a cut of flesh above the unused delight of conflagrations of midnight: it is experience consuming itself with its unavowed impotence. Thirst reabsorbs itself ever cloudy and the contours of the routes of flesh stem from an ever limpid vigilance and from the hills when the vegetations merge themselves into marine plate in the form of excesses and microscopies.

Detail (gelatin silver print, 15 x 19 in.) from *Thread of Life*— see totem at right, second image from bottom. *Thread of Life* was first presented, in a smaller version, in Koch's 2nd garage installation (1993) and was his first use of text-as-image. Some years later, Koch used the Tzara text in various iterations (jigsaw puzzle, video-poem, glass head sculpture) in his third and final garage installation (2006); and again in his 2009 photobook *Touchless Automatic Wonder*.

Being more complexly “totemic” in form than Rauschenberg’s, Koch’s contemporaneous images interact on a deeper integration of formal elements than the older artist’s efforts. An organic quality, like a DNA strand, energizes Koch’s totems. For instance, in *Surplus Koan Totem* (1991, see page 14) the verticality coinciding with the subject depicted: an ICBM sporting large letters that spelling out *SURPLUS*, with all its constellated meanings as “excess,” “obsolete,” and “overkill.” Koch permits us to construct the missile as a whole from visual fragments shot at varying distances — four close-up frames create varying missile widths — as well as to find new words cut from the letter composing *SURPLUS* (i.e., *US* which signifies both the United States and the pronoun “us”), and *PLUS* (denoting the addition of terms which describes Koch’s process of visual assembly). The bottom frame wittily replaces the missile’s base with Brobdingnagian feet, a dream-like displacement that anthropomorphizes the deadly weapon, enhancing its reading as a totem signifying where we stand in our complex international situation of nuclear deterrence.

This interplay of imagery is absent from Rauschenberg’s bare bones juxtaposition of images. It is as if Rauschenberg said to himself *I have all these damn photos I’ve accrued over the years taking up space in my studio, so now let’s see how I can recycle them*. Thomas Lawson in “Last Exit: Painting” (*Art After Modernism, Rethinking Representation*, 1984) warns of such arbitrary use of imagery: “The capacity to assimilate anything and everything ... becomes a repressive unity.” In contradistinction, Koch has



Thread of Life (7 gelatin silver prints, 106 x 19 in., 1995), Lewis Koch. His only specifically autobiographical totem.

been making single images *always with the purpose in mind* of using them as a database to selectively draw upon to create his thought-provoking assemblages. I am reminded of Jerry Uelsmann who kept an archive of his individual photographs that he variously dipped into when creating his surreal combination prints.

Prints in Koch's disparate arrays are spread across gallery walls, some arrayed in a circle, and some arranged into vertical totemic constructions. *Thread of Life* (1995) is one of a twelve-part suite of totems. It is "shuffled" slightly horizontally, making it appear unstable, and has a framed text excerpted from Tristan Tzara's formative prose poem "When Things Dream," creating what he has called "a personal *exquisite corpse*." Compared to *Surplus Koan Totem*, this assemblage is more disparate, no larger visual entity ("missile") growing out of its parts. These disjointed elements echo the photo of Tzara's Dadaist poem's fragmented diction. Tellingly, Koch places that text-photo near the totem's base, suggesting poetic language's subversive effect (i.e., Julia Kristeva's concept of *la sémiotique*, which is closely related to the infantile pre-Oedipal, an emotional field, tied to the instincts, which dwells in the fissures and prosody of language rather than in the denotative meanings of words. Importantly, Koch uses words in images, arranges images into a syntax. Thus, his assemblages "speak" to us in a subversive way.

In *Thread of Life* the frame second from the top is out of focus; another frame, third from the top, re-enforces the theme of disarray by depicting a hodge-podge of small photos on a wall in his studio. Meaning has been shaken up, forms become unstable, hard to read, suggesting the "decentered self."

