DISMANTLING MODERNISM, REINVENTING DOCUMENTARY (NOTES ON THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION)

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SUPPOSE WE REGARD art as a mode of human communication, as a discourse anchored in concrete social relations, rather than as a mystified, vaporous, and ahistorical realm of purely affective expression and experience. Art, like speech, is both symbolic exchange and material practice, involving the production of both meaning and physical presence. Meaning, as an understanding of that presence, emerges from an interpretive act. Interpretation is ideologically constrained. Our readings of past culture are subject to the covert demands of the historical present. Mystified interpretation universalizes the act of reading, lifting it above history.

The meaning of an artwork ought to be regarded, then, as *contingent,* rather than as immanent, universally given, or fixed. The Kantian separation of cognitive and affective faculties, which provided the philosophical basis for Romanticism, must likewise be critically superseded. This argument, then, calls for a fundamental break with idealist esthetics, a break with the notion of genius both in its original form and in its debased neo-romantic appearance at the center of the mythology of mass culture, where "genius" assumes the trappings of a charismatic stardom.

I'm not suggesting that we ignore or suppress the creative, affective, and expressive aspects of cultural activity, to do so would be to play into the hands of the ongoing technocratic obliteration of human creativity. What I am arguing is that we understand the extent to which art *redeems* a repressive social order by offering a wholly imaginary transcendence, a false harmony, to docile and isolated spectators. The cult of private experience, of the entirely affective relation to culture demanded by a consumerist economy, serves to obliterate momentarily, on weekends, knowledge of the fragmentation, boredom, and routinization of labor, knowledge of the self as a commodity.

In capitalist society, artists are represented as possessing a privileged subjectivity, gifted with an uncommon unity of self and labor. Artists are the bearers of an autonomy that is systematically and

covertly denied the economically objectified mass spectator, the wage-worker and the woman who works without wages in the home. Even the apparatus of mass culture itself can be bent to this elitist logic. "Artists" are the people who stare out, accusingly and seductively, from billboards and magazine advertisements. A glamorous young couple can be seen lounging in what looks like a Soho loft; they tell us of the secret of white rum, effortlessly gleaned from Liza Minnelli at an Andy Warhol party. Richard Avedon is offered to us as an almost impossible ideal: bohemian as well as his "own Guggenheim Foundation." Artist and patron coalesce in a petit-bourgeois dream fleshed-out in the realm of a self-valorizing mass culture. Further, the recent efforts to elevate photography to the status of high art by transforming the photographic print into a privileged commodity, and the photographer, regardless of working context, into an autonomous *auteur* with a capacity for genius, have the effect of restoring the "aura," to use Walter Benjamin's term, to a mass-communications technology. At the same time, the camera hobbyist, the consumer of leisure technology, is invited to participate in a delimited and therefore illusory and pathetic creativity, in an advertising induced fantasy of self-authorship fed by power over the image machine, and through it, over its prey.

The crisis of contemporary art involves more than a lack of "unifying" metacritical thought, nor can it be resolved by expensive "interdisciplinary" organ transplants. The problems of art are refractions of a larger cultural and ideological crisis, stemming from the declining legitimacy of the liberal capitalist world view. Putting it bluntly, these crises are rooted in the materially dictated inequalities of advanced capitalism and will only be resolved *practically,* by the struggle for an authentic socialism.

Artists and writers who move toward an openly political cultural practice need to educate themselves out of their own professional elitism and narrowness of concern. A theoretical grasp of modernism and its pitfalls might be useful in this regard. The problem of modernist closure, of an "immanent critique" which, failing logically to overcome the paradigm within which it begins, ultimately reduces every practice to a formalism, is larger than any one intellectual discipline and yet infects them all. Modernist practice is organized professionally and shielded by a bogus ideology of neutrality. (Even academic thuggeries like Dr. Milton Friedman's overtly instrumentalist "free market" economics employ the neutrality gambit.) In political-economic terms, modernism stems from the fundamental division of "mental" and "manual" labor under advanced capitalism. The former is further specialized and accorded certain privileges, as well as a managerial relation to the latter, which is fragmented and degraded.

