

The art of photography as we now understand it was, to all intents and purposes, invented during the late 1960s in California. Before that time, of course, there were photographs—remarkable, great, even artistic ones—and photographic images that functioned as documents of art ideas or actions, but these pictures were read very differently from the way we look at photographs today. Indeed, they meant something different.

Over its first hundred years of wide use—that is, from the 1850s to the 1950s—photography had come to be seen by its relatively few critics and historians primarily as a window on the existential world (even as film was embraced for its fantastic possibilities). There were precious photographs, art objects by the standards of the day, whether “pictorial,” in the sense that they looked like drawings or etchings, or “straight” in their embrace of photographic detail and tonalities. These were destined for the few galleries that would admit them or the few prescient museums that began to collect them in the 1930s. And there were evidentiary photographs, generally valued for the nominal subject depicted and made for journalistic, scientific, commercial, memorial, legal, and like purposes. Among these were the vast majority of camera-produced images, pictures few would have predicted might ever have value as objects.¹ But all photographs were generally assumed to have a unique relationship, privileged above that of any other picture, to fact.

It is hard today, when virtually all Americans carry a sophisticated camera in pocket or purse, to remember a time when making a technically good photograph required expensive equipment and real training. Now, most telephones come with a decent camera, and advanced image-editing tools are easily and cheaply at hand. In that earlier time, storing, reproducing, and distributing photographic images was difficult and expensive. Now, we type the name of the United States president into a palm-size device and are delivered, in 0.24 seconds, some 19 million photographs of him. Tellingly, 3.3 million of those pictures, indexed by Google as

“funny photographs,” are heavily yet convincingly manipulated. But before 1960, photographs were treated as though they were essentially “true,” in the sense that they optically and chemically recorded what was in front of the camera, even if they were interpretive in cropping, point of view, lighting, or pose. Extensive redesign of a photographic image, generally not seamless in any case, was generally viewed as dishonest and unethical.²

The 1960s was, famously, a decade that put trust in institutions, even experience, under extreme stress. It was an age of psycho/perceptual experiment; a time of constant bombardment with reportage, visual and verbal, of a war that would ultimately prove incomprehensible; a moment when a president turned to deception as a governance tool. In Southern California—where the local “industry” is a structure for manufacturing and trading in images—the illusion of reality promoted by the photograph came under particular scrutiny.

In an environment largely cut off from a wider “art world”—the largest California city had no independent art museum until the opening of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1965—Southern California artists such as John Baldessari, Wallace Berman, Robert Heineken, and Edward Ruscha nurtured a profound distrust of the very bedrock of photography’s supposed distinction as a picture medium.³ Working independently, these four and others around them launched an attack on the validity of the photograph’s claim to truth. As early as 1963, Berman began making works, in a series now referred to as *Faceless Faces*, that present grids of standard-looking portraits of featureless men and women. He juxtaposed the photographs with Hebrew letters that give an impression of meaning but spell nothing, confounding interpretation. From the mid-1960s until his death in 1976, he returned again and again to works that show multiple images of a hand holding a transistor radio, into which a variety of photographic images were set, an aural medium mutely broadcasting visual clichés and scraps of unformed ideas (fig. 01). In all these works,

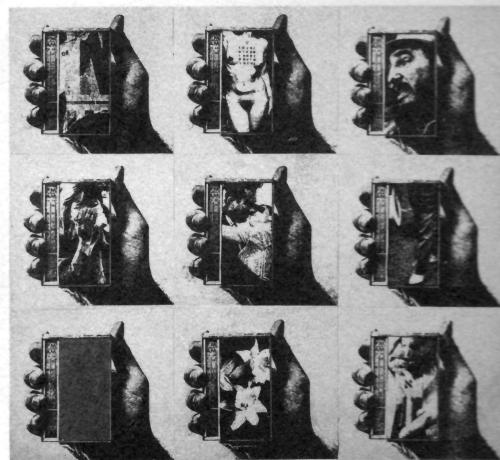


fig. 01

fig. 01 **Wallace Berman**
Homage to Artie, 1965
 Verifax collage and gouache
 17¾ x 19½ inches
 The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles,
 gift of Lannan Foundation