Apropos visual logic of Koch's wall print arrays is critic Rosalind Krauss's comment, "Structurally, logically, the grid can only be repeated." This logic is explicit in many works from the 1970s. For instance, Michael Kirby's "two dimensional sculpture" installations (see next page) representing specific places, where, as Kirby says, the third dimension needs to be reconstructed in the viewer's mind. Closer in form to Koch's totems, yet different, is Michael Snow's *Of a Ladder* (also see next page). The grid, the ladder, systematically extends upward. Both artists use photographs to *represent* things, the grid to objectively present them.

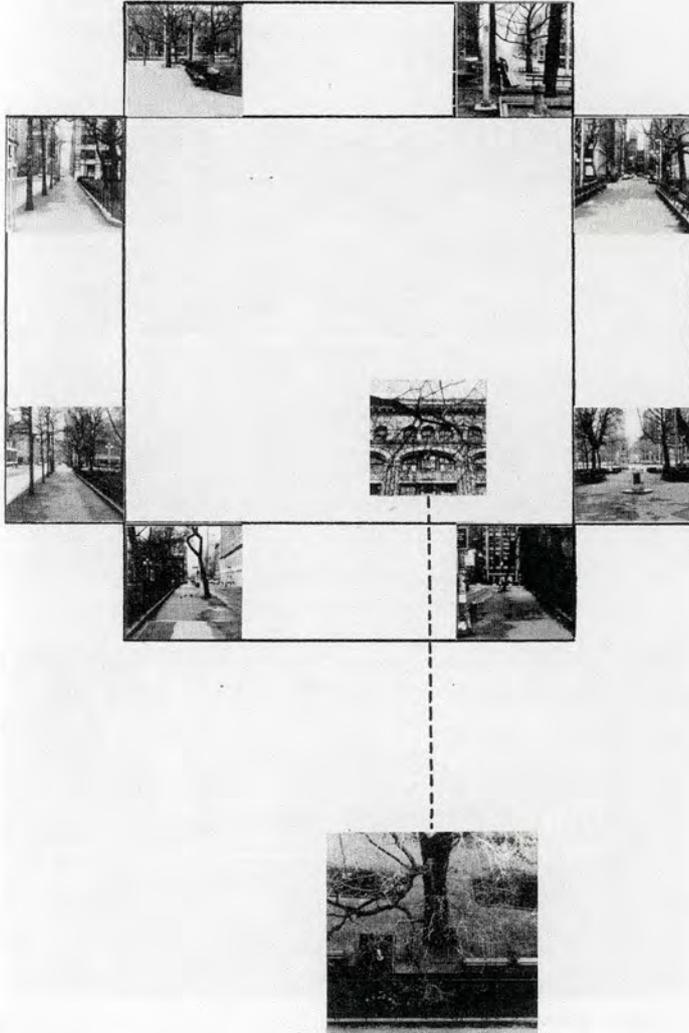
Koch's assemblages, particularly his totems, are more "models" than representations *per se*. Models are representations of something else; they stand for, depict, or imitate a selected part of the external world and tend to be built around homologies, sympathetic resonances, recursive loops as seen in Koch's totems. His work is less about using photographs as representations of our lived world, than using images to produce models of our post-industrial society. Some of his works directly upset the grid (see cover image). *Broken Oval, (for R. L)*, 1989, takes the vertical totem-form and bends it head-to-toe, forming a oblong, distorted *ouroboros*, a mythic circular array symbolizing wholeness, now warped. It is, ironically, constructed out of barely recognizable fragments of a city with its man-made detritus, photo-fragments of buildings and pavement re-assembled into a dynamic, spinning vector. Koch here replaces Richard Long's natural settings with culture, a clever take on that British land artist's photo-documentation of his nature walks. As Koch says: "My first encounter with Long's work was with his stone circles; that is what I was riffing on in this assemblage, a circle is warped, broken, to suggest the intangibility of perfection." In the theory of deconstructivist architecture, this formal distortion of normative forms (circles become ovals) is referred to as "violated perfection."



Combination print by Jerry N. Uelsmann.



A Line in the Himalayas (gelatin silver print, 1975)
Richard Long.



Washington Square Park, April 14 and 15, 1974 ("two dimensional sculpture"), Michael Kirby.



Of a Ladder (11" x 14" gelatin silver prints, 1971), Michael Snow.