An ideology of separation, of petit-bourgeois upward aspiration, induces the intellectual worker to view the "working class" with superiority, cynicism, contempt, and glimmers of fear. Artists, despite their romanticism and their slumming, are no exception.

The ideological confusions of current art, euphemistically labeled a "healthy pluralism" by art promoters, stem from the collapsed authority of the modernist paradigm. "Pure" artistic modernism collapses because it is ultimately a self-annihilating project, narrowing the field of art's concerns with scientistic rigor, dead-ending in alternating appeals to taste, science and metaphysics. Over the past five years, a rather cynical and self-referential mannerism, partially based on Pop art, has rolled out of this cul-de-sac. Some people call this phenomenon "postmodernism." (Already, a so-called "political art" has been used as an end-game modernist bludgeon, as a chic vanguardism, by artists who suffer from a very real isolation from larger social issues. This would be bad enough if it weren't for the fact that the art-promotional system converts everything it handles into "fashion," while dishing out a good quantity of liberal obfuscation.) These developments demonstrate that the only necessary rigor in a commodified cultural environment is that of incessant artistic self-promotion. Here elite culture becomes a parasitical "mannerist" representation of mass culture, a private-party sideshow, with its own photojournalism, gossip column reviews, promoters, celebrity pantheon, and narcissistic stellar-bound performers. The charisma of the art star is subject to an overdeveloped bureaucratism. Careers are "managed." Innovation is regularized, adjusted to the demands of the market. Modernism, per se (as well as the lingering ghost of bohemianism), is transformed into farce, into a professionalism based on academic appointments, periodic exposure, lofty real estate speculation in the former factory districts of decaying cities, massive state funding, jet travel, and increasingly ostentatious corporate patronage of the arts. This last development represents an attempt by monopoly capital to "humanize" its image for the middle-managerial and professional subclasses (the vicarious consumers of high culture, the museum audience) in the face of an escalating legitimation crisis. High art is rapidly becoming a specialized colony of the monopoly capitalist media.

Political domination, especially in the advanced capitalist countries and the more developed neo-colonies, depends on an exaggerated symbolic apparatus, on pedagogy and spectacle, on the authoritarian monologues of school and mass media. These are the main agents of working class obedience and docility; these are the main promoters of phony consumer options, of "lifestyle," and increasingly, of political reaction, nihilism, and sadomasochism. Any effective political

art will have to be grounded in work *against* these institutions. We need a political economy, a sociology, and a nonformalist semiotics of media. We need to comprehend advertising as the fundamental discourse of capitalism, exposing the link between the language of manufactured needs and commodity fetishism. From this basis, a critical representational art, an art that points openly to the social world and to possibilities of concrete social transformation, could develop. But we will also have to work toward a redefined *pragmatics,* toward modes of address based on a dialogical pedagogy, and toward a different and significantly wider notion of audience, one that engages with ongoing progressive struggles against the established order. Without a coherent oppositional politics, though, an oppositional culture remains tentative and isolated. Obviously, a great deal needs to be done.

II

A SMALL GROUP of contemporary artists is working on an art that deals with the social ordering of people's lives. Most of their work involves still photography and video; most relies heavily on written or spoken language. I'm talking about a representational art, an art that refers to something beyond itself. Form and mannerism are not ends in themselves. These works might be about any number of things, ranging from the material and ideological space of the "self" to the dominant social realities of corporate spectacle and corporate power. The initial questions are these: How do we invent our lives out of a limited range of possibilities, and how are our lives invented for us by those in power? As I've already suggested, if these questions are asked only within the institutional boundaries of elite culture, only within the "art world," then the answers will be academic. Given a certain poverty of means, this art aims toward a wider audience, and toward considerations of concrete social transformation.