fig. 02

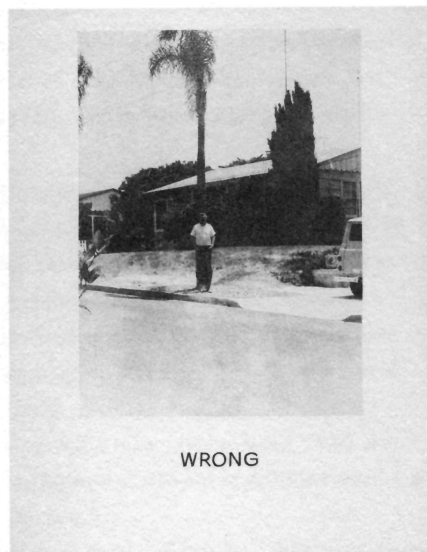


fig. 03

fig. 02 **Robert Heinecken**
Inaugural Excerpt Videogram/Ronald Reagan (...not the other way...),
 1981

fig. 03 **John Baldessari**
Wrong, 1966–68
 Photo emulsion and acrylic on canvas
 59 x 45 inches
 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the Contemporary
 Art Council

Berman pointedly subverted narrative and description, turning the most specific of pictorial strategies into something poetic, yet hollow and generic.

Although best known as a painter, Ruscha produced a highly influential series of photographs beginning in 1963. He purposely stripped, as much as possible, any affect from the pictures he used—a direct challenge to the idea of creative photography. Indeed, the surfeit of fact in his books deliberately devalues meaning, sucking from the photograph its only claim to life. At the same time, Heinecken set up chance clashes among photographic images that dramatically reshaped the meaning of the individual elements, for example, superimposing the same picture of a war atrocity on every page of a fashion magazine or cutting image-shaped holes out of magazine pages to create new automatic collages. Heinecken explored related territory throughout his life as an artist (he died in 2006). Produced in 1981 as *Inaugural Excerpt Videograms* (fig. 02), the works featured in this exhibition are spontaneous montages made by pressing unexposed color printing paper (the Cibachrome brand used a positive-to-positive process) against a television screen. Newly inaugurated President Ronald Reagan and various talking-head commentators were thus *absorbed* (as much as recorded), their ghostly traces captured as relics but not as information.

However, it was the work of Baldessari that epitomized this nascent attitude toward the photograph. His *Wrong* (1966–68) (fig. 03) sums it up concisely. The picture is printed, crucially, on canvas. It depicts a man (the artist) standing on a curb; in violation of a basic photography principle concerning point of view, a palm tree apparently “grows” out of his head. Beneath the image, in sign-painter block lettering, like a caption in an out-size instruction manual, is the single, irrefutable word “WRONG.” *Wrong* is a breakthrough work, not only for the artist but for art and the field of photography. It cuts cleanly through the traditional arguments for photography as art: it is not technically innovative or accomplished; its materials and

finish are barely acceptable; compositionally, it is a disaster; and its nominal subject is boring. Yet, it makes a new case: everything about this work, as a photograph and as a painting, is wrong because it is neither photograph nor painting as they had thus far been critically defined. In negating both, *Wrong* makes the very authority of the photograph itself its artistic subject and purpose. The point is not that the picture is compositionally wrong, but that it is a falsehood at its core.

Particularly in Southern California, this new approach became a working principle for many artists. It freed them to approach photographic meaning as something more plastic than concrete. Baldessari has continued to explore such territory for more than forty years; his 1981 work *Virtues and Vices* (for *Giotto*) reforges the content of found photographs into morality tales, breaching a pictorial gap of seven hundred years. Whereas Baldessari rechannels our interpretation of existing images, Robert Cumming fabricated elaborate photographic lies from scratch. In his diptych *Fast and Slow Rain* (1974), painted strings stretch diagonally across the picture plane, in front of a constructed building façade, read as “fast rain” frozen in the light of a camera flash; hung vertically before the same façade, the strings resemble strobe-lit “slow rain.” A foot photographed from one angle appears to be flexed in motion toward the viewer in another diptych, *Walking Shoes Turned* (1975); the second photograph, from the side, reveals the foot to be balanced on a ridiculously high-heeled shoe. Cheap visual jokes though they might seem at first glance, Cumming’s work of this period profoundly challenged our reliance on entrenched habits of vision and deep-rooted trust in the camera.