In the 1970s the logic of the grid array as a pre-established system of objective organization was widely employed by artists as an escape from Abstract Expressionism's subjectivity.

Looking across decades of his production, one sees Koch reprise the same images over and over again in both new *spatial* contexts (museum installations, photobooks, personal garage project installations, public libraries, public highways), as well as in new *image* contexts (within the “Totem” series, on double-page book spreads, in his wall arrays), exemplifying the philosophical insights of Ludwig Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, Roland Barthes, et al.) that meaning is context dependent. Koch often places the same photograph in new contexts, challenging one’s reading of that part to the whole.

Use of this context dependency was addressed by Alex Sweetman in his superb essay “Photo-bookworks: The Critical Realist Tradition”: “Another way of dislocating or preventing the readings of the official culture is to use pictures differently, to inflect them by altering the context in which they are seen and by extension interpreted” (*Artists’ Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, 1985). Apropos to this insight about context Koch, in his *Totembooks*, quotes naturalist John Muir: “When we try to pick out anything by itself we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.” This is an insight that prefigures our modern concept of fields, ecosystems, and illuminates Koch’s play with part-to-whole, whole-to-part in his assemblages.

The dedication in his three-volume set of *Totembooks* to friend and mentor Paul Vanderbilt (1905-1992) — “who loved pictures, their many meanings, their mystery, and the spaces in between” — celebrates Vanderbilt’s personal “reception theory,” that emphasizes each particular reader’s reception or interpretation of an image / text. This describes Koch’s own photographic *modus operandi*: “I am not telling viewers what to think, rather I am proposing what they think about.” The structure of his photo-assemblies evoke expectations which are interrupted by surprising unfulfillments, *producing gaps* which require filling by the viewer to create a coherent flow, particularly challenging in his *Thread of Life* totem. The viewer must then re-look at the work in light of those gap fillings, playing on the possible readings of the work. Personally, I enjoy the brain-tease of trying to unlock the rich meanings with Koch’s assemblages, readings that can vary based



When Things Dream, garage installation space, 2006, Lewis Koch. Southeast corner view, including *Ex Libris: self-portrait as a long bookshelf* (75 digital photographs, printed in five segments, total dimensions 7” x 453”, partial view, upper wall). *Ex Libris* was first conceived for “When Things Dream”: Garageography, version 3.0.6, the third installation of the Garage Trilogy, Madison, Wisconsin.

Along this promenade which joins the ends of days to the ends of nights, it defatigably present, whose length cannot be measured in spite of a suspicion of limits barely offered to our minds, along this promenade where the ends of days succeed to the ends of nights succeed to detach themselves to drag iserably about to tunnels, from wreck to wreck, eastwards of madness, we receive a period of life, a period of joys and great losses, of despair and enslavement within reach of our tired looks, within reach of compact and firm masses, definitely sweet to the doubt that follows us along, we perceive objects. Beyond of going from sea to maintain the caress is finally torn apart fill the way. One forth dwells in the secret of certitude. Imperceptibly found the perspectives of the present, long calls forth sorrow, its constraining companion and it is only around in the floating circles caudal by a stone in clear water, or by the waves of water and night, — or by the waves of a chain launched: full speed to the sky, — that life no longer seeks its way, and resigns itself to its confusion without shadow or after a time, not so much the reality of nature and its problematical certainty, as its representation of landmark to designate space, making a path through it of time and our own mental life. Sublime views, strange clouds, flights of sharks by waves of applause, retinas of eyes, auroras of oceans in glass, tables of direction, watches lightning crumpled paper that tremble the stars and the thousand feather of resurrection, all that which awakens tenderness out of all reason, unstable flames, shadows of love (the very indifference, the much sated, the void, them is the guarantee of a great peace, certitude), from childhood (with death) do you people this ocean, which you accompany with your supreme silence, the feeling which affects you according to the industrial appearance and the infinitely varying forms of the laws of nature. Things to touch, to cut, to crush, to apply to the eye, to the skin, to the heart, to the soul, to the mind, this is to lie, to flee from the color, things cold or hot, feminine or masculine, things of day or night, things to absorb through the pores of our skin, things of our life, that which expresses itself unnoticed, that which matters because it does not allow itself and spends itself without reckoning on the thousand loose stones placed along the edge of the unanimous road: your stambers fixed in a case of butterflies have cut the diamond under all the aspects of the earth in our childhoods lost inside of our selves and unspeakably loaded with dreams like the geological layers that serve us as bed sheets.

