

Seeing Double

Late in 1981, when I had been director of the California Museum of Photography only long enough to be broadly aware of the museum's collections and potentials, I had a late-night conversation in Chicago with Kenneth Shorr. Shorr had, for several years, been making art out of recycled popular images, old studio portrait negatives, overheard conversations, and other cultural garbage. When I described the museum's Keystone-Mast Collection of nineteenth and early twentieth-century stereographic negatives his eyes lit up. He talked excitedly about the possibility of coming to Riverside to work with such a vast array of (as he saw it) virgin, raw material. We discussed the costs of such a project, and I later explored some grant possibilities, but things didn't go much further then.

About a year later, Jim Pomeroy visited the Keystone-Mast Collection from his home in San Francisco. Pomeroy is an artist who has produced a broad range of work in music, performance, and photography. His interest in the collection stemmed from perception experiments he had done with stereography and the stereo effect. He, Ed Earle, and I renewed the discussion of possible artist's residencies which would provide for extensive work by contemporary photographers in the collection.

These two informal talks were the seeds of a project we eventually titled "Seeing Double." The project was simple enough: bring the two artists to Riverside; provide a modest honorarium, housing, work space, access to the collection, and research assistance; and trust in their vision and integrity. A proposal was developed, which was generously funded by the National Endowment for the Arts through that federal agency's Visual Artists Forums program. Pomeroy visited the museum from January 7 to January 21, 1985, presenting a public lecture on his work here on January 24. Shorr's residency was from March 21 to March 29, with a lecture on March 28.

This publication contains two individual artist's books which resulted. They are designed and edited by the photographers from the larger mass of pictures each produced: Pomeroy's either connoting or quite specifically denoting modern political messages; Shorr's nightmarishly personal.

This *Bulletin* also comprises a sort of visual "final report" on what we believe to be a groundbreaking project. Seeing Double sets a precedent in cooperation between a public museum and artists and—more importantly—in reclamation of the past as the stuff of artistic discourse.

The essential activity of any museum is a

fundamentally conservative one: to **collect** and preserve. Through the research, **exhibition**, and instruction functions served at **this** museum we hope to promote understanding of photography's role in today's culture. **But** in a sense, this hope can never be **satisfied** by traditional museum functions—**regardless** of any new insights reached by scholars, **or** new contexts envisioned by curators, **history** remains mere interpretation. If we can **simply** *echo* the past, and avoid the blatant **untruth**, we are said to succeed.

The photographer works with slightly **better** odds. For, as surely as every picture is a **distortion** of the real world, each photograph is also evidence of an unalterable chemical **and** physical tautology. As a work of art, a **photograph** is—at the same time—both an interpretation and a self-defining fact.

In their work on the "Seeing Double" project, both Shorr and Pomeroy have not only re-interpreted history, they have reclaimed and *restored* it. No other work could be more faithful to this museum's collections, and to its philosophical/ esthetic mission. **No** other museum could be a more apt locus for such a project.

Charles Desmarais
Director