SHORT ESSAYS

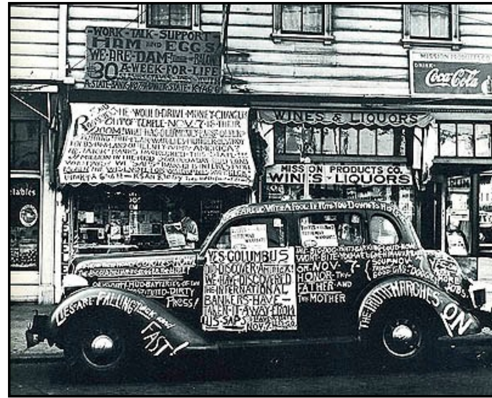
Book Review:
***TOUCHLESS AUTOMATIC WONDER*, a photobook by Lewis Koch**
(Borderland Books, Madison, WI, 2009) **ISBN: 978-0-9815620-4-9**
112 pages, 79 duotones, hard cover, edition of 1500 *www.borderlandbooks.net.*
Images for this essay can be viewed at: *www.uturn.org/Reviews/hugrevu3.htm*

> *. . . 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*

> *I like seeing things and I like words. There is something revelatory about the two together, an almost pentecostal feeling of seeing in tongues.*"
>
> — Lewis Koch,
> "Introduction." *Touchless Automatic Wonder* (2009)

SHORT ESSAYS

Rejecting modernist, Purist photography's aversion to the encroachment of language, embracing the late John Gutmann's passion for a language-suffused world, Koch has made the postmodern "linguistic turn," seeing our mass-mediated world today as a complex scripto-visual topology, fragments of which are wittily caught in the net of his camera's frame.



Working with these visual fragments, the "ruins" of our postmodern life-world, Koch constructs a concatenation 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*, Adorno). For instance, in *Mount Horeb, Wisconsin*, *USA* (1981) a four-legged sign seems to graze like a cow on a rolling Wisconsin slope, its message wholly discombobulated, a creature babbling its first attempt at words. Formally, the image is constructed out of various 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.

As if to suggest a kind of "Rosetta Stone" in relation to this and other images that follow, this handsomely-printed book's frontispiece depicts a stone tablet, a fragment found in the Catedral Vieja, Salamanca, Spain on which is carved a jumbled, dyslexic version of he Roman alphabet; on the title page opposite one notes the book's subtitle: "Found Text from the Real World."

Further into the book, *Preacher's signboard, Tracy City, Tennessee, USA* (1994) depicts these letters, now formed into fragmented words—Come, Steal, Destroy, Might—a tightly-cropped array of words with a powerful range of possible meanings depending upon context; here context is made ambiguous through cropping. Other times, Koch achieves the same by obscuring the text with people and

objects, or through the fact that the text has partially peeled off. The found text is freed from its semantic moorings, letting the textual fragments float connotatively into our minds where we are challenged to make our own sense of it.

What follows in the book are some of the most thought-provoking images (signs) one has seen-read; a carefully arranged collection where the-play-of-the-signifier ("Sign ever[y]thing," reads J. L. Nipper's studio door in one of Koch's photos) has been given maximum latitude by scene chosen, manner of cropping, and the unseen machinations of human agency behind the textual component of the image. In turn, one's latitude of possible responses range from laughter (that "almost Be S" looking like judgmental margin gloss next to the image of the blonde hitchhiker on the sign-painter's ad), to head-scratching puzzlement (the question mark sign on a barren, frozen lake), to utter wonder (a math problem worked out in what looks like fragments of rolled dough).

Many of the images in Koch's book could be generally described by the phrase "things fall apart," as so prevalent is the theme of entropy. Small town *Vietnam war memorial, Wisconsin*, USA (1990) is startling in that a list of names on a war memorial have been permitted to be reduced to state of utter dishevelment. Soldiers' names, the memory of their sacrifice, are given the same kind of indifference they were subjected to by their government in the first place. In a succinct visual statement, Koch is able to say as much or more about war, memory, and death than Edward Kienholz did in his controversial installation, *Portable War Memorial* (1968).

Koch's production bears comparison with other significant artistic production, especially as not a few of Koch's images pay homage to earlier photographers. *Photo studio storefront, 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 portraits is found in disarray and the text is fragmentary, peeling off.

Both 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. But Evans composes his subjects quite formally with a view camera, often frontally. Koch's hand-camera is wielded in a freer fashion like

Robert Frank did in *The Americans* (1959). Moreover, where Evans's subject was the changing face of American society in his day, Koch's reach is global, indicating the inexorable march of American late-capitalism and popular culture into foreign lands and the suffusion of the foreign into our homeland as seen 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, a visual comment that recalls similar imagery in Frank's photobook, *The Americans*. Recall such images as *Santa Fe, New Mexico (1955-56)*, where the SAVE sign oversees an anthropomorphic congregation of gasoline pumps (the word is semantically ambiguous and could refer to saving one's soul or saving money at the pump, suggesting a corrupting of religious sentiment); and *St. Francis, gas station, and City Hall, Los Angeles* (1955-56), which figures that symbol of poverty and piety gesturing his crucifix toward a decadent postwar capitalist society in need of salvation.

Another fruitful comparison can be made. Koch's *Madison, Wisconsin, USA* (1986) is an obvious reference to Margaret Bourke-White's well-known Great Depression document, *At the Time of the Louisville Flood* (1937). Similarities and differences between these two photographs are instructive. Both contrast commercial boosterism with a harsher reality: poverty and breadlines in Bourke-White's case, disease-plagued society in Koch's.

The exacerbation of cancer, heart disease, and lung disorders in our fast-food glutted, polluted environment referenced in Koch's image contrasts with Bourke-White's focus on natural disasters.Yet in Koch's version, the car's windshield reflects a virtual image simpatico with Jean Baudrillard's famous conception of automobile windshields as "screens" on which our reality is projected as we are propelled through our visual simulacrum; in contradistinction, the window in Bourke-White's billboard is transparent, revealing a firmer sense of reality, the nuclear family within. Where Bourke-White's image asserts an empirical epistemology appropriate for her day, Koch's gives us a conventionalist epistemology resonant with our postmodern world where simulacra are fast edging out "the real."

The absent-real and the political run through Koch's book; for instance, in *Manitowoc, Wisconsin, USA* (1999) that much-despised store, Walmart, has seemingly vanished and its entrance sign uprooted like a tree hit by a Midwestern tornado. The sign pitches out toward us from a black night sky, but its shadow retreats

backwards and to the side. The actual store is replaced here with an unruly fragment, its abjected signage. Anti-big-box store advocates can rub their hands in glee at this instance of a damaged world.

This dark, damaged world of Koch's Walmart shows up in Chicago photographer Barbara Crane's" Monster Series" from the early 1980s—just seen by this writer in her traveling retrospective—but in a more concentrated form. Another image in *Touchless—Watermelon Days midway, Pardeeville, Wisconsin, USA* (1990) —shows Koch similarly using close-up to render fragments enigmatic, but now textual elements absent from Crane's approach—a tic-tac-toe grid, the word "fuck," etc.—are featured.

In summary, Koch takes the "garbage" 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 concatenations of our cultural leftovers, conferring different meanings and possible functions on these fragments and pieces, permitting us the pleasure of joining him in wondering about all that stuff out there.

Koch's conception of the fragment as developed in these photographs puts in question the very idea of a unified totality and leads us toward a new conception of totality as non-unified, fragmented or dismembered, however paradoxical that notion may seem (French theorists, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus* have developed this notion under their concept of the *rhizome*) . This new book will be a welcome companion on your bookshelf next to those classics, Evans's *American Photographs* and Frank's *The Americans*.

SHORT ESSAYS

Book Review:
WASTE LAND: MEDITATIONS ON A RAVAGED LANDSCAPE
(New York: Aperture, 1997). Photographs by David T. Hanson, Preface by Wendell Berry. Afterword by Mark Dowie. Hardcover, 160 pages, $40.00. This piece originally appeared in *The New Art Examiner* (October 1998).
Images for this essay can be viewed at: *www.uturn.org/Reviews/hugrevu1.htm*

Can the seduction of beauty be used to arouse our social conscience? David T. Hanson's *Waste Land: Meditations on a Ravaged Landscape* (1997) argues it can. The photographer collects a large body of his formally astute, mainly aerial, color photographs of mined and maimed earth, hazardous waste sites, military installations, and power plants that bespeak of the pervasive presence of the machine in the garden.

Godfrey Reggio's *Koyannisqatsi*, a 1980s filmic attack on industrial blight, tried to achieve both beauty and social message, but many critics still said the aerial shots (high verticals and low obliques, also used by Hanson), his time-lapse photography, coupled with the absence of any narration, meant visual seduction triumphed the social message.

Privileging beauty over social critique, Sally Euclaire's touting of John Pfahl's series "Power Places" (1981 - 83) in *New Color/New Work: Eighteen Photographic Essays* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984) noted Pfahl's art-for-art-sake intentions in his romanticized color photographs of nuclear- and coal-powered plants. Espousing the New Criticism's penchant for ambiguity and a reactionary postmodernist nostalgia, she also observed that Pfahl's juxtapositionings of the machine in the garden were polysemous enough for them to be either praised by power company CEO's for their artful, luscious treatment of the subject or touted as chilling visions of an impending *Götterdämmerung* by ecologist and anti-nuclear groups.

Contra Pfahl's romanticism, Hanson's images of industrial rape of our lands depicts the machine as having wholly ruined the garden. He knowingly anchors his images within maps and textual support that goes far to overcome the dilemma of producing either beauty or a social critique, and does so without their overcoming residing in mere ambiguity. Filled with text, maps, and photographic mappings, the book breaks down firm differences between the map and the territory, between sign and referent, a textual strategy Abigail Solomon-Godeau attributed to "New Docu-

mentary." Wendell Berry's Preface theorizes how Hanson's imagery should be read. He reasserts the traditional photographic dilemma of art/document, privileging the former term. He admits some may still view Hanson's images as merely "abstract art" or "beautiful shapes." But he attributes this to the fact that the lands were so ill-used by the abstract forces of technology that "nobody foresaw, because nobody cared, what they would look like." Berry then suggests two opposing correctives, each grappling with one horn of the art/document and beauty/instrumentality dilemma. One, the corrective of metaphor: that we see these beautiful images as "representations of bad art—if by art we mean the ways and products of human work" which are "symbolic of what we cannot see," the horrible seeping pollution. And two, the corrective of metonymy: that we attend to the images' referents, to "the things that are readily identifiable (trees, buildings, roads, vehicles, etc.)," so as to go beyond the abstraction and see "that their common subject is a monstrous ugliness."

The static either-beauty-or-social-critique dilemma is refashioned as a dialectical flux between present and absent appearances in Hanson's photographs: what easily appears (formally seductive abstraction, a sign rooted in land abuse)/what doesn't appear (ugliness, only envisioned by mental effort when one attends to the signs' referents). Hanson's superb book reflects both a commitment to artful seeing and hard-hitting social comment (see figure 6).

SHORT ESSAYS

Book Review: *WINOGRAND 1964* by Trudy Wilner Stack.
Exhibition Catalogue for "Winogrand 1964," Photographs from the Garry Winogrand Archive, Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona (Arena Editions, 2003).
Images can be viewed at: *www.uturn.org/Reviews/hugrevu2.ht*

Amid the deafening traffic of the town
Tall, slender, in deep mourning, with majesty,
A woman passed, raising, with dignity
In her posed hand, the flounces of her gown;

Graceful, noble, with a statue's form.
And I drank, trembling as a madman thrills,
From her eyes, ashen sky where brooded storm,
The softness that fascinates, the pleasure that kills.

A flash . . . then night! -- O lovely fugitive,
I am suddenly reborn from your swift glance;
Shall I never see you till eternity? . . .

— Charles Baudelaire,
"To a Passer-by," *Les Fleurs du mal*

I

Baudelaire-as-*flâneur* here presents the quintessential experience of the modern city: the fascination and shock which attend the pedestrian's encounter with the metropolitan crowd. But where Baudelaire speculates with melancholy whether he might ever see this intriguing apparition again, the modern street photographer guarantees our ability to re-experience the fleeting event. The camera as optical scalpel excises a slice from the flux of the real and embalms it in a gelatin-silver print. No waiting until eternity to again see that posed hand or flounces of gown.