whentingsdream

A GARAGE INSTALLATION BY LEWIS KOCH
Garageography, v. 3.0.6
APRIL 29 - JUNE 25, 2006
OPENING EVENT: SATURDAY, MAY 6, 4-7 PM
Location: Sunday May 14, 4-7 PM
2661 East Johnson Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53704
free admission / for hours, call (608) 244-3214
funded in part by Madison Arts Commission, with additional funds from Wisconsin Arts Board
© 2007 Thomas Thum

Poster for “When Things Dream” (Tzara text in the background, 2006), Lewis Koch.

on whether I've seen one of the images previously in a different context (within the work or exhibition space), what I bring to the work on a personal level, and at what historical moment I am viewing it. I have come up with different readings of specific works over the years of my familiarity with his production.

Speaking of context, Koch challenged the commercial gallery and artist book contexts as early as 1977 with his first show in a public library, then in 1983 he began installing work in the old wooden garage adjacent to his studio house. It is a physical space and an imaginative one, open to constant evolution, rather than resolution. "Duct Tape Works" (his second garage installation, 1993) intermingled photographs with duct tape-altered objects (see below, right), recalling Surrealist installations.

When Things Dream (2006) grew out of his previous garage installations and a much earlier "Garage Interiors" series, exemplified by 8256.12, *Milwaukee*, (1982). Garages become contained spaces where Koch can "dream with eyes wide open" — as a child he was sometimes found open-eyed and sound asleep — and the theme of dreaming is central to his 1986 photo-sequence *Into the Heart of Darkness and Light: A Dream Sequence* (see page 2, installation view).

His 2006 installation featured text-based artwork mixed up with everyday objects and typical garage detritus, all within the confines of a simple wood frame one-car garage adjacent to his studio. In this carefully orchestrated jumble could be found a videopoem as silent soundtrack, a glass head, a unique jigsaw puzzle, book shelves, and a color photographic frieze of books titled *Ex Libris* (these book works become part of a later series called "Stacks & spines"). A mundane storage space takes on the ludic aspects of a Surrealist exhibition.

With these garage installs, Koch explodes his photo-assemblage into three-dimensions where photographs share imaginative space with mundane objects and various media. The elite commercial gallery is supplanted by a "pop-up" show conflating the everyday with the extraordinary. A year later, Koch reached a global audience by creating a digital web-based virtual tour of this installation on afsnitP, a Danish virtual exhibition space for visual poetry and intermedia art. Appropriately titled "Garageography," he collaborated with Danish designer-poet Christian Yde Frostholm, founder of afsnitP (view at: www.afsnitp.dk/galleri/garageography/). Enter the site. Against a background of that Tristan Tzara quote, credits emerge, then a photograph of a sign posted in front of the house advertising the garage show. Click on that image and you are lead into the garage space. Click on the arrow in that image to follow a succession of photographs of the show, entering the space and "looking around"; click on the plus signs in these images to see details from the installation. The experience for me was akin to being involved in a crime scene investigation, checking out all the clues, trying to come up with a solution. Trying to solve the *not-knowing*.



8256.12, *Milwaukee* (from the series, "Garage Interiors," 1982), Lewis Koch. A melancholic sense of emptiness.



"Duct Tape Works" (garage installation space, 1993), Lewis Koch.



Touchless Automatic Wonder (photobook, 2009): Resale shop window, Waupaca, Wisconsin, USA, 1992; Lewis Koch. Another reference to "not knowing."



IF COME IN NO
 STEAL AND TO
 DESTROY, I AM
 I MIGHT HAVE

osaycanyousee (exhibition keepsake, pp. 2-3, 2008): Truax Air National Guard base, Madison, WI, 1986; Madison, WI, 1991; Tracy City, TN, 1994; Lewis Koch. Outside/inside; surface/depth; manifest/latent; probing, revealing, surveilling..