Robert E. Brown’s intricately detailed, one-to-one scaled images of building features such as mail slots and ventilation grates carry the notion of a true record to the extreme: a photograph in a gallery

might well be ignored, mistaken for the mundane original. In 1974, Brown created *Cinder Block Room* for the exhibition "New Photography: San Francisco and the Bay Area" at the M. H. deYoung Memorial Museum in San Francisco (fig. 04). The work enlarged in scale Brown's concerns of the time, entirely wrapping a space with a mural photograph of a typical garage or basement cinder block wall. *Cinder Block Room* asks us to consider the relationship of photograph to reality, fact to fiction, and, ultimately, image to meaning.

Ellen Brooks, whose *Adolescents* (1975) (fig. 05) slyly exploits superficial similarities to studio portraiture, told an interviewer:

Using the photograph has been primary in my work. I don't use the word "use" casually. From the first photography class I took at UCLA I questioned the authority of the photograph. In the late 1960s it was still looked on as a record of fact. I did not embrace that idea; instead, I thought of it as a material with special properties that were unique [unto] itself. I didn't believe it as a fact. I recognized that it looked factual but wasn't.⁴

In choosing to present images of young children in the nude, Brooks loaded the *Adolescents* project with sexual tension and ethical questions no mere picture can resolve. These stresses were even greater, paradoxically, at that permissive time (the mid-1970s) and place (California) than they would be today, precisely because that atmosphere was so sexualized. And yet there is a distance, enforced by the Xerox-style printing technique and the serial presentation, which reminds us these are "objects about" rather than "pictures of," to make a distinction famously formulated by Heineken.⁵

This distancing characterizes many works in this exhibition that might at first appear to be "documentary," in the probative sense of that word. Lewis Baltz's extraordinary series *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California* (1974) (fig. 06) borrows the visual tropes of Minimalist painting, particularly as practiced by such artists as John McLaughlin and Robert Irwin. Baltz has, in fact, acknowledged a

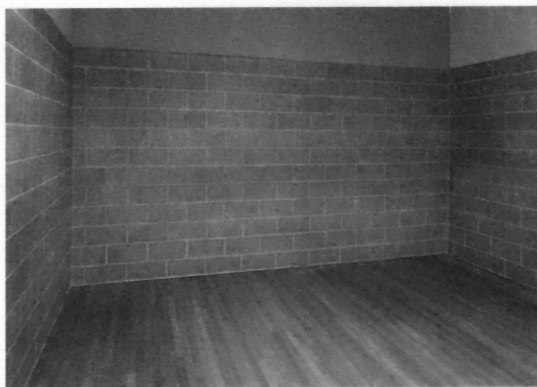


fig. 04

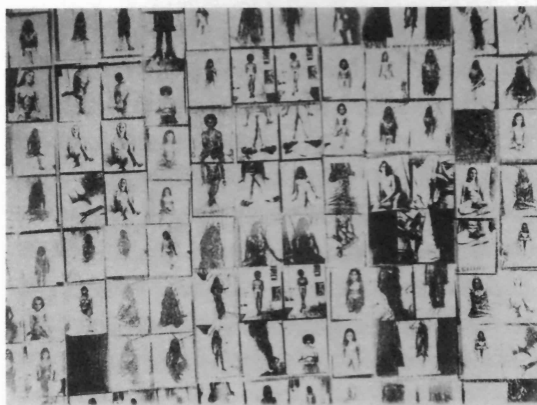
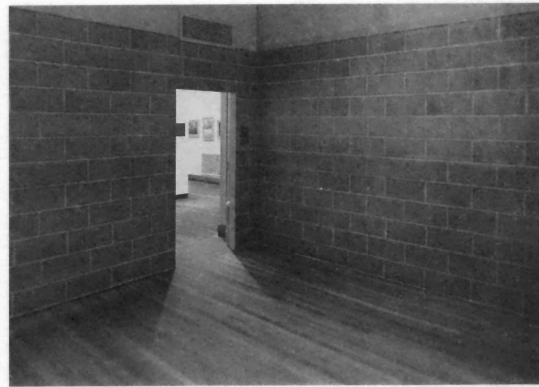