Walter Benjamin viewed Baudelaire's poem as capturing the utter impoverishment of human life subject to the commodity form; the poem, he said, articulates the fragmentation of coherent experience and its replacement by a plethora of

disparate, discontinuous impressions. The technological development of the camera has followed this trajectory: from long duration of exposure suffered by sitters before daguerreotypists to the millisecond cut into the temporal flow by photojournalists wielding their Leicas. Such instantaneous views became desired commodities and began to fill the picture magazines of Europe by the 1920s; American picture magazine followed a decade later with *Life* and *Look*. Such images mainly celebrated the throbbing pulse of modern life, intrigued by the unusual vantage point, or fascinated by quick action halted. Some photography, dubbed "Concerned Photography," looked into the plight of the marginalized, the suffering of the world with the hopes of changing conditions. W. Eugene Smith's life's work comes to mind.

With the publication of Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1959) a different sensibility became visible. During the 1950s a photographer had two choices of praxis: 1) reportage/photojournalism that communicated objective fact; and 2) subjective photography—evocative, poetic, "difficult" imagery that tested one's ability to "read" a photograph. If the photojournalist communicated straightforwardly, the subjective photographer (such as Minor White) probed the personal and collective unconscious. Frank's body of work did not fit comfortably in either category. It outraged many critics who claimed Frank was distorting the facts and using stylistic bravado to suit his own vision. Which, of course, he was. It was, as John Szarkowski would later oxymoronically put it, personal documentary, a "New Document." A suturing together of fact/fiction akin to a visual version of Hunter S. Thompson's gonzo-journalism.

Frank's more personal aesthetic influenced a generation of "photographers of the social landscape" (as curators Thomas Garver and Nathan Lyons came to refer to them). One major figure to arise within this generation was Garry Winogrand. A watershed year in Winogrand's development as American premier street photographer was 1964. Drawing upon the massive archive of Winogrand's work housed at the Garry Winogrand Archive at the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, Arizona, Trudy Wilner Stack, curator of exhibitions and collections, has put together an important sampling (195 images, black-and-white and color, many only now seen for the first time) of this restive photographer's work. All images were culled from 1964, a year that saw the introduction of the topless bathing suit, the outbreak of numerous race riots across the U.S., Cassius Clay changing his name to Muhammad

Ali, the Supreme Court upholding the Civil Rights Act against two separate challenges, the release of The Rolling Stones's first album, the Beatles phenomenon, and the deposing of Nikita Khrushchev as the Soviet Union's Premier.

As the catalogue and exhibition make explicit, Winogrand wrote in his 1963 Guggenheim Grant application (which he received in 1964 and used to continue crisscrossing the United States, photographing the American scene): "I look at the pictures I have done up to now, and they make me feel that who we are and how we feel and what is to become of us just doesn't matter. Our aspirations and successes have been cheap and petty. I read the newspapers, the columnists, some books, I look at some magazines [our press]. They all deal in illusions and fantasies. I can only conclude that we have lost ourselves, and that the bomb may finish the job permanently, and it just doesn't matter, we have not loved life. I cannot accept my conclusions, and so I must continue this photographic investigation and deeper. This is my project." Robert Frank could have made such an observation about us Americans. We see the same disconnect among people, the bland sameness of dress, and a Puritanical drabness of the social which Frank caught in his images.

II

> *It is certainly right to condemn formalism, but it is ordinarily forgotten that its error is not that it esteems form too much, but that it esteems it so little that it detaches it from meaning.*
>
> — Maurice Merleau-Ponty,
> "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence"

Compare that socially-inflected 1963 insight into Winogrand’s practice with a later more solipsistic statement by him: "I photograph to see what the world looks like photographed." What has intervened? John Szarkowski's taking up the cause of street photography's snapshot aesthetic under the rubric of his Greenbergian modernist-formalist theory of photography. Like Clement Greenberg with painting during the 1950s, the "Czar of Photography" set the connoisseurial tone for visual haute cuisine during the 1960s, a tone which touted photography's five inherent aspects—subject matter, vantage point, time, frame, and detail—as creative elements used to produce "a picture." This picture, according to Szarkowski, gave us little

knowledge about the world and more about how the intelligent eye of the photographer saw that world, how he (more *hes* than *shes*) constructed a new order and clarity out of the discordant flux of the real. Winogrand's later repudiation of social message in his work was firmly in line with his chief curatorial benefactor's conception of photographic practice as a highly refined formal game strategy. In *The Photographer's Eye* (1966), Szarkowski refers to the boundaries of the frame as akin to a billiard table's cushion. Such a formalist reading is exemplified in Szarkowski's analysis of specific images in *Looking at Photographs* (1973). Knowing which side his bread was buttered on, Winogrand simply picked up this formalist artspeak, confirming Szakowksi's appreciation of his work.

What I found so intriguing in Stack's *Winogrand 1964* (and realized during a summer 2003 exhibition at Columbia College's Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago) was a turn away from the Szarkowskian formalist construction of this seminal photographer by the curator situating Winogrand's imagery within a social context, providing a time-line of events from 1964 and reproducing his statement which display his original concern for the social implications of his subject matter. Moreover, Stack provides us insight into Winogrand's color work (the originals are slides) that Szarkowski tended to ignore at the time (until giving his blessing to color photography with the show and catalogue, *William Eggleston's* Guide, 1976). Appropriately, the Museum of Contemporary Photography concurrently showed work by Eggleston during the Winogrand show. Winogrand's color work—contemporaneous with Helen Levitt's and Joel Meyerowitz's color street photography—adheres to the tenets of what photo historian Jonathan Green calls "New Color": snapshot-like banal subjects with subdued color, color as pertaining to light not form. In other words, Winogrand's color work anticipates later color photography, it appears surprisingly contemporary compared to his black-and-white work. It makes one want to see more color work by other photographers during the early Sixties when color was not seriously considered by most photography curators.

Winogrand wasn't to make his big splash until 1967 when he was included in Szarkowski's “New Documents” show, along with Lee Friedlander and Diane Arbus. Later, his books *The Animals* (1969) and *Public Relations* (1977) confirmed him as a master. But *Wingrand 1964* allows to see that by 1964 he had already mastered his use of demotic subject matter, the “snapshot aesthetic” whereby

complex, diverse social reality is smartly stuffed into the confines of the frame in a way that maximizes all the possibilities of surprise, comedy, biting satire, and visual moxie. It confirms that Winogrand did see his obsessive clicking away at our human gestures within our built environment as connected to revealing how the modern city has shaped us and we it—for better or worse. As in Baudelaire's poem to a passerby, here little things count: an untucked shirt of a tourist photographing his family at Lake Tahoe (p. 57); the drooping jowls of a morose visitor to a make-shift Kennedy memorial on Dealey Plaza (p.102); a cigar poking out of a man's mouth on Dealey Plaza (p. 103); a bizarre hat on a woman arriving at Candlestick Park (p. 166); thick glasses tumbling off a teen's face at Candlestick Park (p. 171); the absurd gawking grin on a Veteran of Foreign Wars in Dallas (p. 131); an array of expressions on faces in a crowd at a State Fair (p. 134); and, the elegant formal repetition of angular shapes in home, car and landscape in a shot of a suburban dwelling (p. 191).

Winogrand jostled among us; he trolled the modern crowd (which for those who first observed it, the urban masses aroused both fear and curiosity) for choice catches. He hooked and filleted our awkward humanity and sometimes maimed bodies; he recorded our furtive hustlings about town and witnessed the banalities of our social landscape like a man brooding over our cities as they were already in ruins or simply awaiting an impending apocalypse. His images—we enjoy them as urban tableaux vivants and, not unsurprisingly, this look has been simulated in post-modernist photographic efforts by the likes of Jeff Wall—evoke an over all sense of melancholy even as they depict the ephemeral beauty of the passing moment within the turmoil of human activity. This is firmly in line with Baudelaire's touting of modernité as an aesthetics of the contingent, the fleeting and transient. The casual stroller of the social landscape is the mute witness to such contingencies. Walter Benjamin viewed this *flâneur* who observes and muses over such contingencies as a figure of, a symbol for, the intensification and disintegration of experience in the modern city. But beginning with Baudelaire, this spy among us speaks. More recently he has moved on from poetic words to poetic pictures. He can now provide photographic evidence of the fusion of self and world via such "New Documents" as Winogrand and his peers generously provide us.

SHORT ESSAYS

Exhibition Review:
"INDUSTRIA" September 5 - October 24, 2008, Flatfile Galleries,
217 N. Carpenter, Chicago IL 60607
Images for this essay can be viewed at: *www.uturn.org/Industria*

I

Chicago photographers Ryan Zoghlin (see figure 4) and Dimitre (see figure 3) and sculptor Terrence Karpowicz presented work under the gallery's exhibition theme "Industria." Here I wish to address only the photographic work in that show, contextualizing it with earlier artworks that also address our industrial landscape.

The connection between modernism and technology, the Machine Aesthetic, has been well-documented. Internal combustion engines and electrical dynamos became symbols of a New Age for both capitalist and socialist. Thomas Hart Benton's *Instruments of Power* (1939) is a collage of American industrial might; Benton's visual distortions capture the dynamism of the machine age. While the Commisar's refrain: "Communism equals electrification plus the soviets," calculated the Russian hopes for a brighter future. Utopian hopes for Henry Ford and Lenin were caught up in the fast developing technologies which required ever increasing modes of power to run them. Russian posters of the period reflected this desire to move a largely feudal society into the modern industrial age.

Even when The Great Depression put the brakes on abstraction in art and rampant economic development, the carrot dangled before the masses was still better living through technology. Franklin Roosevelt's Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) project to bring hydro-electric power to rural areas was championed in such hopeful images as Lucien Bloch's *Land of Plenty* (1935) where huge power poles emerge like giant stalks of corn from an abundant cornfield, conflating nature/culture into a single force for utopian aspirations.

The 1939 World's Fair—its theme being "The World of Tomorrow"—re-enforced the connection between technological advancement, scientific planning, machine efficiency, and better living. The Fair's streamlined structures, the Trylon and Perisphere, became symbols of modernity and our impending better future.

The Fair's huge General Motors's pavilion housing Norman Bel Geddes's Futurama exhibit modeled a future around the supremacy of the private automobile

serviced by super-highways and surrounded by high-rises inspired by Le Corbusier's *City of Towers* (1923) plan. When leaving the exhibit, one was given a badge proclaiming "I've seen the future." During the Fair, *Vogue* magazine kept with the utopian theme featuring fashions of the future. The jumpsuit clad, bearded lad in one image is fully equipped for the Age of Electricity.

The focus on the future maintained its pull on the populace even after the horrors of World War II. Disneyland, Buena Park, California and later Disney World's Experimental Prototype Community of Tomrrow (E.P.C.O.T.) in Orlando, Florida stressed the world of tomorrow with its futuristic architecture and transportation systems like the monorail.

By the early 1950s some philosophers decried the modernist paradigm. French thinker Jacques Ellul railed against the loss of human control in the face of the "one best way" logic of "technique" in *The Technological Society*. Martin Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology" argues that the essence of technology resides in its "enframing" of nature as a "standing-reserve" to be exploited. But offers some hope in how artists might reframe technology. Some artists, like Jean Tinguely via his self-destructing machines, also sent out warning signals, but until the 1960s' counter-culture movement, our road to progress went merrily along. The first real glimmer of a shift in attitude within a broader public came in 1970 with the publication of Ernst Callenbach's novel *Ecotopia*; but it too envisioned a better future via technology, albeit through eco-friendly versions and a modified socialist society.

II

By the 1980s, the paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism deconstructed the master discourses of science and technological mastery with its teleological projection toward a brighter future. People's lived experience in an environment increasingly over-built and predicated on ecologically unsound technology, chipped away at utopian hopes. Dystopian envisionments in the popular media (e.g., the film *Blade Runner*) began to replace older utopian assumptions. The very technology that was to usher in a harmonious future began to encroach and despoil our dwelling.

John Humble, a Los Angeles-based photographer since 1974, has developed a keen eye for the odd, and often visually painful, juxtapositions found as he drives

about that smog-choked Inland Empire. Those high-tension wires lauded in Bloch's 1935 woodcut are now seen as sprouting from tacky pre-fab trailer-homes—not only visually ugly, but hazardous to health according to recent studies. In another of his images from this 1980s series, a stucco tract home with barren backyard appears to have oil rigs madly pumping black gold from it as a telephone pole casts its ugly shadow across the threshold. As a former resident of Los Angeles myself, these images remind me not to return.