* *



Stacks and spines (78" x 132", 6 archival pigment prints, 2015), Lewis Koch. An assemblage of photo friezes of the artist's bookshelves, originally photographed for his 2006 garage installation "When Things Dream."

Book Assemblages

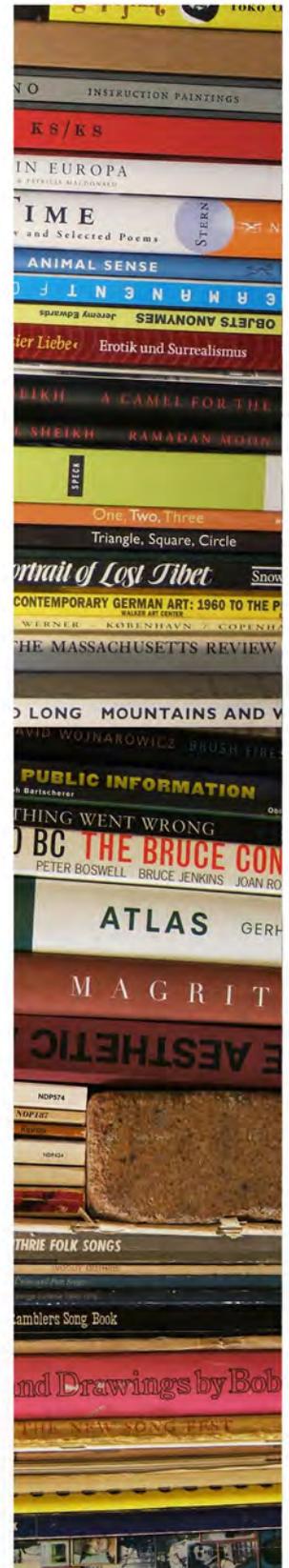
When invited to make an exhibit of my work at Madison's new central library, I immediately thought of books. Of course. Books are the lifeblood of libraries. Books are in my blood. They have long been a subject of my photography, seen in their various guises and habitats, intermingling visual representations of image and text.

— Lewis Koch, "Stacked & Shelved," 2015
www.lensculture.com/lewiskoch/?modal=project-80332

The space of language today is not defined by Rhetoric, but by the Library.

— "Language, Counter-Memory, Practice," Michel Foucault

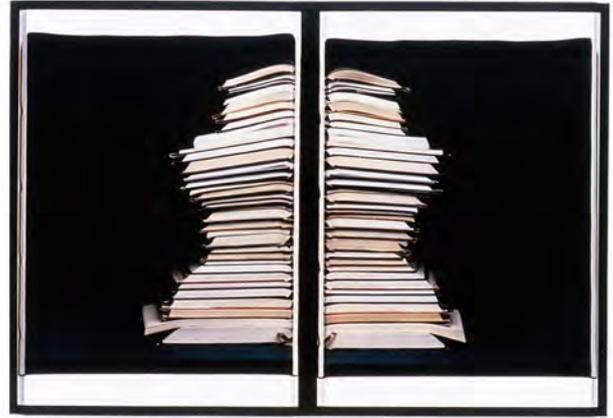
Having stacked single photos in his totems, and given his interest in books (fragments of knowledge), no surprise Koch sought out shelved and stacked books, photographing them in color, using them in a photographic frieze and as shelved objects for *When Things Dream* garage installation. Later, he began to explore other arrangements and contexts for these book photos. *Stacks & spines* (2015) was one incarnation of these explorations. Recall that his totems already look like spines; that opening a book randomly accesses information in bits and pieces like the disparate visual offerings of the totems. That a photograph of a book suggests the presence of text hidden between its covers, but text the viewer cannot access.



Detail, *Stacks and spines* (2015), Lewis Koch.



Koch's "Stacked & Shelved" exhibit, comprised of three large-scale assemblages, Ballweg Gallery, Madison (WI) Public Library (2015), Lewis Koch.



Synapseartscience (book sculpture, 2014) Buzz Spector

Koch's work has always been informed by the intellectual adventure of *not-knowing*, yet seeking metaphor and connectedness. When we think of not-knowing, we think of grabbing a book, going to the public library or our personal bookshelves, *nosing* around the many-colored spines (which American poet/author Gary Lutz wittily called "snouts").