fig. 05

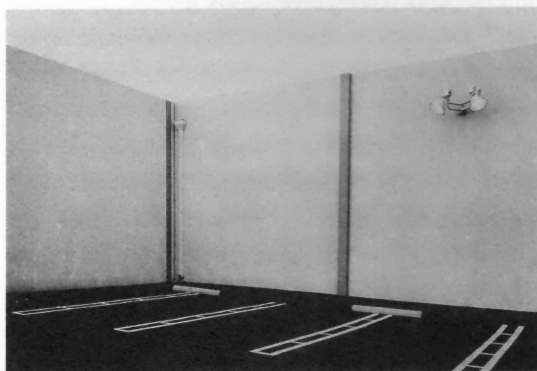


fig. 06

fig. 04 Robert E. Brown

Two views of *Cinder Block Room*, 1974

Toned gelatin-silver print

Dimensions variable

Installation in "New Photography: San Francisco and the Bay Area," M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, 1974

fig. 05 Ellen Brooks

Detail of *Adolescents*, 1975

fig. 06 Lewis Baltz

South Corner Parking Area 23831 El Toro Road El Toro, from *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California*, 1974



fig. 07



fig. 08

fig. 07 **Joe Deal**

Soboba Hot Springs, CA (I), from The Fault Zone, 1979

Vintage silver print

13 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches

The Estate of Joe Deal, courtesy Robert Mann Gallery, New York

fig. 08 **Judy Fiskin**

Untitled, from Military Architecture, 1975

fig. 09 **Allan Sekula**

Detail from School Is a Factory, 1978–80

fig. 10 **Bill Owens**

A banana split has one banana, three lumps of ice milk, crushed pineapple, strawberries, chocolate syrup and whipped cream. In two days of our forty-nine-cent special we sold five thousand splits. Businessmen want a pretty face at the counter... (1976), from Working, 1977

formal debt to these painters, whose work helped launch Southern California's Light and Space movement, which is inflected with Asian philosophical and meditative qualities. Baltz's works depict serene stucco surfaces, sharply defined in tones of black and white, in faultless photographic prints. They bear a kind of ascetic witness to change in the ranchlands and farm fields of Orange County, but they take no firm position. As Baltz himself pointed out, behind those calm façades, "you don't know whether they're manufacturing pantyhose or megadeath."⁶

That same unease permeates *The Fault Zone* (1978–80) (fig. 07), a series of pictures by Joe Deal, and Judy Fiskin's 1975 suite *Military Architecture* (fig. 08). (Deal is often associated with Baltz as a result of their participation in the important 1975 exhibition "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape," which also included San Francisco photographer Henry Wessel, as well as Robert Adams, who has strong ties to Los Angeles. The show included no individual women.) Without a map to plot the geographic titles of individual pictures, only the overarching title of Deal's series suggests that all the subjects were found along the notorious San Andreas fault. But his tightly structured images, relying on a square format, flat light, and horizonless composition, leave us with a sense of barely contained tension amidst the wide expanse of California's desert suburbs. Fiskin, too, presented her work in a constrained signature style: her tiny prints, with strong contrasts of black and white, suggest thumbnail illustrations from a catalog of architectural types. Their simplified geometry and cool detachment, completely devoid of human presence, belies conflicted American attitudes toward the military at the end of an unpopular failed war.

Robbert Flick also developed an idiosyncratic style, building large grids of multiple images. His subjects are generally streetscapes of Los Angeles, dissected according to a quasi-scientific method that is developed for each work. The surfeit of information he assembles for each project might be

thought to better describe or explain his subjects, but the works generally have the opposite effect: truth is seen to be dependent upon point of view—and point of view is revealed as variable or flexible, if not capricious.

By 1975, a nascent critical structure began to be erected around photography. In that year, Southern California artist and critic Allan Sekula published an extremely influential essay in the national magazine *Artforum*. Though it draws upon the insights of such critics as Roland Barthes, the article also reflects the new attitudes about the photograph expressed by artists in the region, giving them theoretical substance. "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning" argues that every photograph has a social and political purpose—that "every photographic image is a sign, above all, of someone's investment in the sending of a message."⁷

This insight hit American photography—its teachers, critics, and practitioners—with a wallop. It surely influenced the artists and writers who developed a coherent theory of postmodernism in visual art—the Pictures Generation of Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, the critic Douglas Crimp, and others—helping to transmit what had been a local phenomenon to the art marketplace of New York. Sekula brought this understanding to his own work as an artist. *School Is a Factory* (1978–80) (fig. 09) conflates polemical images and a purposely stilted documentary style in a bald critique of the political purposes of education.