Ryan Zoghlin, Chicago's answer to L.A.'s John Humble, also explores the intersection between dwelling and technology. El trains, expressways, and jet airlines skirt homes. Instead of the title "Industria," Zoghlin's body of work on exhibit at Flatfile could have been aptly titled "Disturbia." What his camera cannot record -- sound—he implies by spatial juxtaposition. Where Humble focuses on visual urban blight, Zoghlin directs us to contemplate the perpetual racket we are subjected to in city life. Both photographers have superb eye for composition servicing their respective conceptual programs. In *Commuter Train*, Zoghlin builds his image around triangular roof lines nipped by a sweeping arc of train and track. We feel the formal tension in the proximity of the train and house roof as well as imagine the never-ending sound decibels disturbing the resident of that dwelling. And all of this happening in the context of a vivid green nature— in which a tree's shadow intrudes, a ploy analogous to Humble's ever-present telephone poles— and deep blue skies.

Interchange is as formally astute. A web of horizontals and verticals in line and rectangular form repeat throughout the image. Like a sculpture's base, the curving curb and sidewalk anchor the house, whose lines strain optically due to the perspectival distortion—strain as if this sad place wants OUT of its straight-jacket. The horizontal rectangular hulks of the passing trucks echo, and contrast with, the vertical rectangle of the house with its heavily framed rectangular windows and odd door, placed as if trying to escape the racket. The massive concrete framing around the two-story structure echos the poured cement expressway structure. Utility poles frame the home like bookends. In optical space, the roadway slams into a leafless tree, nature assaulted by culture, all under a bright blue sky. Again we sense the residents locked in, victims of not only traffic noise, but also exhaust fumes. Like the previous image, one can help wonder "Who'd tolerate living there?" In response, of course, class issues come to mind here as they do in Humble's work too: "Who'd live

there? Why, of course, those who can't afford to be a NIMBY (an advocate of "Not in my backyard," and the title of a limited edition book by the artist).

Zoghlin's incisive visual critiques of the placement of the machine in our garden desublimates the "technological sublime" (what Leo Marx meant by the complex hybrid of technological progressivism and the pastoral ideal arising in America) that Dimitre's large prints, in contradistinction, intensify.

III

Dimitre (yes, it's just Dimitre) shows familiar things, like our electrical infrastructure, in a new way; he rescues what we might mistake as mundane with his sharp eye for strong formal relationships and a good sense of how to heighten impact via Photoshop enhancement without over doing it. Moreover, his prints are LARGE, enveloping the viewer. The result is what Caroline A. Jones in *Machine in the Studio* (1996) calls an "iconic" expression of Leo Marx's "technological sublime." Dimitre's *Electric Sub* reminds me of Walt Whitman's "singing the strong light works of engineers," and recalls the Precisionist painter, Louis Lozowick's, celebration of electrical power, *High Voltage—Cos Cob* (1930). But whereas Lozowick was formalizing what people saw as positive signs of an emerging utopia, Dimitre is reclaiming what appears today as a pox upon our landscape in positive terms. Today we just tune out such powerlines as unwanted visual blights. Dimitre forces us to sit up and regard these structures in a fresh way. Surprise is what one feels in looking at his large prints (both he and Zoghlin do commerical photographic work, but of the two, Dimitre's is the most graphic and polished in presentation). In several of Dimitre's images, light seems to exude from the print such that from across the gallery one might easily mistake them for backlit Duratrans presentations. Power, their subject, appears to literally jump into the viewer's own space. The large prints are seductive and fascinating. In *Electric Sub* the brightest part of the composition backlights a phallic-looking feature among the gridded wires. Analogously, in *Double Cool*, a nuclear powerplant's steam and nature's clouds is backlight by a romantic moon—a more ambiguous visual statement than John Phafl’s treatment of the same subject.

The beauty and the moody atmosphere in Dimitre's images recall to mind Chicago photographer Michelle Keim's earlier work and material collated in her

recent photobook *Iron Beauties* (Nazraeli Press, 2006), as well as John Pfahl's early eighties series on power plants, "Power Places." A blurb on Catherine Edleman Gallery's webpage concerning Keim's work describes our fascination with industry: "Steel mills and power plants contain the same tense beauty and spectacular power as volcanoes and electrical storms, and serve as a reminder that industrial age technology is powerfully in the present."

Steering clear of *direct* confrontation with ecological issues, both Pfahl and Dimitre render picturesque nuclear power facilities. Cooling towers are obvious emblems of this controversial technology and both photographers feature them as mysterious manmade eruptions in the landscape, like a volcano uncertain. Paraphrasing curator Sally Eauclaire's insightful remarks about Pfahl's photos of nuclear plants in *New Color/New Work* (1984) for my purposes here: Are these elegiac summaries of our civilization or steamy death's heads like those popping up in seventeenth-century landscapes in which all that is missing is the motto: *Et in Arcadia Ego*—“I [death] am also in Arcadia."

In summary, Flatfile Gallery (now defunct) has again presented thought-provoking work with a social edge in their "Industria" exhibition. The choice of artists presented the show's theme, “Industria,” in contrasting modalities and was well-presented. Their diverse work and approaches resonated well together, provoking repeated visits to see the show again and again.

SHORT ESSAYS

THE CUT OF THE KITSCHEN KNIFE

A catalogue essay for "Confessions of a Dadaist: The Era of Existence, 1979 - 2005, Part II" at Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, IL (2005)
Images for this essay can be viewed at: *www.uturn.org/romer2.pdf*

> *The image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be—the greater its emotional power and poetic reality.*
>
> — André Breton,
> *Manifestoes of Surrealism*

> *[F]or Baudrillard collecting performs the same homeostatic functions as dreaming . . .*
>
> — Naomi Shor,
> "Collecting Paris"

> *Seek not whether a man is a Catholic or a Protestant, a Darwinist or a Fundamentalist, a Liberal or a conservative. Ask him what objects he collects.*
>
> — John Windsor,
> "Identity Parades"

I

In his novel *Nadja* (1928), Surrealist writer, André Breton, reports searching France's Saint-Ouen fleamarket "for objects that can be found nowhere else: old fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse." Breton's fascination here is with what Celeste Olalquiaga in *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* (1998) calls the "shattered aura," a feeling of uniqueness enabling the historical experience of that object's loss. Many of such objects/images were dubbed *kitsch* and anathema to elite taste. "[V]ulgarly reproduced artistic rubbish," Gillo Dorfles defined the term in *Kitsch: The World of*

Bad Taste (1969). German in origin, it began to be used in the mid-1800s in Munich to denigrate certain forms of art; etymologically it derives from *verkitschen*, to make cheap, and *kitschen*, to collect junk. Dorfles lists the sins of *Kitsch* as: ". . . substitution of untrue for true feelings, exploitation of trite social clichés, abuse of patriotic, religious and mystic themes out of their proper contexts, and so on." Such questionable items of popular culture, economist Thorstein Veblen stylistically dubbed as "barbarian normal." Frank Wedekind, founder of German Expressionist drama, called *Kitsch* "the Gothic or the Baroque of our age," and which modernist critic Clement Greenberg, in "Avant-garde and Kitsch" (1939), claimed was a pernicious, false culture imposed on, rather than organically arising from, society.

"Kitsch is," writes Olalquiaga, adding to the discourse, "these scattered fragments of the aura, traces of dream images turned loose from their matrix, multiplied by the incessant beat of industrialization, covering the emptiness left by both the aura's demise and modernity's failure to deliver its promise of a radiant future." Smith-Romer recalls that, like her, theorist-collector Walter Benjamin was passionately drawn to the petrified, obsolete elements of civilization; small glass balls containing a landscape upon which snow fell when shook were among his favorite objects. During the 1950s, Helene Smith-Romer's parents owned (and lived behind) their own Mom 'n Pop toy/candy/fountain store (and later owned an art/magazine/card store) while her uncle made his own candy and sold it in his magazine/novelty store. She fondly recalls her father bringing home such glass snowballs and credits her playful immersion in these family enterprises as keying her into the material she mines for her aesthetic productions and her love of play-as-art, art-as-play.

The protagonist in Zola's *Nana* (1880) predates Breton's fascination with such popular artifacts; strolling through a famous Parisian arcade: "She was taken especially by the pressing attraction of cheap knick-knacks, requisites in walnut-shells, necessaries in small containers, ragpicker's baskets for toothpicks, Vendôme columns and obelisks containing thermometers." A contemporary Nana ever on the search for such "modern hieroglyphs," Smith-Romer, in her astute collage works and wittily recycled found objects (her "Pop Alreadymades"), in her apocryphal narratives, wacky mail-art leaflets, brochures, placards, and other oddball enclosures, continues to valorize the concept of the decontextualized (or recontextualized)

object/image. For over twenty years, this Chicago artist has reveled in the plethora of commercial production, stuff usually defamed as "*Kitsch*," but which artist and collector Katherine Dreier in *Western Art in the New Era* (1923) observes: "One is constantly being asked in America, what is Dadaism? One might say in response that almost any form of our modern advertisements, which are essentially American and original, is some form of natural Dadaism in our country. We in America often appear natural-born Dadaists as regards art . . ."

These words could have been uttered by Smith-Romer. With a keen eye for aesthetics and socio-political concerns (i.e., how such objects reveal our collective attitudes, whether that be racism, militarism, religions, etc), she roams through the cultural detritus that surrounds us, awakening their congealed life. Her drifting through the flotsam and jetsam of our commodities results in not only a spectacular collection of oddments, but also provides her with the materials for her myriad collage-works. A dialectical "engager" of popular culture, she is both participant and critic. As participant, she is an obsessed collector fascinated in the afterlife of the object/image, in what has already been mediated by memory; on the objects she collects, she performs a baptism of oblivion, consecrates it to the eternity of memory, and gives us an opportunity to share her passion for the weird, the incongruous. Yet at the same time she wittily critiques our society through *what* she collects and *how* she manipulates these objects/images; junk becomes grist (like in Dadaist Kurt Schwitter's work) for aesthetic beauty and social comment: a box of Ubangi cocktail mixers (labeled as "A Laugh Mixer") touches on the issue of racism, while a model's commercial smile found in an artifact becomes what it *essentially* is, the contorted grin of the victim in which the sexism and cheap eroticism of our society is foregrounded. Even Gillo Dorfles admits in his aforementioned book that, "some of the most ghastly objects can be transformed into artistically positive elements, if not masterpieces, if used in a certain way . . . if they are de-mythified and used in a different context and atmosphere." (Today, Dorfles might point to both Japanese artist Takashi Murakami and Helene Smith-Romer as art production that mixes up high and low culture in instances of de-mythification and recontextualization). In "Aldous Huxley and Utopia," Marxist theorist Theodor Adorno captures something I sense lies behind Smith-Romer's philosophy *vis-à-vis* the popular: "It is ridiculous to reproach chewing gum for diminishing the propensity of metaphysics, but it could

probably be shown that Wrigley's profits and his Chicago palace have their roots in the social function of reconciling people to bad conditions and thus diverting them from criticism. It is not that chewing gum undermines metaphysics but that it *is* metaphysics . . ." It is this perceptive turn of commercial crud into a philosophy worth sharing with us that marks the ingeniousness of Helene's artistic production over these many years.

II

For both Dada/Surrealism and Poststructuralism, meaning is understood as being produced through the juxtaposition of images, heteroclite materials, and the clash of associations, rather than deriving from some ideal correspondence between sign and referent. Dadaist Hannah Höch and Surrealist André Breton were among a handful of aesthetic rebels in the 1920s to first explore the implications of such juxtapositions exemplified by the qualities of instability and spontaneity, where a dialectic between accident and intention reigned.

German theorist Walter Benjamin (using a collage-like literary strategy) expostulated on the phantasmagoric aspects of the material world under capitalism, examining the impact of mass reproduction and media, factors that increasingly turned our world into fragments. This, our social world, has been described in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) by French Situationist, Guy Debord thus: "Under the shimmering diversions of the spectacle, *banalization* dominates modern society the world over and at every point where the developed consumption of commodities has seemingly multiplied the roles and objects to choose from. . . . The celebrity, the spectacular representation of a living human being, embodies this banality by embodying the image of a possible role. Being a star means specializing in the *seemingly lived*; the star is the object of identification with the shallow seeming life that has to compensate for the fragmented productive specialization which are actually lived." Society has, indeed, become wholly absurd, surreal, or "hyperreal," is Jean Baudrillard's take on our postmodern condition, where objects and images become empty signs circulating with ever greater intensity. This process of disintegration and reintegration–noted earlier by Benjamin, reacted to by Dadaism and Surrealism, and carried out as a material process in Smith-Romer's artworks —has now become a defining characteristic of our age. Complexity and chaos have

even become the hallmarks of cutting-edge science.