Koch, as many others, was influenced by book artist Buzz Spector's unique use of books as sculptural material. Spector's treatment of the book ranges from the straight-forward presentation of books as information carriers to a Duchampian objectification of one of humankind's most prevailing inventions. Spector is a book manipulator, his books come *off* the shelf. But Koch's books are kept on shelves or in stacks; his photographs flatten them, emphasizing their spines, becoming visual grist for his shuffling of imagery into new contexts. Like his exhibit "Stacked & Shelved" in the Ballweg Gallery, at Madison (WI) Public Library, which delighted library-goers with playful arrays of color images of variously arranged books. One wall assemblage (see below) played with near and far: the central *tromp-l'oeil* vertical array of shelved books is seen as "far" (an indentation in space) and, in this context, reads anthropomorphically as a figure of a head, while the expanding images of books on each side read as "near" and look like arms outspread across the wall, in a gesture of welcoming.



"A Scattering of books, a miscellany of shelves," (32" x 258"), an assemblage of bookshelf images made over the preceding years, first shown at the Ballweg Gallery in the Madison Public Library (2015), Lewis Koch.



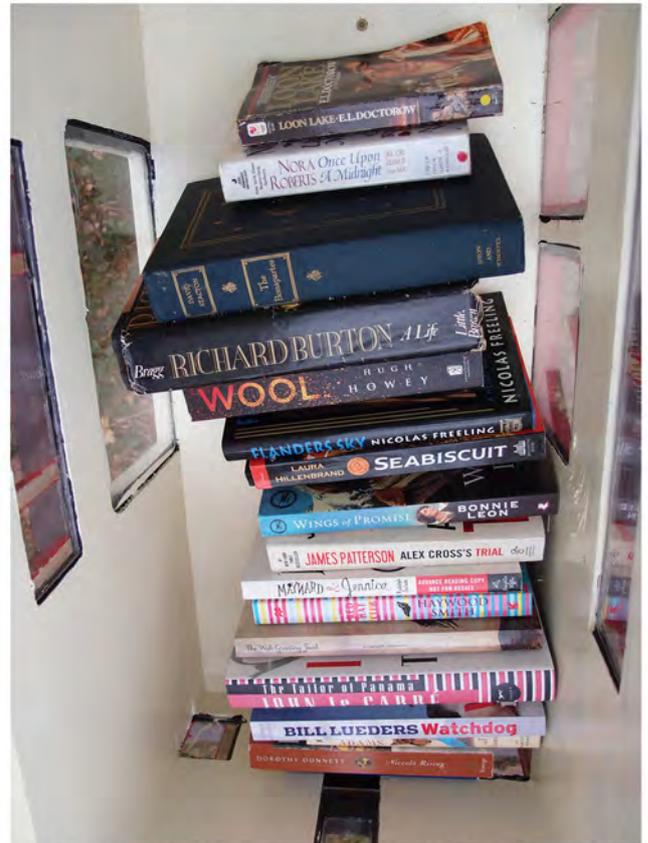
"When Things Dream" garage installation view, detail (2006), Lewis Koch. As a single image, this was subsequently used in Koch's assemblage of bookshelf photographs, "A Scattering of books, a miscellany of shelves" (2015).



"A Scattering of books, a miscellany of shelves" (2015). Elevator, Lakewood, New Jersey (2013, the central image in the assemblage), Lewis Koch.