The almost forensic style of Sekula's photographs places them squarely in a strain developed by a suburban San Francisco newspaper photographer, Bill Owens, who turned photojournalism upside down with his 1973 book *Suburbia*. Photographed head on with a wide-angle lens and the flat flash lighting familiar from tabloid news photographs of decades earlier, Owens's pictures made other photographs, whether intended as art or as



fig. 09



fig. 10



fig. 11

fig. 11 Chauncey Hare

Orville Englander, Richmond, California, from Interior America, 1968
 Photograph printed from the original negatives in the Chauncey Hare Photograph Archive in The Bancroft Library Pictorial Collection, University of California, Berkeley

These photographs were made by Chauncey Hare to protest and warn against the growing domination of working people by multinational corporations and their elite owners and managers.

journalism, look pretentious and sissified. His subjects were East Bay tract homes and their middle-class inhabitants, who—like Owens himself, he acknowledged—bought into a standardized dream of prosperity on a cul-de-sac, complete with two-car garage. The pictures were paired with snippets of revealing interviews with their subjects, such as: “We’ve been married two months and everything we own is in this room” and “How can I worry about the damned dishes when there are children dying in Vietnam.”

Owens’s series *Working* was published in 1977, originally with the subtitle *I Do It for the Money*. As in his breakthrough work, these pictures (fig. 10) blend disparate influences: the photographs of his near-contemporary Diane Arbus, those of the famous newsman Weegee, and the Farm Service Agency images of the 1930s. But by virtue of his point of view, and by assembling individual photographs and captions into larger book projects, Owens made something alchemically new of these elements. He claimed that his work was not ironic, but it is suffused with the kind of gentle mocking humor one reserves for family and close friends. Like *New Journalism* in writing, Owens’s work brings the tools of fiction—emphasis on scene, narrative, and, above all, subjectivity—to photojournalism, constructing rather than merely reporting the story.

Chauncey Hare was another “new photojournalist” in the San Francisco area who shared, to a large extent, the stylistic and empathetic approach of Owens. But where Owens saw himself as an anthropologist (he had served in the Peace Corps in 1961 and, in 1967–68, took a visual anthropology class with John Collier at San Francisco State College), Hare claimed the stance of a political activist, a point emphasized by his choice of title for a recent published compendium of his work, *Protest Photographs* (2004). Like Owens, Hare presented his photographs primarily in book form. *Interior America*, released in 1978, brought a trained engineer’s precision to his description of American existence. Each picture is a detailed inventory of

an environment, but also a life. Colorless both literally and figuratively, they describe an oppressed and powerless society of corporate pawns overwhelmed at work and at home by drudgery and the mundane. The photograph *Orville Englander, Richmond, California*, used for the cover of *Interior America*, was Hare’s 1968 epiphany, a description of a man uncomfortably stuffed into a tiny slot amidst “a stove, a water heater, exhaust piping from the stove and water heater, a can of Maxwell House Coffee, a clock, and, above Orville’s head, a winter scene”⁸ (fig. 11). A later series, published in 1984 as *This Was Corporate America*, depicted an ostensibly different class of people no less smothered by an atmosphere of sterility. “I had a responsibility to honor what I saw and photographed,” Hare said, “especially when I used a wide angle lens that took in more than what people thought I was photographing.”⁹

The growing mistrust among artists of the photograph’s ability to bear the weight of truth took a different form for Hare. He was a wildly successful photographer by almost any standard: in the sixteen years between 1968 and 1984, he was awarded a total of six fellowships (three each) by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts; published two books; and had important museum exhibitions, including a show at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Yet he refused ever to sell a photograph at any price and became deeply disenchanted with museums and universities because, as he later explained it, the “formal art process dehumanized the photographs by turning them into purely aesthetic objects.”¹⁰ For Hare, the picture was not the point: for all the loving detail of his portraits and their environments, it was inadequate to “honor” his subjects.