The question that Höch, Breton, and Benjamin ended up probing in their respective practices was: Could montage as the formal principle of the new machine/media technologies be itself used to reconstruct an experiential world so that it provided a coherence of vision necessary for aesthetic/activist/philosophical reflection? From the parts could one reconstitute a whole? Benjamin writes of his unfinished study of commercial society, his "Arcades Project," that he wants to "discover the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the small, particular moments." In other words, he saw in the kitsch of the nineteenth century the image of future tyranny. But this project of interpretation leads to the circularity of understanding known in philosophy as the "hermeneutic circle": one cannot understand the whole unless one understands the parts, and the parts cannot be understood without the whole. This back-and-forth from parts to whole, whole to parts, is exemplified in the production of the montage/collage.

Contemporary German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, suggests that at its most basic, the process of interpretation requires establishing distance, rendering the strange familiar, the familiar strange. It is in the space *between* the strange and the familiar that interpretation has its play. Such distance is established by moving objects/images into strange contexts that provoke new understandings. The *bri-colaged* artworks of Smith-Romer—articulated as dis/integrated elements—take place in that ludic space between the strange and the familiar. Whereas Benjamin found his "dialectical images" in the Parisian arcades and wrote his observations in musty libraries, Smith-Romer finds hers in musty attics, estate sales, fleamarkets, toy stores like Uncle Fun's in Chicago, and various second-hand stores. She then frequently reproduces her collages, artist books, and enclosures in that ubiquitous commercial establishment—Kinko's. Just as Max Ernst photographed his collages, seeing the final photo as the finished work, not the original collage, Smith-Romer most often copies her cut-and-paste assemblages in order to give them a unified surface.

Smith-Romer's penchant for collecting, imposing an order by means of an arbitrary scheme, and her work in collage are analogous activities. In *The Cultures of Collecting* (1994) edited by John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, Cardinal makes explicit in "Collecting and Collage-making: The Case of Kurt Schwitters": "To recognize that the components of a given collage have corporate impact is to

acknowledge that they form a systematic ensemble. It follows that the collage is in fact a collection—by which I mean *a concerted gathering of selected items which manifest themselves as pattern or set, thereby reconciling their divergent origins with a collective discourse*. [That aforementioned circularity between parts to whole.] . . . Both ultimately exist to be *shown*, and implicitly to be shown to impress."

Smith-Romer's presentation of her collages are various: laser-copier prints from both Kinko's and Lab One (some enlarged 400 per cent via "tiling" and carefully mounted on board and sprayed with a matte finish), conventional C-prints, and inkjet digital prints done at home on an Epson 800 inkjet printer after scanning from a C-print. Yet the differences between these processes is hard to distinguish in the final result. The composite parts to these collages (e.g., from her "Dis/Integration Series: Homage to 4 Women Dadaists: Hannah Höch, Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Mina Loy, and Mary Reynolds," 1992 - 2005) range from the use of large fragments (*Woman*), to smaller fragments (*Tootsie Needs*, figure 5)), to extremely fine bits of diverse materials (*Me and Him*). Overall, the creative thrust of her artwork is from *many* to *one*, producing a novel entity that is other than the *many* that gave rise to it and which becomes part of a new *many* in turn productive of new novel entities. Here is a rhythmic alternation between *many* and *one*.

In relationship to the items in her collection of Pop Alreadymades, the latter two types of collage are akin to holograms in that in a small fragment of the collage one spies something of the whole structure of stuff collected on her website. Or, reversing the process: going from her collection of gross objects to her "dis/integrated" collages one traces something akin to the recursive, self-same structure of fractals. We get what looks like copies of copies, cultural detritus *ad infinitum*.

III

In his famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1937), Benjamin traces the replacement of the original by the copy, the impact of modern technologies on art, art-making, and its consumption by a mass audience. A dialectician, he sees both the upside and downside of the impact of photography, photomechanical reproduction, and film. For instance, he notes the subversive potential of photography as a proletarian art form in terms of both its production (mass access, ease of use) and consumption (multiple, inexpensive

"original" prints for plural consumption). Had the Xerox copier been invented then, Benjamin would have certainly seen it as an accessible, fast, inexpensive purveyor of images analogous to that of the camera. How appropriate, then, that Smith-Romer, trained in photography, should graduate to using the color copier. "Kinko's as an artist studio," is how she succinctly puts it, meaning her mode of production debunks the aura of the traditional artist's studio as a singular, unique place, as that special site of cultist concern (the proverbial studio visit, all those photographs shot in famous artists' studios, the significant street address, etc.).

Appropriate, too, is Smith-Romer's key vehicle of dissemination, besides her mailings, her website, "The I Due Art 4 You Museum" (*www.idueart4youmuseum.com*), which updates André Malraux's notion of the Imaginary Museum into the digital age as a Virtual Museum of which one may become a member. Here are found scanned versions of her various collages (originals range from 4 x 5 to 20 x 24 inches) and her collection of for-sale oddments (ranging from flat to dimensional). This section of collectibles (recalling those cabinets of curiosities, *Wunderkammern,* of old) includes her Pop Alreadymades, those items of popular culture Smith-Romer intuits as modern hieroglyphs, and a myriad of bizarre gifts. Among the latter are rubber stamps, which Helene sees as a pop version of elitist print-making; by stamp-of-hand, choice verbal tidbits become easily reiterated graffiti, sayings ranging from the political to the absurd. They are either quotations by notables (" 'To be an artist a woman must have the will of the devil'—Alice Neel," and " 'Once a specific crime has appeared for the first time, its reappearance is more likely than its initial emergence could ever have been'—Hannah Arendt"), or witty blurbs written by the artist herself ("John Ashcroft gives me nightmares," and "Barking is not allowed unless accompanied by an adult").

IV

As if all this wasn't enough, Smith-Romer provides web surfers with various narratives. Click on the NEW icon and you are offered video clips of Helene discussing Part I of her recent retrospective exhibitions (of which this is Part II) and reading one of her visual books, *Conversations with Elmer.* Click on "The Harry Family" and you encounter a rambling, apocryphal autobiographical account (illustrated with personal family documents and studio portraits culled from bins at antique stores, including a photo of the family dog) by a Madame S. Harry and her daughter, Beatrice, concerning

their well-heeled, far-traveled Harry family, who, we are told, had a fascinating involvement with early European avant-garde art and artists. "I traveled throughout Europe," writes Madame S. Harry, "when I was quite young, only fifteen or sixteen, with my cousin and good friend Grace Kennedy. Since Grace was then a quite famous silent screen star, she introduced me to the artistic circle and life in Europe. We met an array of European avant-garde artists from Hugo Ball to Pablo Picasso to Hannah Höch." And her daughter, Beatrice, comments: "In retrospect, I can trace my obsession with artists and collecting to those precious early years. We constantly wandered the world and breathed in our experience, our education was provided by partaking in life." Here, of course, Smith-Romer, veiled through these female "avatars," traces her own artistic influences.

Though it seems ancillary to the collection on her site, narrating and collecting are actually related activities. Mieke Bal's essay in *The Cultures of Collecting*, "Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting," explains: "I will discuss collecting as a narrative; not as a process about which a narrative can be told, but as itself a narrative. . . . Collecting comes to mean collecting precisely when a series of haphazard purchases or gifts suddenly becomes a meaningful sequence. That is the moment when a self-conscious narrator begins to 'tell' its [the collection's] story . . ." Another recent narrative added to the site relates Smith-Romer's fortuitous discovery of another Hélène Smith (1861 - 1932), a famous Swiss medium who claimed (among other bizarre things) she'd been in contact with Martians and became a famous case study for Théodore Flournoy, a prominent colleague of C. G. Jung's. Smith-Romer appropriates this medium as her own "namesake," dubbing her "The First Surrealist Woman" after she discovered this Swiss medium depicted on a deck of playing cards created by the Surrealists during WWII (Victor Brauner imaged her as the trump card, the Queen of Spades).

Surfing her website, we are given a provocative juxtaposition of diverse particularities from which we attempt to wrestle a sense of the whole: fictions masked as histories, true histories that seem fictional, meticulously-crafted collages, "comicalities" such as a King Kong Silk Tie, an Avon Lady Decanter, a Campbell Soup dress inspired by Warhol, a Jesus Christ thermometer, an America: Love it or Leave Car Air Freshener, a Connect-the-Dots book featuring nude males, old group shots of soldiers, hand-colored photos of Mexican wrestlers, and a postcard of a young and dorky-looking Bill and Hillary Clinton; but there are more disturbing items: a box of Saddam Hussein Condoms

as used by U.S. troops with sexist remarks aimed at Iraqi women, a souvenir bottle of Desert Storm Sand from Iraq, various wearable bejeweled pins saying "Jesus" and "Bitch," a postcard circa 1900 of Blacks Laboring in a Southern Cotton Field; and then there are those thought-provoking rubber stamps.

Mere "junk"? Or, are these *artificialia* images of our social unconscious? Smith-Romer would agree with Kurt Schwitters's concept of *Merz,* that meaning does lurk in such cultural detritus. Just as Schwitters's famous Merzbau installation in his Hannover studio was an ongoing collection of everything that was of importance to him, a constructed autobiography exemplifying his belief in the equal rights of all materials, Smith-Romer's website strives to become, as she puts it, "a Merzbau-without-borders," a virtual version of that long-sought for entity called the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total, or complete, artwork). Moreover, just as it was under the pressure of the changing political situation in Germany that Schwitters's *Merzbau* became for him a freeing alternative to an increasingly restrictive social reality, Smith-Romer's all-encompassing website is a welcome detour from the depressing police-state trajectory of post-9/11 society.

SHORT ESSAYS

FINGERING PHOTOGRAPHY: INDEX AND DIGIT

An excerpt from my November, 1994 commentator's response to Professor Joseph Squier's earlier talk in October, "Art, Community and the Colonization of the Internet" at the lecture series, "Technology and Ethics in Art and Design" held over several months in the Fall of 1994 at Purdue University, Indiana.
Images for this lecture can be viewed at: *www.uturn.org/Fingering*

Joseph Squier, computer artist and assistant professor of Art and Design at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign gave a lecture at Purdue University, "Art, Community, and the Colonization of the Internet" (October,1994), wherein he remarked, "I have not felt a need to distance myself from other art practice, or separate myself from other artists. But rather a need to maintain, and in fact cultivate, a sense of solidarity with both my contemporaries and those artists who have come before me." Mr. Squier went on to suggest we not reject the past, but reflect on it and learn from it. Although he was not blind to the fact that the computer presents us with a new tool capable of dramatically new potential for aesthetic production and distribution, he also noted that we must "resist being blinded by our infatuation with the means and the tools, and not lose sight of the end."

I shall continue in Mr. Squier's spirit of making connections between past and present and his caution toward unreasonably glorifying or condemning this new tool. I shall argue a continuity of ends, without denying they are markedly different means, between past photographic practice and what some term "post-photography," the enhancement or creation of photographic imagery via digital computer technology. In a 1985 article "Zone V: Photojournalism, Ethics, and the Electronic Age," journalism professor Howard Bossen argued against this position, claiming that given the capacity to digitally delude we are now confronted with new ethical questions in photography: "Computers can be used to create images that never existed in the real world but are visually indistinguishable from conventional photographs made of the real world, . . ." The digital manipulator, Bossen argued, may conjure up something that wasn't there in actuality, for instance, the fanciful completion of an earlier scheme of Palladio's Villa Pisani via computer manipulation. Or the manipulator may make something disappear from where it once existed, as in the seamless Removal of John Howard's Statue from

Harvard Yard demonstrates. Gary Hesse, Assistant Director of Light Work, agrees, worrying that, "Becoming more dependent on digital information and stimuli, our collective experiences will fall prey to the ease with which digital information can be distorted and manipulated."