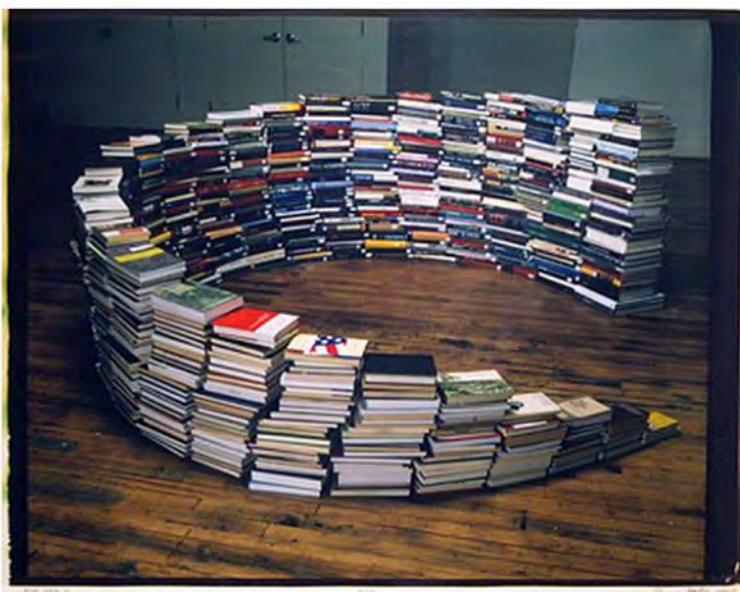
A single image from "Ex Libris: What Madison is (and is not) reading," (2015), Lewis Koch. Koch's photographs of Little Free Library book box interiors made specifically for the Madison Public Library show.



From "Ex Libris: What Madison is (and is not) reading," (2015). Box interior, Little Free Library, Madison, WI (2014), Lewis Koch



A single image from the assemblage "A Scattering of books, a miscellany of shelves" (2015). Used bookstore, Girona, Catalonia (2013), Lewis Koch. Another example of one of Koch's found assemblages.



Big Red C (book installation, 2007), Buzz Spector.



"Ex Libris: What Madison is (and is not) reading," (70" x 267"), one of three assemblages in the exhibit *Stacked & Shelved, photographs of books*, Ballweg Gallery in the Madison Public Library (2015), Lewis Koch.

The second assemblage in the Madison Public Library exhibition. "Ex Libris: What Madison is (and is not) reading," was done specifically for that space. It consists of photographs of the interiors of Madison's Little Free Library boxes (a nonprofit organization that inspires a love of reading, builds community, and sparks creativity by fostering neighborhood book exchanges around the world). Most of us have encountered such boxes, grabbing a book, leaving a book, looking at what people are reading.

The resulting prints made of these small spaces of free public exchange were applied directly on the library gallery's walls, appearing columbarium-like, as recesses in the wall, an assemblage that plays on the irony of *not-knowing* which books in these niches were wanted or unwanted, depending upon who wants to read them (or not). What selection would you make? Which of your books would you drop off? Which would you pick up? In a time when electronic information flows and Kindle devices are replacing books, Little Free Libraries are something like a "Slow Food Movement" but for texts (see photo at the right). Koch offers us a moment to again think about the "lives of books," those *livres* in our personal lives.

In summary, Koch takes the "refuse" of our everyday life, the fragments of surviving stuff scattered about, and takes responsibility for it, in a visual sense. He's a *bricoleur* making intelligent pictorial linkages of our cultural leftovers, conferring different meanings and possible functions on these fragments and pieces, bringing back the pleasure of joining him in wondering about all that "stuff" out there.

This brings us back to John Muir's observation: *When we try to pick out anything by itself we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.*



A Little Free Library, Madison, Wisconsin, Lewis Koch (2014).

* * *



Self-portrait with "Wall Diary", Lewis Koch (2012)

LEWIS KOCH

Drawing upon aspects of photography, sculpture, assemblage and text, Koch calls attention to the often unremarked upon elements of everyday life. Over the past forty years, his work has been shown in garages, on kiosks and billboards, as well as in museums and galleries, with solo exhibitions in New York, London, Brussels, Seoul, Toronto, Chicago and Los Angeles. His work is in permanent collections throughout the United States, Canada and Europe, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Maison Européenne de la Photographie (Paris), Museum for Fotokunst/Brandts (Odense), Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Whitney Museum of American Art, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago). As an artist-in-residence at Copenhagen's Fotografisk Center, Koch created the web project "Touchless Automatic Wonder" which was an