In 1977, Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan self-published an artist’s book that gave visual and conceptual shape to two key ideas underlying the work of Sekula, Owens, Hare, and others exploring similar territory. The first was that context has as

much to do with our interpretation of a photograph as subject matter or formal stance. The second was that photographs, as embodiments of social structures, carry political weight. Sorting through some two million photographs in such government and military-industrial archives in California as those of Bechtel Corporation, San Francisco; TRW, Inc., Redondo Beach; Jet Propulsion Laboratories, Pasadena; Aeronutronic Ford Corporation, Newport Beach and Palo Alto; United Technologies, Sunnyvale; and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department,¹¹ Mandel and Sultan pulled images from the original files and reproduced them in an album that resembles a bureaucratic report. They titled it, simply, *Evidence* (fig. 12). Professionally (if unimaginatively) lit, shot, and printed, the pictures seem laden with the authority of their official sources; torn from their original contexts, though, they look like coded records of senseless rituals, absurd getups, and anachronistic gear. The sequencing and the pacing—without captions, one image to a page—build a crazy-quilt narrative full of double meaning, non sequitur, and hyperbole. Thus, with a mere rejiggering of a pile of pictures, the photograph—and, metaphorically, all our once-trusted institutions—is exposed as a soulless and hollow vessel, without the meaning we ourselves bring to it.

In 1981, Christopher Williams employed a strategy similar to Mandel and Sultan's to chillingly different effect for his work *SOURCE: The Photographic Archive, John F. Kennedy Library...* (fig. 13). As the complete one-hundred-plus word title of the work reveals in exhausting technical detail, the artist re-photographed all the pictures in the Kennedy Library files that met two simple criteria: "the photograph or photographs must be dated May 10, 1963, and the subject, John F. Kennedy, must have his back turned toward the camera." *Evidence* had set photographs adrift from their contextual mooring: without an original text or associated images, the viewer had no choice but to trust the new order the artists imposed. *SOURCE*, on the other hand, relies on the viewer's detailed knowledge of



fig. 12

fig. 12 **Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan**
All Untitled, from *Evidence*, 1977

Kennedy's appearance, his ready accessibility to photojournalists, his tragic murder six months later, and the fact that the president was shot from behind. That knowledge burdens the four photographs selected for *SOURCE*, transforming mundane public records into foreboding omens.

Working in film, San Francisco artist Bruce Conner also drew upon government archival images for *Crossroads* (1976) (fig. 14). Noted for highly energetic—one might say frenetic—films with pop music soundtracks to match (his photographs of the punk scene attest to his broad musical tastes), Conner took an almost meditative approach in this piece, slowly repeating sequences showing the test detonation of an atom bomb on July 25, 1946. One might almost think of the images as animated stills, so gradually does the mushroom cloud unfurl. The thirty-six-minute work is divided into three sections. The first, accompanied only by a track of incidental sounds and explosions, ends at precisely thirteen minutes with a simple white crosshair graphic; by the second section, the bomb blasts are quelled by an overlay of Minimalist music (by Patrick Gleeson and Terry Riley); the third section, marked by screen white-outs bracketing a high aerial shot, depicts the explosion a final time, gradually calming to a near-abstract image of sea and mist until, in the final seconds, a warship materializes on the horizon. One can hardly imagine a more striking demonstration of the capacity of photography to detach meaning from image.

Photography even as autobiography was deeply affected by the new understanding in this period of the camera's faithlessness. Ilene Segalove's 1975 paean to heroic figures in her life (photography's inventor, L. J. M. Daguerre; Isaac Newton; Joan of Arc; and, incongruously, Barbie), titled *Close but No Cigar* (fig. 15), mocks herself and history, but also photography's claim to accuracy: what of history is reliable, what is fabrication? (Not that she was



fig. 13

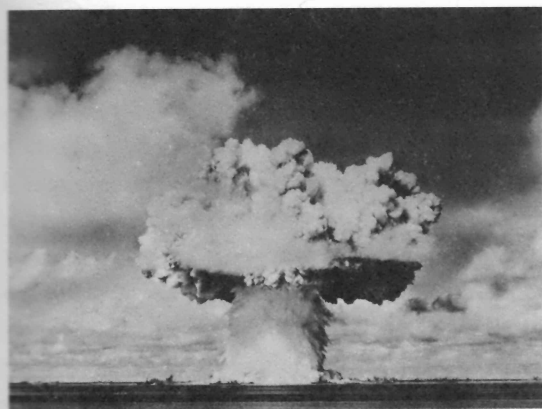


fig. 14

fig. 13 Christopher Williams

Detail from *SOURCE: The Photographic Archive*, John F. Kennedy Library, Columbia Point on Dorchester Bay, Boston, Massachusetts, 02125, U.S.A.; *CONDITIONS FOR SELECTION*: There are two conditions: the photograph or photographs must be dated May 10, 1963, and the subject, John F. Kennedy, must have his back turned toward the camera. All photographs on file fulfilling these requirements are used. *TECHNICAL TREATMENT*: The photographs are subjected to the following operations: rephotography (4x5" copy negative), enlargement (from 8x10" to 11x14" by use of the copy negative), and cropping (1/16" is removed from all sides of the rephotographed, enlarged image). *PRESENTATION*: Under the *Big Black Sun*, California Art 1974–1981, 1 October 2011–13 February 2012, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Christopher Williams, 1981