Yet such excision is hardly a new capability. It had already been accomplished in conventional photography, albeit less easily and seamlessly. There's the Soviet's pernicous attempt to rewrite history: the figure of Trotsky, once standing below on the right in a photograph of Lenin Addressing a Crowd, was neatly excised. In Leon Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution,* publishing houses have repeatedly used as a *factual* illustration of the 1917 October Revolution an enlarged still frame excised from *October*, Sergei Eisenstein's 1920 filmic recreation of the event which few know of or complain about.

Certainly, the computer, a new tool, has permitted an easier and more invisible futzing with history. But such desire has plagued conventional photographers since they realized photography willy-nilly captured everything before their lens whether they wanted it there or not, suggesting the compensatory use of retouching, air-brushing, and more overtly manipulable non-silver processes such as cyanotype, bromoil, and gum bichromate printing. Conversely, photography has suffered from not being able to always capture what it hoped it could. So addition—via photomontage, as opposed to excision—was employed; for instance, Eugène Appert's 1870 "documentary" photograph *Crimes de la Commune: Massacre des Dominicans D'Arcueil, Route d'Italia No. 38, 25 Mai 1871, à 4 heures et demie*—issued by the Thiers government to justify, in turn, its massacre of the Communards two months later—uses such fakery to record purported violence against the clergy during the revolutionary upsurge by the Paris Communards. Yet, it is as if the image in itself was insufficient testimony. Appert flanked the image with extensive printed verbal accompaniment to enhance the truth-effect of his composite, anchoring the after-the-event fakery to the list of victims and perpetrators framed by a lengthy denotative title specifying precise locale, time, and date of the event. Although seemingly a documentary image, it was produced after the alleged event, the montage serving to conjer up what was supposed to have occurred. That is, people were probably fooled by this image only to the extent they wanted to be misled due to their hatred or misgivings about the Commune, because the photographic technology of the day was too bulky for such a spot news-shot and the faster emulsion gelatin dry plates

were still not available to arrest action as depicted in Appert's image.

Concerning the implications of this image, photo historian Naomi Rosenblum writes: “Though not the first time that photographs had been doctored, the acknowledgment that documentary images could be altered marked the end of an era that had believed that such photographs might be pardoned anything because of their redeeming merit—truth.” Here Rosenblum reaffirms the fact/fiction dichotomy but, as film critic Serge Daney notes, "The visual is neither the double nor the outrageous, false or inaccurate misrepresentation of something else; the visual is something else, something which is not neutral, which has its own laws, effects and exigencies."

Before elucidating those "laws, effects, and exigencies," Daney goes on to discuss how seeing and sight are connected to the Western metaphysical tradition, how seeing became eventually synonymous with believing, how we adopted "the quite blind trust in the visible," which he terms "photology":

> Let us designate as 'photological' that obstinate will to confuse vision and cognition [*connaissance*], making the latter the compensation of the former and the former the guarantee of the latter, seeing in directness of vision the model of cognition.

The digital manipulator can produce fancies similar to Appert's. He or she can play mad-scientist, substituting one identity for another as seen in *TV Guide*'s cover of Oprah Winfrey's head on Ann-Margret's body. Nevertheless, an 1890s photograph of *Toulouse Lautrec paints Toulouse Lautrec* by Maurice Guibert, a photographic substitution of the same identity twice, is in its seamlessness every bit as visually convincing as Oprah's new body.

In both instances, we are not really fooled as to the existence of two Lautrec's, or of the ultra-glamorous Oprah. We can finger the trick for historically we know Lautrec had neither twin brother nor some strange *Döppelganger* dogging him; and, we know from Oprah's daily television appearances her body's substantial build. The charm of Lautrec Paints Lautrec resides in it figuring our sense of ourselves as psychologically "split subjects," an invisible condition brought to visibility by this trick photo. More pernicious is the image of the slimmer Oprah. Its sexism is not dependent upon the viewer actually believing that Oprah really is slimmer; the image's function is, in fact, intensified by our knowing it isn't "real." The viewer knows Oprah isn't that slim (a lack)

and, by implication, that "I'm not so slim either" (another lack), which is promptly followed by the internalized societal accusation: "You should be slimmer." Society's desire now becomes our viewer's desire: "I want to be slimmer." The cover image, without tricking our viewer into believing Oprah is really so thin, yet re-enforces our viewer's insecurities, stimulates desires (rooted in lack), and naturalizes the patriarchal stereotype of the slim sexy body. Our viewer has unwittingly become an accomplice in the production of meaning. The viewer is caught up in a world of images—what French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan would "the Imaginary"—and so fails to recognize "the Real" (what Lacan terms "misrecognition). Thus the great force of the photographic—and this is confirmed in these of Lautrec and Oprah—is not its supposed transparency and its optico-chemical contiguity to the real, but rather its anchorage in the obsessional: the true referent of the image is not the real per se, but the Imaginary. This produces of the reality effect of the image. . . .

SHORT ESSAYS

THE AESTHETIC USE OF MACHINIC BEINGS

The catalogue essay for the exhibition "in::FORMATION" at the Betty Rymer Gallery, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (January, 2000)
Also published in *Leonardo* 33 : 4 (Fall 2000)
The endnotes format of the original text have been retained.
Images for this essay can be viewed at: *www.uturn.org/Synapsis*

The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity just because he [sic] is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception.
— Marshall McLuhan,
Understanding Media (1964)

The artist is now only the mechanic, the maker, the stage manager, not the star.
— Tina Matkovic,
Primary Structures (The Jewish Museum, 1966)

Today, the main option people have for expressing themselves powerfully is through machines.
— Mark Pauline,
Survival Research Laboratories (1987)

Overview:

The group, *sine::apsis experiments*, is a network of artists—Valerie Sullivan Fuchs, Kevin Heisner, Dan Miller, Kym Olsen, Fernando Orellana, Sabrina Raaf, Lauren Was, and Amy Youngs—that interface bodies and technologies. Steve Boyer, and Kenneth E. Rinaldo, all contemporary media artists, have been invited by *sine::apsis* as special guests for this show, "in::FORMATION," an exhibition of art that moves and makes artworks in the process. Often natural life processes are introduced into artificial media. The result is immersive and responsive art experiences generated by computer-mediated kinetic and interactive sound sculptures, light installations, experiments with

microorganisms, and performance works. Besides the pre-programmed activity, randomness is introduced into these works. Like scientists in cybernetics and socio-biology, these artists agree in seeing randomness not simply as a lacking pattern but as the creative ground from which patterns can emerge. [1] Such systems result in "emergence" whereby, appearing on their own, surprising and unaccounted-for properties that arise from the complex system and develop in ways not anticipated. The pieces form developed networks to which are imparted an upward tension to the recursively looped programs such that, "like a spring compressed and suddenly released, the processes break out of the pattern of circular self-organization and leap outward into the new." [2] They ask us to see technology and the human as contiguous, rather than opposed, and speculate upon the advent of new mutual evolution.

The group (formerly known as *synApse*) began in 1998 when Sabrina Raaf and Fernando Orellana invited nine other Chicago-based artists to meet and discuss issues concerning art and technology. [3] Commonalities were found, mutual technical support was given, and a collective vision formulated. For instance, the interrelationship between information and entropy interests them—like how technologies encourage rapid restructuring and new uses of our bodies that then change experiences of our embodiment in the world. This then impacts the metaphoric networks at play within culture and encourages new life-choices. But also of interest to them is how technologies are geared to accelerate a planned obsolescence that feeds rampant consumerism. On the market, machines have short life spans. In one of their manifestoes, the group declares both a stoic resignation to the inevitable obsolescence and breakdown of their automata and their own mortal bodies, even as they utopically formulate a vision of themselves as machine-assisted artists producing artworks that are art-producing machines.

To focus on only the machine's mortality might lead one to think that these artworks by *sine::apsis* and their invited guest exhibitors are heirs of Swiss artist Jean Tinguely's hilariously self-destroying machine-sculptures or American Richard Stankiewicz's infernal motorized junk. However, the artists in "in::FORMATION" eschew both the former's slapstick lampooning of, and the latter's sardonic attack on, modernity's child—the machine. Tinguely delighted in contrasting, as K. G. Pontus Hultén put it, "the paroxysm of junk in motion" to the fluidity of human locomotion. Stankiewicz resurrected metallic monsters from our glut of junk, as Hultén observed: " . . . he awakens machine parts from their dreams and makes them come alive. Anything brought

back to life in this way is frightful and menacing. Stankiewicz is apparently afraid of the power of machines; when they are smashed, their degraded strength seems even more frightening than before." [4] Hence, the true contemporary heir to the Tinguely-Stankiewicz's legacy is not *sine::apsis*, but Mark Pauline and Matt Heckert's San Francisco-based Survival Research Laboratories' (SRL) manic machinic black comedy performances wherein humor and threat meet.

For modernists Tinguely and Stankiewicz, aesthetic logic succeeds only by maintaining an antipodal contrast: human/machine. To them, the term intelligent-machine would have been an oxymoron. And SRL's wacky machines only warn us of the "dark side of the force" of technology while, paradoxically, encouraging participants and viewers to take devilish delight in the simulation of unleashed fury. Not so the artworks in "in::FORMATION." These artists seek a rapprochement between art and science, between the human and technology.

To seek an artistic precedent concurrent with Tinguely and Stankiewicz for *sine::apsis*'s alternative attitude toward technology one must go back to Robert Rauschenberg's "combine-painting" *Pantomime* (1961). This 7-foot by 5-foot canvas sports two operating electrical fans that face each other from either side of the piece so that, as Hultén describes it, "The play of the two fans . . . is one of the subtlest uses of mechanical means in a work of art. The two currents of air move over the painting behind them [the fans], keeping it fresh and in constant relation to the atmosphere of the room. The display of electric cords connects the work of art to the current of life." [5] One also notices wide splashes of black paint that appear to have moved from the left toward the center and white pigment that seem to have flowed from the right toward the center, clues suggesting they've been spread in part by the force of the air from each fan, hastening the pigments' drying. This distinctly implies the cooperative agency of man and machine the production of pigmental patterns whereby human and machinic constraints coupled with random events result in an artwork. Here the machine, as in "in::FORMATION," is treated as an apprentice, that appears to learn and come to function independently of its master, rather than an object of sport or menace.

The artists represented in this show desire creative machines rather than foist on us destructive ones. They produce a more complex systems architecture where networks, reflexivity, and the interplay of randomness and pattern are used to initiate a profound engagement with informatics, [6] commenting on a society fraught with information glut,

genetic engineering, robotics, AIDS, and environmental destruction. They observe that sensorial experience is increasingly mediated through technological extensions of ourselves. Where humans and machines are viewed as sharing patterns of organization, there can emerge the "posthuman," the splicing of human with the machine. These artists view such innovations as fertile implements, as tools to be used for heuristically creating new experiential frameworks that question the nature of creativity, manipulate staid cultural messages, and restructure old meanings.

As in SRL performances, technology can be construed dystopically, but one must also recall Martin Heidegger's claim that where technology's danger lies, so does its saving power, a saving power not merely secondary to its danger. Underscoring the ambiguous nature of technology—Heidegger reminds us that in ancient Greece "the poiésis of the fine arts was also called *techné*"—he says any decisive confrontation with technology "must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it. Such a realm is art."[7] Such a confrontation underlies *sine::apsis*'s interfacing of technology and the human.

These installations and the accompanying opening night performances (all produced specifically for this exhibition) function as witty metacommentaries on artistic production itself while challenging Marshall McLuhan's claim that new technologies can only induce "self-amputations" of our own organs to protect them from over stimulation.[8] Their works evoke a more positive outlook toward interfacing with machines than evidenced in Arthur Kroker's recent comment that we are living in the "flesh-eating 90s."[9] Becoming posthuman need not result in a wasting away of our humanity. Here information is not conceived as a thing separate from the medium instantiating it, but as literally, physically in formation. Embodiment—realized in the human complicity in the systems on exhibition here, as well as their various material products—is not a to-be-purged supplement to information. [10] The works here are articulations that escape from the dualism of anti/pro-humanism by offering models of "post-human existence where 'technology' and the 'human' are understood in continuous rather than in oppositional terms." [11] As a group, these artists strive toward what Katherine Hayles has called "reverse reductionism": the synthesis of elements which produce something mysterious and excessive. [12]

Thus, these artists stress human agency—employing both artist and audience —and modes generating random events as catalysts for their non-determinate, intelligent,

independently functioning mechanisms. The machines become autonomous; by themselves they produce/transform certain materials during the span of the exhibit. The exhibitors intend such transformations to make an impact on the audience visually, but often on the exhibition space as well via sound, smell, and taste. In some works, the very presence of a viewer in the exhibition space functions reflexively as feedback. Looped through the observers, this reflexivity unwittingly makes them part of the system being observed. So how then will the viewers perceive these products—as art or, having not been immediately produced by human hand, something less?