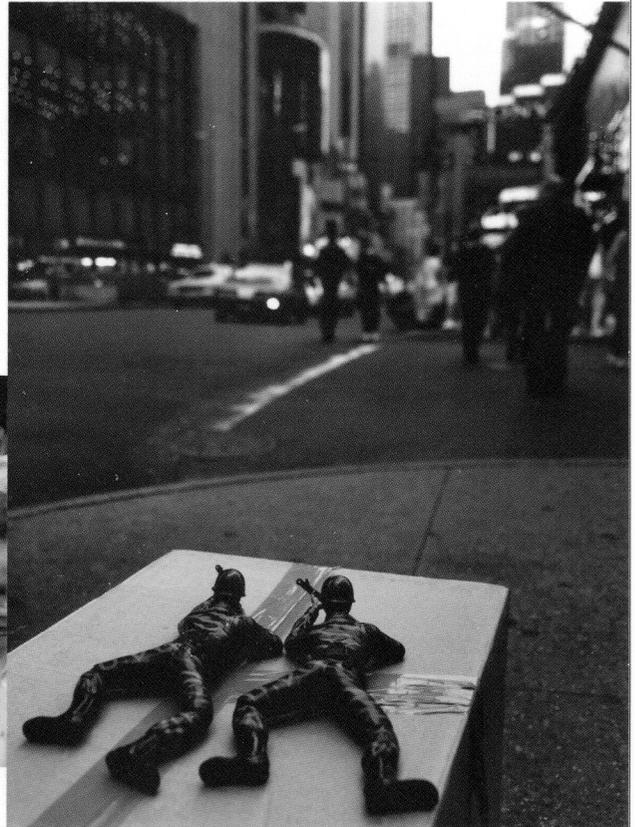
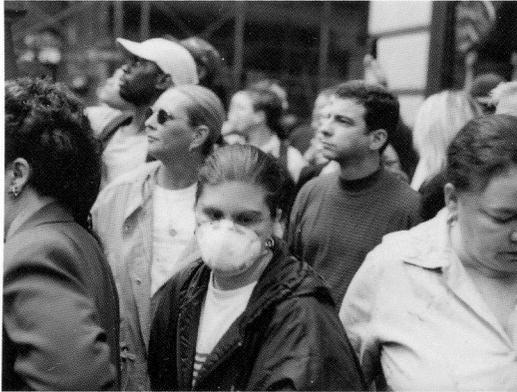
overview of his work in photography and assemblage prior to 2001. It is also the basis for a monograph (Borderland Books, Madison, 2009) by the same title. "When Things Dream" — the third installation in the artist's Garage Trilogy — was placed on the Web at www.afsnitp.dk as "Garageography 3.0.7"; it is a comprehensive, labyrinthine presentation of Koch's work in installation. *For further information, inquiries may be made directly to lewiskoch@yahoo.com*

JAMES HUGUNIN

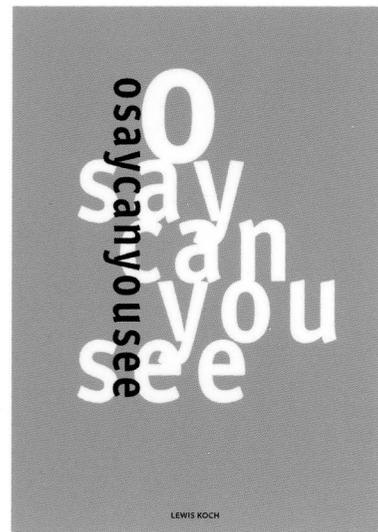
Emeritus Faculty, taught the History of Photography and Contemporary Theory at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Many of his writings can be downloaded from Academia.edu. He is the founder/ editor of two art journals: *The Dumb Ox* (1976 - 82) and *U-Turn Art E-zine* (1982 - present) at www.eturn.org. He is the author of five experimental novels (the first, *Something is Crook in Middlebrook*, critic/ writer Derek Pell called "the best experimental novel of 2012," while *Tar Spackled Banner*, was listed as "notable" in Wesleyan University's anthology of Best American Experimental Writing for 2014), four books of criticism/theory, and numerous artist books. In 1983, he won the first Reva and David Logan Award for Distinguished New Writing in Photography from the N.E.A. and The Photographic Resource Center, Boston, MA. In 2016 he was elected a member of The Society of Midland Authors. He now resides in Santa Fe, New Mexico.



Self-Portrait, James Hugunin (2013)



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