above manipulating the photograph to try to make it more true, retouching the image of her bared breasts to match the nippleless Barbie.) *All the Pants I Had Except the Ones I Was Wearing (Front and Back)* (1974) is a pointedly pointless documentary work in the autobiographical vein, while *The History of a Woman Is the History of Her Jewelry* (1975) places former first lady Pat Nixon at the center of an absurdly reductive historical narrative.

Segalove's video suite *The Mom Tapes* (1974) brought documentary television into the home. The introduction of the Sony Portapak in 1967 had put a quality video recorder into the hands of artists at a price at least some could afford (about \$6,500 in today's dollars). Segalove used the new tool to record a series of vignettes and dialogues featuring her mother that borrowed the tropes of broadcast television, placing them in a decidedly homey setting. "Mom, I'm bored," she whines in one short "interview," which takes place over the image of an overstuffed chair (a talk-show set reduced to living-room scale), to which her mother answers with a succession of obvious suggestions, each petulantly rejected. Uncritically cataloguing mom's views on a range of topics, from the philosophical to advice on where to get a good deal on shoes, Segalove simply allows the unexamined materialism and sexism of the era to float to the top of her gentle maternal portrait.

For *Family Docudrama* (1980–83), Eileen Cowin drew upon a wide range of visual sources, from neoclassical art to movies and television, as well as her own family history (fig. 16). The works are always perplexing, purposefully mashing up art-historical reference and soap-opera rerun, collapsing the distinction between subject and model (both functions being served by her husband, her stepchildren, and herself—played by herself, her identical twin sister, or both), and demanding an attention that is repaid by ever more complex questions. Frequently, as in the pictures selected for this exhibition, images are also included as subject. One example depicts a family at dinner. Though four characters are seated



fig. 15



fig. 16

fig. 14 Bruce Conner
Still from *Crossroads*, 1976fig. 15 Ilene Segalove
Close but No Cigar, 1975
Eight photographs
29 x 19 inches each
Courtesy of the artist and Jancar Gallery, Los Angelesfig. 16 Eileen Cowin
Untitled, from *Family Docudrama*, 1981

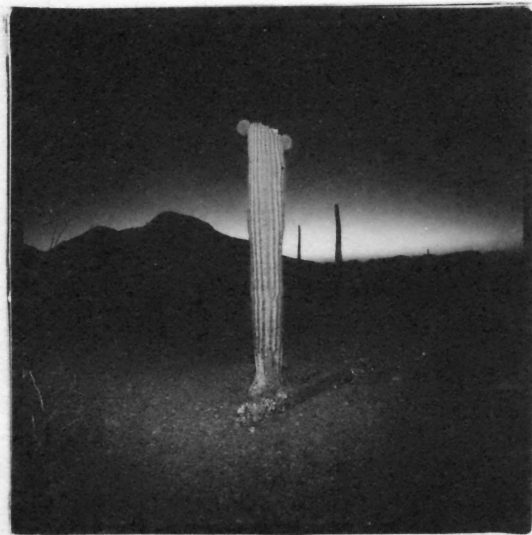


fig. 17



fig. 18

fig. 17 **Richard Misrach**
Untitled [Saguaro, Arizona] (1976), from *Night Desert Photographs*,
 1975–1977

fig. 18 **John Divola**
Zuma #20 (1978/2006), from *Zuma Series*, 1977–78

together, they are further from one another than they might be if at far ends of the house, as they look off into spaces beyond the frame. Shadow images on the wall become fifth and sixth presences, one a looming alter ego of the teenage boy that consumes fully a quarter of the scene. On the wall is a photograph (another in *Docudrama*)—apparently of the same people in the same room, in which the adults embrace as the kids uncomfortably fidget with a wedding cake—and on the wall in that photograph is yet another, compounding the dizzying layers of constructed reality.