For many people artistic creation is mysterious, even magical. Most theories of creativity are too vague to be modeled and computers are deterministic, but they can simulate arbitrary choices. The idea is to start with a few simple rules or constraints and then, through highly recursive structures, allow complexity to emerge spontaneously. [13] Enhancing this effect, the artworks in this exhibition intermix computational devices with human agency and random generation either at the initial stage or during the computational event itself. The artist or random generator produces ideas, making use of at least some initial constraints. The outcome calls for revision or elaboration by both machine and audience intervention, and the process may be governed by constraints that cannot be used in the generative stage. In other words, the intelligent-machines in this exhibition are designed to evolve spontaneously in directions the artist-programmer may not have anticipated; their intent is to produce systems that evolve the capacity to evolve. They are in formation. In the process, these machine-human systems create products and byproducts for our wonderment.

These artists seem to have anticipated an observation by Katherine Hayles: "The best possible time to contest for what the posthuman means is now, before the trains of thought it embodies have been laid down so firmly that it would take dynamite to change them. Although some current versions of the posthuman point toward the anti-human and the apocalyptic, we can craft others that will be conducive to the long-range survival of humans and of the other life-forms, biological and artificial, with whom we share the planet and ourselves." [14]

"Wanderings" by Stephen W. Boyer: clad in a network of microprocessors wired to produce sound, the artist moves about the gallery. When he likes the musical patterns, he downloads the algorithm to a sculptural object that he is wired to. This object, which remains active throughout the exhibition, contains dozens of small light sources inter-

woven into a network representing relationships among the twelve tones of the chromatic scale. Disconnected from the artist, the sound-sculpture continues to modify the original sound pattern as sensors embedded in the gallery unobtrusively and randomly feed back new data to the system, increasing musical complexity.

"Gesundheit" by Kym Olsen and Trevor Martin: the turn of a millenium gives us an artificial frame from which to reflect on the successes and failures of our methods of making meaning. How have these methods affected our perceptions of ourselves externally and internally is the general question from which "Gesundheit" began. It is a distillation of one of many explorations the performers have made with the body as the site for pathology, pleasure, hysteria, pain, and transformation.

In this case they have focused on the center of the body, the belly. The performers are located behind an artifical wall which has peepholes from which to view them. One performer is suspended on the wall, while the other "tortures" the suspended performer's belly as she attempts to tell a story. Their exposed skin is covered in organic material such as flour, egg and food coloring. Here the belly is used to investigate the dynamics between public/private and pleasure/pain. Formally, the use of a frustrated narrative, absurdity, and fragmentation are used to "paint" an incomplete picture for the viewer. The viewer is unable to see the whole gestural sequence and the artificiality of the external appearances of the performers work to inhabit the postmodern idea that all history is fabricated.

The Installations:

The In Finite Earth by Valerie Sullivan Fuchs: symbolizes earth, air, fire, and water using four hollow ceramic spheres whose surfaces are encrusted with suggestions of ruins; inside, they contain objects specific to the elements they symbolize (e.g., a heating element in the fire sphere). Different video projections beam down upon each sphere. Elizabeth Fisher in *Women's Creation*, 1975 speculates that the "first cultural device was probably a recipient. . . . Many theorists feel that the earliest cultural inventions must have been a container to hold gathered products and some kind of sling or net carrier," and here ancient clay and carrier bag technology meets hi-tech in an ecological comment on how we are misusing our natural resources.

Database PØØ: mutating informatic tools by Kevin Heisner: in this work a database is generated over the duration of the exhibition. The viewers/participants

interact with the piece by leaving a telephone response at 888-803-8735. The message is then forwarded to a voice pager installed inside a wooden animal transport cage, which is the shell of the sculpture. This message is then emitted in delayed real-time from within the cage. There is a door at one end of the wooden box with an expanded metal opening through which the viewer can see inside and view a projected video. The messages end up recorded into a database on a web site. The site displays a short animation of the video, the phone number, and the text sorted into a randomly ordered data structure. This artwork explores presence/absence in communication, pattern/randomness in information, and the evolution of artificial senses and its biological ramifications.

Colony by Dan Miller: three robot loader mechanisms, following unique patterns, struggle to co-create a surface. Sensors in the gallery decide which loader deposits its material on the tabletop. The pattern for each loader is randomly sequenced to create new patterns. One loader places biodegradable foam squares on the table, another drizzles wax, and the third drops pebbles and water. Once deposited, the materials interact, wear on each other, creating patterned deposits. It makes us think about earthmovers, despoiled land, and systems run amuck.

The Hive by Fernando Orellana: nine drawing machines simultaneously drawing while communicating to each other via a network. The server of this network will mediate commands to each individual machine, allowing for "The Hive's" behavior to change while time passes. Connected in parallel with the piece's network is a malfunctioning pager unit that turns on chaotically through out athe work's "ON" time. This random event is used as a seed to generate behavioral patterns unattainable in *The Hive*'s closed network. In addition to the pager's random injection of information, the pager will also allow for incoming pages. The number of the pager will be available for viewers to call, thus allowing "The Hive" yet another means of achieving independent behavioral patterns. These undetermined patterns will be reflected in the motion of each individual machine and in the drawings that the installation will produce. Periodically, through out the exhibition's duration, the drawings will be removed and new drawings will begin.

The Unstoppable Hum by Sabrina Raaf: we perceive the hum of our industrial environment as inanimate background noise, while our life sounds animate space. This piece reverses these roles, showing us how a building environment perceives us. Contact microphones monitor inherent sounds from pipes and machinery, etc. in the gallery; a geophone listens to visitors' footsteps while a video camera tracks their motion through the space. A microprocessor translates these inputs into digital signals that activate a biomorphic kinetic sculpture that blows air over water-filled bottles of various sizes

secreted therein, creating sensually dissonant tones. The environment's hums activate the most animated tones, while the humans' activity is translated into sounds of wheezing water bags and droning bass noises.

Standby Deliver by Kenneth Rinaldo: consists of aluminum plates facing each other and moving back and forth attached to activating motors. Underneath is a lit glass sugar molecule. Visitors have access to chewing gum, which they chew and stick to the plates, which will stretch out, creating long colorful strings of the sticky substance. After many cycles of the plates back and forth motion, the glass sugar molecule rises up to catch the colorful goo. These molecules are periodically collected, becoming colorful illuminated sculptures displayed on the gallery wall. This computer-human activated system uses sugar, gum and machine as metaphor for human consumption and waist cycle while offering mouth and eye candy to help the participant question the impact of their addictive consumerist behavior and the sugar tweaked cognition that results.

Little Graffiti by Lauren Was: a hi-tech bulbous sculpture: driven by Basic Stamp II and programmed to generate random behavior—rolls determinedly back and forth on a track and up and down on a cord along the wall; it scrawls playfully with lo-tech large crayons—at times the scrawl may be elegant, at others, manic; either way, one flashes on those delightful, naughty wall-defacing enterprises of childhood.

Alchemical Bloom by Amy Youngs: outside temperature becomes information via a sensor that controls the voltage to an electroplating tank wherein "grows" an organic-looking copper object; thus, the weather directly affects the size, texture, and shape of the copper deposits on the armature dipped into the copper sulfate. As each copper bloom is completed, it is displayed hanging on a wire, still dripping, beside the tank in chronological order of production. The bloom quickly develops a patina, while the excess copper sulfate drips create crystalline designs on an aluminum canvas underneath. Process, product and byproduct all become "the art" in this transmutation of weather, electricity and chemistry.

ENDNOTES:

1. Concerning randomness and creativity, some see chaos as accelerating the evolution of biological and artificial life (Chris Langton and Stuart Kauffman), while others see randomness as the froth of noise from which coherent microstates evolve and to which living systems owe their capacity for fast, flexible response (Francisco J. Varela).

2. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1999): 222.

3. In engaging with the machine, these artists collaborate much less with industrial technicians than did Tinguely and the artists involved in Experiments in Art and Technology's (E.A.T.) 1960s idealistic and internationalist attempt to heal the breach between art/science and emotion/reason, by pairing artists and technicians.

4. K. G. Pontus Hultén, *The Machine as seen at the end of the mechanical age* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968): 172, 176.

5. Ibid., 188.

6. "Informatics" refers to the material, technological, economic, and social structures that make our "information age" possible.

7. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1977): 28, 35. Heidegger claims the essence of technology is nothing technological; the real threat is not from "potentially lethal machines and apparatus of technology," but resides in the attendant informational processes of regulating and securing, an "Enframing" of our world into a dead stockpile for potential use. This "standing-reserve" may be embodied as objects or encoded as information, and it occludes a more truthful revealing of the poetic coming forth of things and a more poetical way of dwelling in the world.

8. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: Signet Books, 1964): 52-53.

9. See Arthur Kroker, *Hacking the Future for the Flesh-Eating 90s* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

10. On this point these artists agree with N. Katherine Hayles who, in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999): 5, argues against the mind/body dualism in cybernetics that favors disembodiment; her anti-Platonic stance claims "an opportunity to put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects."

11. Anne Balsamo, "Feminism for the Incurably Informed," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92 (1993): 684.

12. Hayles, "Narratives of Artificial Life," Jon Birds, Barry Curtis, et al. (eds.), *FutureNatural* (London: Routledge, 1996): 153.

13. Philip N. Johnson-Laird, *The Computer and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988): 258, sketches out a "multi-stage" computational architecture with which a computer might come to be seen as creative: "It uses constraints to generate ideas and some to select viable ones from amongst them. Because creativity is not deterministic, there may at some point be more than one possibility—even after the use of some constraints—and, if so, an arbitrary choice is made from amongst them. The constraints may be spread over many stages, or products may be fed back for modification to the generative stage. Multi-stage creativity uses constraints both generatively and selectively."

14. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman,* 291.

SHORT ESSAYS

FOREWORD TO *CREATIVITY: THE SEEKER'S JOURNEY* (Oceanside, CA, 2006)
A special edition handmade book by photographer/teacher Larry Vogel

> *Everyman has energies which he can develop into creative work. I do not believe so much in art as in mankind. Every man [sic] reveals himself. Much of it is art.*
>
> — Laszlo Moholy-Nagy

In noted Japanese filmmaker, Hiroshi Teshigahara's first full length film, *Pitfall* (1962), the camera focuses on a thin, grubby child, the son of an impoverished miner who plays instinctively and attentively, with mud, fashioning small, sculptural shapes around the family hut. Teshigahara here emphasizes his belief in humanity's innate creativity; he consciously strives to reveal the purity of this child's first impulse, what the filmmaker sees as the origin of all creativity and the source of the possibility that there is a universal human experience. In all of Teshigahara's films, there are incidental scenes of people making things: artistic things, ordinary things

In contradistinction to the creative people in Teshigahara's films, we suffer today a major malaise: it is society's reliance on the conditioned response, the repetitive act, the voice of authority. What challenges such a one-dimensional approach to life? Creativity. Psychologists have associated creativity with intellectual competence, inquiry as a habit of mind, cognitive flexibility, aesthetic sensitivity, and sense of destiny. Creativity is the most basic manifestation of the need to fulfill our own being in the world. Defined as suprarational, it brings intellectual, volitional, and emotional functions into play all together while relating the person to his or her world. As such, creativity brings us fulfillment, joy, independence.

I have the privilege of teaching art history, theory, and criticism at two major Chicago institutions. At the first, an art school, I preach to the converted, my students having already discovered their creative impulses; albeit, these art majors are exposed to postmodernist "weak thought" which downplays the notion of "genius," with its

romantic overtones of unbridled creativity, in favor of more modest terms like "producer." Yet these emerging artists experience an empowerment and joy in creation that post-modernist theories are less equipped to elucidate than modernist theories were. These artists create something new, exhibiting what psychologist Abraham Maslow terms "special talent creativeness." Maslow also describes another more generally available form: "self-actualizing creativeness." This is an *attitude* for creativity and is characterized by openness to experience, an innocence of perception combined with a sophisticated mind in which the usual play/work distinction becomes blurred. Individuals of this latter type, wrote Maslow, "were able to be more 'natural' and less controlled and inhibited in their behavior, which seemed to be able to flow out more easily and freely and with less blocking and self-criticism." Creativity, according to Maslow, entails a fusion of the Freudian "pleasure principle" with "the reality principle," challenging the imposed dichotomy of joyless labor versus productiveless leisure.

At the second school, a liberal arts university, I am a missionary bringing "the good word" of *creativity* to students who are often suspicious of anything having to do with the fine arts. In my art history lectures I present them with instances of "special talent creativeness," all the while encouraging them to develop their own "self-actualizing creativeness." However, too often these students are skeptical of their own potential for creative expression, so "pragmatized" they are by our performance-oriented society and/or intimidated by the "professionalization" of the arts. Ironically, our "No child left behind" educational policy means leaving behind the teaching of the *creative* use of knowledge and experience in favor of rote learning aimed at passing standardized tests.

Evaluation is always a threat, which creates a need for defensiveness, producing an atmosphere toxic to creativity. Too many products of our educational system are people who perform well within clear parameters and institutional structures, but find themselves lost when asked "to think outside the box" in order to make new associations between experience and knowledge, or between different subjects. They literally don't understand how, or have the confidence, to apply creativity to tasks at hand. Bereft of creative outlets, these individuals are less likely to challenge the status quo, less likely to self-actualize, accepting life as it has been pre-programmed by others than invent their own life project. Yet genuinely creative adaptation seems to be the only way we can keep abreast of the kaleidoscopic changes in our world. The rash of reactionary ideologies

plaguing our world today are, in my opinion, in part linked to our waning creativity.

Psychologists have consistently noted the importance of belief in self to creativity: Rollo May (he titled one of his books *The Courage to Create,* 1975) wrote: “It requires greater courage to preserve inner freedom, to move on in one's inward journey into new realms, than to stand defiantly for outer freedom. It is often easier to play the martyr, as it is to be rash in battle.” Erich Fromm, in “The Creative Attitude” (1959), defined creativity as: “the willingness to let go of all certainties and illusions” which “requires *courage* and *faith*.” But how can one muster this courage, learn to focus one’s energies?

Southern California artist, Larry Vogel, has developed a clear exposition of how to accept the challenge of a life of self-exploration through willful acts of creation (figure 10). Going on the assumption that we are innately creative but in need of some encouragement and guidance, Vogel draws upon psychologists G. Wallis and Jacob Getzel’s “Five Stages of Creativity” — First Insight, Saturation, Incubation, Illumination, and Verification — which provide the reader with mind exercises and examples of each stage drawn from his own creative experiences.

Vogel takes us chapter by chapter through these stages. First Insight is a passionate connection to our initial subject or problem; Saturation involves information gathering from diverse sources; Incubation pertains to pondering (both conscious and unconscious) the problem; this inward journey often leads to a sudden moment of enlightenment or Illumination in which the solution is envisioned; and, finally, Verification, the most difficult stage: acting, a doing in which one makes the unseen, seen. Ideation is realized in artifact.

Although Vogel’s book targets the fledgling artist, giving him or her tools with which to unblock creative insights, collateral damage is done to *every* person’s tendency toward mental inertia and fear of exercising one’s imagination.

SHORT ESSAYS

Case Study I: Wreck-Ages. Photobooks: Edward Ruscha, Lewis Koch

Images for this review can be viewed at: *http://www.uturn.org/Reviews/Kochbomb.pdf*

***wreck·age** [rékij] noun*
1. remains after destruction: the broken pieces left after something has been extremely badly damaged or destroyed
2. process of wrecking: the ruin or destruction of something (formal)

Sitting before me on my desk are two artist books, each filled with machine wreckage, from two ages: proto-postmodernism (Ruscha) and the post-conceptual years of a waning postmodernism (Koch). What might be gleaned from a comparison of these "bookends" to postmodernity? In what way are they similar? In what way are they different? What are their respective relationships to technology: the recording camera, the object recorded? What are their relationships to a key concept in post-modernism, "the fragment?" In what manner do they construct a form of knowledge?

Ed Ruscha's book exemplifies the second definition given above, "a process of wrecking: the ruin or destruction of something." In *Royal Road Test,* Mason Williams tosses an old Royal Model-X (circa mid-1920s) typewriter out the window of a Buick *Le Sabre* speeding along at 90 m.p.h. on August 21, 1966. Like an accident report, the wreckage is assessed photo-by-photo along its 189-foot crash-path on U.S. Highway 91. The weather ("Perfect") is recorded, other parameters of the event are, with tongue-in-cheek meticulousness, listed and diagramed. The straight-forward black-and-white photographs (most *not* shot by Ruscha) are captioned "dumb snapshots" *pointing* to the shards of the machine, visual data which, in a few shots, is a pointing that is humorously *doubled* in-frame by a conspicuously pointing index finger. The deadpan, monochromatic photos are bled off the pages in this offset, small edition book. The photographs depict a machine reduced to smashed parts, heralding that era's increasing interest in entropy: earlier, Jean Tinguely's preceding self-destructive machines, later Robert Smithson's earthworks and writings on the topic, Wynn Bullock's photographs, like *Typewriter* (1951), as well as J. G. Ballard's literary exploration of dissolution of organization and hierarchy into de-differentiation and terminal sameness.

This book is one of several witty photobooks Ruscha produced during the 1960s: *Various Small Fires and Milk, Every Building on Sunset Strip* and *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations, Real Estate Opportunities, Thirty-Four Parking Lots in Los*

Angeles, and so forth. Margaret Iverson in "Auto-maticity: Ruscha and performative photograhphy" (2010) discusses these little books as "cool in conception and as hotly subversive as Duchamp's Readymades." The implications? Art can be fun and sell for $3.00 per copy. This deadpan mockumentary at the behest of the *seemingly* trivial (Rube Goldberg devices and Jean Tinguely's crazed machines mine such humor) *is* funny *and* yet profound. The trivial can be fascinating as curators John Szarkowski and Peter Galassi assert such when they state that banal photographic subjects can be raised to new heights of *formal coherence* by "the intelligent eye of the photographer." But Ruscha and his photographer, Patrick Blackwell, compose so as to *foil* such optical *haut cuisine.* In Ruscha's world, art can be *anything*. And photography? What do you know! It need not exhibit an Ansel Adams print fetishism nor Szarkowskian formal astuteness. Of course, traditional photo-connoisseurs reacted defensively: "It's art (maybe), but is it photography?" Ruscha's scripto-visual text counters traditional pictorial aesthetics with the "auto-maticity" (car, road, typewriter, toss, camera) of a controlled experiment, a crime-scene investigation.

In the anthology *Photography After Conceptual Art* (2010), Margaret Iversen and Aron Vinegar in separate essays reassess Ruscha's bookworks. Iversen sees *Royal Road Test* "most obviously as an instance of instructional-performative photography," but where "the photographs are a trace of the act and do not necessarily document a performance," what Aron Vinegar understands as evoking a "pre-symbolic state." Iversen reads Ruscha's book as putting into practice instances of what will later be denominated as "systemic art," carrying out a predetermined set of instructions, a counter-expressionistic mode of working akin to the computational methods of punch-cards and computer programing.

Much has been made of Ruscha's "deadpan candor" in these photobooks, a nonjudgmental approach to their subject matter. Seemingly banal objects have been touted by Andre Breton and other Surrealists and Iversen notes a surreal flavor to Ruscha's books. But she misses an opportunity to re-enforce that point when she overlooks the book's title, "Royal Road Test," as a play on Freud's famous dictum that the *dream* is the "royal road to the unconscious," probably because Ruscha's objects are most often the quotidian of our car culture (gasoline stations, pools, parking lots, cheap apartments, etc) and *not* the "old-fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensive, even perverse" uncanny objects Breton found in the Saint-

Ouen flea market. But Ruscha may have put forward his “road test,” where an old-fashioned machine is smashed as obsolete, to introduce its old-fashioned remains as a pop-oriented, neutrally depicted object. *Royal Road Test* transforms a nostalgic, surreal, uncanny object into a pop/conceptual wrecked object via “indifference” and a nod to entropy, employing a neutrality of observation akin to Edmund Husserl’s sober phenomenological reduction, bracketing the natural world and imposing an *eidetic* reduction so as to reveal essences underlying variants. Speaking of sobriety, Vinegar reproduces a publicity still of Keaton, a collapsed machine (a camera no less) flattening him to the ground. The photo records the scene in deadpan, mimicking Keaton’s expression and revealing his equanimity under stress, what Heidegger in *Being and Time* terms “*a disclosive submission to world out of which things that matter to us can be encountered*.”

Like that philosopher’s attending to a mode of deep receptiveness toward the facticity of the world (an approach consciously expressed as an aesthetic in photographer Edward Weston’s essays and in his famous *Daybooks*), Ruscha also goes “to the things themselves,” but he does so tongue-in-cheek, putting to the “road-test” Husserlian seriousness and Weston’s modernist exemplification of Husserlian essences. (Having the same surname, did Ruscha see the wordplay potential in having the two “Eds” butt heads on the field of photographic contest?) While Weston took great care in selecting his subject matter and arranging it on his ground-glass (becoming the “ground” of the situation), Ruscha plays the role of the naive snap-shooter (Jeff Wall affirms this in “ ‘Marks of Indifference’: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art,” 1996) where one is thrown into a situation that is already there; in this case, *the situation* becomes “ground” upon which the photographer finds him/herself. This ground, this situation, will become important in Aron Vinegar’s take on this “dumb snapshot” aspect (evoking “happy accidents” or “fortuitous wrecks”) as used in Ruscha’s photobooks.

Calling attention to issues of random sampling and aleatory choice in Ruscha’s work (the naive and quotidian), Benjamin Buchloh offers its source in Duchamp and Cage’s legacy of an “aesthetic of indifference.” But Vinegar critiques Buchloh’s Adorno-inflected socially-oriented critique wherein Ruscha’s work is viewed as in conformity with the dominant structures of our “administered” society, a stance that meshes well with Stanley Cavell’s analysis of film actor Buster

Keaton's poker face where, in "What becomes of things on film" (1988), he reads it as "acceptance of the external world and the things in it." Vinegar counters this by citing Jaleh Mansoor's article in *October,* "Ed Ruscha's one-way street" (Winter 2005) that reads Ruscha's practice as much more critical of mass culture than Buchloh and Cavell's positions offer. But Vinegar, attuned to the anti-Marxist trends these days, moves his discussion away from societal issues toward an understanding of Ruscha's existential *being-in-the-world* as exemplified in his photobooks.

Vinegar proceeds to take the Keaton-like rhetorical delivery of "dead-panness," the comic acknowledgment of the world remarked upon by so many about Ruscha's work, and rethink it as *not* ironic distancing, but a mode of *being-with-the-world*. He uses Martin Heidegger's existential spin on Husserlian Phenomenology to focus on the sense of our "attunement" to things that constitute our Life-World, our moods. According to Heidegger, our *Being-in-the-World* entails no "objective" that is not also accompanied by an interpretation; hence, no mood ever comes from merely "without" nor from just "within," but arises from our whole situation that discloses our mode of existence (note some similarities here to Systems Theory's emphasis on relation and reflexivity). Thus, for Heidegger "indifference" is not merely negative, but opens out into "equanimity," a calm and even vision of the possible situations of the *potentiality-of-being-as-a-whole*.

Vinegar expands on this point, summing up his argument by noting that Heidegger describes deadpan expression as "resolute raptness," He offers that this is the ability to remain open to the ordinary in the pursuit of some distanced and more "knowing" condition which, he says, explains why Los Angeles's "superficiality" (Ruscha's description) can be profound and funny and worth living for, as it makes one aware that everything is ephemeral when you look at it from the right angle. Ruscha's photobooks are read as an expression of wonder (rather than critique) of our era, specifically, wonder evoked by Los Angeles's very mundaneness and captured in his books. Object (L. A.) and subject (Ruscha) seem fated to a perfect phenomen-ological pairing of world and self.

Lewis Koch's book, *Bomber, a chance unwinding* (Madison, WI: Areness Press/Blurb. com, 2011) exemplifies the first definition of wreckage sketched above: the "remains after destruction: the broken pieces left after something has been

extremely badly damaged or destroyed." Like Ruscha's book, the event recorded is tied to a specific date: June 28, 1943, when a B-17 Flying Fortress bomber on its way to join the air war over Germany, crashed in Wyoming's Big Horn Mountains, killing all the crew, scattering shards of the plane across what became known as "Bomber Mountain" (elevation 12,840 feet). Koch reverses the entropic direction of Ruscha's project, constructing a new meaning from the imaged debris (non-rusting aluminum, so debris looks "new"), and sets up a comparison/contrast between geological time (the site) and human time (the historical event of the crash).