Photography's history in the American West is tied to the landscape and such famed visual poets as Edward Weston and Ansel Adams. Indeed, before the 1970s, virtually all California photographers who earned notice as artists chose nature as a primary subject. Ordered composition and razor-sharp definition became the technical tools of a whole school of artists who longed to conjure, as Weston put it, "the thing itself."

In that context, an artist like Richard Misrach, who was developing a new view of the landscape in Northern California, or John Divola, based in Southern California, demonstrated a shocking disregard of the photograph's supposed transparency and accuracy. Misrach's *Desert Cantos* series, an elegiac project that began in 1979 and has been in development for some thirty years, is his most famous work (fig. 17). (iPad owners see a picture from the series every time they turn on the device.) Lushly printed, painterly in color, and spectacularly scaled, Misrach's work today might be thought of as an extension of the Ansel Adams tradition. However, before turning to color, Misrach made the important suite *Night Desert Photographs* between 1975 and 1977 that worked very differently from his current pictures (fig. 17). Taking strobe lighting into the desert, he distilled from a cluttered terrain of cactus and rocks striking sculptural forms. The

monochromatic pictures he made (silver prints heavily toned with selenium) heightened the artificiality of the scene, turning it into something more metallic than organic, more constrained than expansive.

For his *Zuma Series* (1977–78), Divola took a similar approach to photographing nature (fig. 18). Working in color, he mixed artificial strobe light with the natural light of a Malibu beach. Returning to an abandoned house repeatedly over two years, he tracked the course of its dissolution. In violation of the long-established photography tradition of supposed objectivity, however, the destruction of the house was a process in which he took an active part, adding graffiti to heighten and elaborate a kind of degenerate rococo decoration. The *Zuma* pictures should not be seen as a specific environmental statement or protest—the building was condemned by local officials of a rich community, after all, to expand a public beach. But surrounding idyllic sunsets with harshly lit, burned, and battered elements is a philosophical stance, if not a broadly political one, in its reframing of a gauzy California prospect. In the context of the art of the period, it can also be seen as a negation of the photograph itself, that tool of stereotypical beauty.

The original sense of the word "disillusion" was "to free or be freed from illusion." The waning euphoria of the 1960s was experienced by many as a bitter loss, but it was also liberating. Amidst traumatic failure, artists in California led the way to an understanding of the photograph as trust's most potent metaphor, but only that.

Notes

1. All this has changed, of course, and today some of the most highly valued collectible photographs are precisely the pictures one would have found, in the 1960s, in a trash bin behind a magazine publishing house or photo agency.

2. This widely accepted view of the photograph as a true record of objective fact took hold despite the alternative presented by important works in collage (and the related, purely photographic, technique of montage) by avant-garde artists of the early twentieth century. There were two reasons an observer in the 1950s could effectively ignore such images in developing a critical theory of photography. The first was the visually obvious *constructed* nature of collage and photomontage, with the rough and scissored edges (often heightened for effect) of the various elements. More significant, though, was an enforced division between what were seen as the separate fields of photography and art. Thus, a collage work by Pablo Picasso or László Moholy-Nagy, properly ensconced in its art cubbyhole, need not confuse any discussion of the essence of photography.

3. The first part of this essay relies heavily on ideas and documentation contained in my book *Proof: Los Angeles Art and the Photograph, 1960–1980* (Los Angeles: Fellows of Contemporary Art, 1992).

4. Ellen Brooks, “Ellen Brooks,” interview by Leslie Tonkonow, *Journal of Contemporary Art* 4, no. 2 (1991): 9–21. In the same interview, Brooks addresses the effectiveness of photography with socially conscious and political motives, because such pictures are “going to come into question more and more as the public realizes the impact of computer imaging. The ease in manipulating picture events, as evidenced in historical photographs of the Civil War in which soldiers were moved around, is a precursor for adapting an event for the photographer’s own purposes.”

5. Robert Heinecken, “The Photograph: Not a Picture of, but an Object about Something,” *ADLA* (October 1965), n.p.

6. Lewis Baltz, quoted in Cathy Curtis, “Art: The Wasteland,” *Los Angeles Times*, 29 March 1992.

7. Allan Sekula, “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” *Artforum* 13, no. 5 (January 1975): 37. The article has been anthologized in its entirety at least three times.

8. Chauncey Hare, *Protest Photographs* (New York: Steven Kasher Gallery; and Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2009), 13.

9. *Ibid.*, 14.

10. *Ibid.*, 16.

11. Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan, *Evidence* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2003), n.p.