Unlike Ruscha, Koch gives us a scripto-visual autopsy of a site of an *actual* disaster. Deaths haunt the scene; no tongue-and-cheek here. A pathos pervades both the book (conceived in full-color with *InDesign* software and published via print-on-demand) and installation. Installation? Yes. Whereas Ruscha's book is a stand-alone object in a series of similar texts, Koch's was conceived as a supplementary chapbook (yet named one of twenty notable recent photobooks at PhotoIreland, Dublin) to accompany gallery installations of this project, such as at the James Watrous Gallery at the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters in Madison, Wisconsin (June 24 - August 7, 2011) where the artist used the walls and glass of the space like giant book pages that envelop the viewer, putting one *inside* the text.

Where Ruscha's photography is purposely casual, mocking the tenets of formalist fine art photography, Koch's is meticulous, considered. After all, he's been working and defining himself as an art photographer for decades. And much of that work has been an exploration of the possibilities of the visual fragment and the importance of text in and outside the image. The traditional versus conceptual employment of photography (where language was to be purged on the one hand and foregrounded in the other) debate is now shopworn, inapplicable in our post-conceptual times.

These images (in the book and exhibition) are well-rendered, the text (both appropriated and written by Koch) is serious, poetic even. Important to Koch's efforts here is his use of screen-shots appropriated by unwinding archival WWII black-and-white documentary film-footage of B-17s in action. We have the interlacing of two "data-bases" and two historical junctures — a THEN (our "good" war, World War II) and a NOW (our problematic war, Afghanistan) — realized via a monochrome-

and-color contrast, each contrast is key to the aesthetics and ethos of the work. When Koch selected the screen-shot, often a double-image resulted, giving an illusion of motion, a dynamism which contrasts effectively against the very stable images of the scattered debris, aluminum debris that has rested in place for decades *without* showing the effects of time, of slow combustion, rusting (coding this as more a wreck than a ruin).

The word *unwinding* in the title of Koch's project obliquely refers to the unwinding of the archival footage and the considered deployment of film fragments from a war past, and the chance, sudden, brutal unwinding of the Boeing bomber's integrity as it smashed in the dark night across the boulder-strewn heights of a remote mountain. For a thousand and one nights these shards have been there to tell their story. This hints at another level of reference to *unwinding* in his project and it has to do with the airplane's nickname. It was customary for crews to name their "bird," usually with a female appellation. Pilot William Ronaghan and his crew chose "Scharazad," an alternate spelling for Scheherazade, the famous female protagonist holding death at bay (the *raison d'être* for it being chosen) in the frame tale of *One Thousand and One Nights.* The bomber's namesake is described in Sir Richard F. Burtons' translation: "She had perused the works of the poets and knew them by heart; she had studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments; and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred." This was a *classy* war-bird.

Ironically, one night the tale turned tragic for "Scharazad's" crew The fragments of this final tale had a small audience until, camera-in-hand, Koch began to "decode" these "ruins" which, despite time, still sit gleaming incongruously in their mountainous setting. Gathering them up visually, he unwound them for our thoughtful reflection in a small book and across gallery walls.

Koch has always had an eye and penchant for wreckage and an attention to signs and slogans that mark our public space, as seen in *Manitowoc, Wisconsin* (1999). His mature *oeuvre* (starting with his "Totems" series) has involved the arrangement of such photographs into new wholes, a poetic riff on Russian Constructivist "factography" (where complete images are juxtaposed rather than shards of cut-up photos into collage). These earlier works put individual photographs into close proximity, forming distinctive shapes. However, these overall shapes retain

within them the formal and semantic integrity of the single image (we can refer to them as "photemes"). These photemes (like morphemes, words), are given a syntactical import that builds toward a "sentence," toward a fuller meaning that is more than the mere sum of the parts. In Ruscha, the closest one gets to this feeling of "language" is in unfolding his clever book, *Every Building on Sunset Strip*.

These photemes are the basic building blocks of Koch's aesthetic world which he combines to form a more complex poetic state of affairs. At times these photemes display a logical construct, like links in a chain, as in *Tar Pit Totem* (1994), where the figure's head grows from the tar pit/soil via interlocking vertical forms. Other times, the image linkages are more ideational than formal, as in Koch's text-image installation of *OSAYCANYOUSEE* (Wright Museum of Art, Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin, 2008). *Bomber*, a *chance unwinding* is a development from such past work, but the gaps between images increase and text takes on a stronger purpose; the result is a complex dance between text-as-image and image-as-text. And between images and object: the installation includes rocks, simulating those at the crash-site, placed at the gallery entrance as less evidence, more rhetorical gesture.

In Ruscha's *Royal Road Test*, the imagery flows over the page edges and through the turned pages without gaps or interruption, the text is informational. The book has a stable frame of reference, reveal its subject un-problematically, *working* stereotypes of perception as a gauntlet tossed in the face of high modernism. Hence, it is an easily deciphered, what Roland Barthes called a "readerly text," giving as its Barthesian reward a comfortable reading (*plaisir*). In contradistinction, Koch's book and wall installation (where the prints are nailed, suggesting rivets, to the wall) are products of interconnections that make effective aesthetic use of carefully positioned gaps (both spatial and conceptual, as seen in the actual crash site) to create a dance between revelation and concealment, between found imagery and authored.

The result is a Barthesian polysemic, "writerly" text open to many interpretational constructs as the frame of reference is more complex due the ambiguous constellation of image-text; the codes regulating text-reader/viewer relationship are fragmented, requiring imaginative restructuring that invites deeper participation by the viewer. This demands more effort to bridge these gaps. Significantly, the gaps function as pivots on which the whole text-reader/viewer relationship revolves; they trigger and control the activity of decipherment.

Unlike Ruscha's book where the segments are marshaled into a graduated sequence, here elements are transformed into reciprocal reflectors. The blank as an empty space between segments enables them to be joined together into a referential field where the two reflecting positions relate to and influence each other. Thus, the 1943 crash date is paired with the 2006, 2008 dates when Koch made his photos *in situ*; monochrome images play off color; text off image; a past war resonates with a present conflict; a book reflects a wall installation, and so forth. Obviously, one must give sustained attention to these complexities, but one's effort is rewarded by what Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) associates with a bliss accruing from the unsettledness and discomfort of aesthetic co-creation (*jouissance*).

The fragmented language, laconic phrases, and found/authored imagery dispersed within the book and running across the gallery walls, produce a charged, heightened expressiveness absent from Ruscha's book. In one double-page spread the poetic text on the left runs up and down the page: "a small punctuation . . . in the ***everlasting*** . . . of it all ... **The everlasting** matter . . .," while a shot taken through a twisted flange bridges the book's gutter. That ruined flange, in turn, irregularly frames a shard of mountain distance, turning the landscape itself into a fragment. *The past frames our present.* In contradistinction, in *Royal Road Test*, entropy triumphs, history for this abjected object ends.

The "dismembered" text/images in Koch's work are, nevertheless, given a conceptual order, a sort of visual postmortem (the images in the installation, ranging from 4 x 6 inches to 14 x 30 inches, are merely tacked up with small nails as in a crash investigation), creating a tension between the broken and chaotic and the ideational net thrown over the evidence of disaster. Koch's color images of a rugged topography strewn with debris, in approach and subject matter, recall the cool, detached gaze of the "New Topographics" photography of the "man-altered landscape" as featured in the influential 1975 exhibition (curated by William Jenkins) which included Frank Gohlke. Gohlke later documented a damaged Wichita Falls after a tornado hit and then recorded the same scenes a year later.

Common to New Topographics and Koch's project is a focus on the altered landscape, the antithesis of the sublime Ansel Adams type of landscape that had, by the mid-seventies, become moribund. But where Gohlke records destruction and then restoration, or Robert Adams and Joe Deal visually comment on tract-home suburban sprawl,

Koch loosens an historical object (the B-17) from its celebrated historical continuum (intimated by the documentary WWII footage) to become part of the viewer/reader's own present-day experience (Koch's image-text array). Koch's project generates an "afterlife" for this war machine in which a fragment of the past finds itself within, even framing, our present. This strategy asks us to uncomfortably revisit the theme of war and destruction, to recall the destruction wrought on cities and civilians during the Second World War and still to this day (my own father was a B-17 bombardier who later had moral twinges about the "collateral damage" from his bombs). The inclusion in the wall installation of appropriated bombsight photos and target maps, bringing to mind the awful effects of aerial bombardment, as well as reminding us of the fact that now nothing utterly disappears, history enters the realm of the permanently pre-sent via photography.

Koch's pun in one section on "sword" and "words" and the phrase "final rest," juxtaposed to a single released bomb, further con-nects the act of bomb destruction with the plane's crash. His project brings back for our consideration a fatal moment when the destroyers were destroyed, the destructive machine itself destroyed, an unwilling Tin-guely-like act. The plane *carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction.* This ob-servation opens Ruscha's *Royal Road Test* where it humorously refers to the ill-fated typewriter; but Koch seems to suggest this existential fate is akin to Marx's notion of dialectical social contradictions, or even to "bad karma" (he's lived in India).

Koch's photo-poetic probing of wreckage (human remains removed in 1945) is more serious than Ruscha's and analogous to German critic Walter Benjamin's interest in the ruin, the corpse, the fragmenting of language, the captioning of photographs where images do not speak for themselves (found in both Ruscha and Koch's art), and the working of the past as something still uncompleted. Koch is Klee's *Angelus Novus*: eyes backward as he flies forward.

Walter Benjamin's seminal study of allegory in seventeenth-century German *Trauerspiel* asserts, "Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things." For Benjamin, allegory is a mode of ruination for the sake of truth. Might we also say this is what Koch has given us for our contemplation? The ruins of a war-era event converted into a very mysterious set of scripto-visual "runes" we must decipher and come to grips with in our own destructive present. If the shards of wreckage in Ruscha's book speak to the issue of entropy and disinterested seeing, Koch's begins

with entropy as a *fait accompli*, taking pre-symbolic fragments of wreckage and re-assembling them into a Symbolic (text-image) that evokes indeterminancy and evokes the mood of trauma. Unlike Bernd and Hilla Becher's organized grid of serialized images, Koch places his images (in book and on wall) with large gaps between images and text, like a Scrabble Board incompletely filled.

As in real-life trauma (war and nature) Koch's ideational elements remain unreconciled. They refuse us a single harmonious perspective, providing an uncertain knowledge, a knowledge-in-process as suggested in an epigraph for his accordion-fold photobook, *Slender Tread Totem* (1993), where he cites John Muir: "When we try to pick out anything by itself we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." As such, Koch's project refuses a deadpan approach and dodges Aron Vinear's touting of the *wondrous* (a reading of Ruscha that deploys the original Enlightenment promise of an aesthetic ability to judge without interest) in favor of a disaster scenario that remains committed to an anti-war stance without being tendentious; in so doing, it remains ever open-ended, a scripto-visual *mise-en-abyme*.

Koch's coda to his gallery installation is a scene snatched from the ending of Wim Wenders film, *Wings of Desire* (1987), on which is over-printed the voice-over from the film (screenplay by Peter Handke). This is not reproduced in his chapbook. We are confronted by a melancholy image of the Berlin Wall (later to become a ruin) blocking any perspective, the back of a person, Homer, sheltering himself from rain, blocking our view of the wall as he seems to contemplate it in a mood that could range from deadpan acceptance to sorrowful loss. It's as if we share a prison yard with him. The voice-over, a verbal clue from Homer, reads in part: *What is it about peace that its inspiration is not enduring? / Why is its story so hard to tell? /I will not give up . . .* So does Koch give voice to his commitment, his struggle for peace, nor can we viewers give up constructing and reconstructing our readings of Koch's complex project.

Finally, as if asking us to take time to *reflect* upon his installation and our place within it, to suggest the interpretational *mise-en-abyme* he's evoked, Koch uses the reflective glass surrounding the gallery space to his benefit as a virtual wall that mirror-reverses shards of his poetic text (in this instance: "Only sun and stones, and soon") as you look up toward the sky, a sky from which that ill-fated B-17 plunged one dark night.