We might be tempted to think of this work as a variety of documentary. That's all right as long as we expose the myth that accompanies the label, the folklore of photographic truth. This preliminary detour seems necessary. The rhetorical strength of documentary is imagined to reside in the unequivocal character of the camera's evidence, in an essential realism. The theory of photographic realism emerges historically as both product and handmaiden of positivism. Vision, itself unimplicated in the world it encounters, is subjected to a mechanical idealization. Paradoxically, the camera serves to ideologically *naturalize* the eye of the observer. Photography, according to this belief, reproduces the visible world: the camera is an engine of fact, the generator of a duplicate world of fetishized

appearances, independently of human practice. Photographs, always the product of socially-specific *encounters* between human-and-human or human-and-nature, become repositories of dead facts, reified objects torn from their social origins.

I shouldn't have to argue that photographic mèaning is relatively indeterminate; the same picture can convey a variety of messages under differing presentational circumstances. Consider the evidence offered by bank holdup cameras. Taken automatically, these pictures could be said to be unpolluted by sensibility, an extreme form of documentary. If the surveillance engineers who developed these cameras have an esthetic, it's one of raw, technological instrumentality. "Just the facts, ma'am." But a courtroom is a battleground of fictions. What is it that a photograph points to? A young white woman holds a submachine gun. The gun is handled confidently, aggressively. The gun is almost dropped out of fear. A fugitive heiress. A kidnap victim. An urban guerrilla. A willing participant. A case of brainwashing. A case of rebellion. A case of schizophrenia. The outcome, based on the "true" reading of the evidence, is a function less of "objectivity" than of political maneuvering. Reproduced in the mass media, this picture might attest to the omniscience of the state within a glamorized and mystifying spectacle of revolution and counter-revolution. But any police photography that is publicly displayed is both a specific attempt at identification and a reminder of police power over "criminal elements." The only "objective" truth that photographs offer is the assertion that somebody or something—in this case, an automated camera—was somewhere and took a picture. Everything else, everything beyond the imprinting of a trace, is up for grabs.

Walter Benjamin recalled the remark that Eugène Atget depicted the streets of Paris as though they were the scene of a crime. That remark serves to poeticize a rather deadpan, nonexpressionist style, to conflate nostalgia and the affectless instrumentality of the detective. Crime here becomes as matter of the heart as well as a matter of fact. Looking backward, through Benjamin to Atget, we see the loss of the past through the continual disruptions of the urban present as a form of violence against memory, resisted by the nostalgic bohemian through acts of solipsistic, passive acquisition. Baudelaire's "Le Cygne" articulates much of that sense of loss, a sense of the impending disappearance of the familiar, that Benjamin attributes indirectly to Atget. I cite this example merely to raise the question of the *affective* character of documentary. Documentary photography has amassed mountains of evidence. And yet, in this pictorial presentation of scientific and legalistic "fact," the genre has simultaneously contributed much to spectacle, to retinal excitation, to

voyeurism, to terror, envy and nostalgia, and only a little to the critical understanding of the social world.

A truly critical social documentary will frame the crime, the trial, and the system of justice and its official myths. Artists working toward this end may or may not produce images that are theatrical and overtly contrived, they may or may not present texts that read like fiction. Social truth is something other than a matter of convincing style. I need only cite John Heartfield's overtly *constructed* images, images in which the formal device is absolutely naked, as examples of an early attempt to go beyond the phenomenal and ideological surface of the social realm. In his best work, Heartfield brings the base to the surface through the simplest of devices, often through punning on a fascist slogan ("Millions stand behind me"). Here, construction passes into a critical *deconstruction.*

A political critique of the documentary genre is sorely needed. Socially conscious American artists have much to learn from both the successes *and* the mistakes, compromises, and collaborations of their Progressive Era and New Deal predecessors. How do we assess the close historical partnership of documentary artists and social democrats? How do we assess the relation between form *and* politics in the work of a more progressive Worker's Film and Photo League? How do we avoid a kind of estheticized political nostalgia in viewing the work of the Thirties? And how about the co-optation of the documentary style by corporate capitalism (notably the oil companies and the television networks) in the late 1940's? How do we disentangle ourselves from the authoritarian and bureaucratic aspects of the genre, from its implicit positivism? (All of this is evidenced in any one second of an Edward R. Murrow or a Walter Cronkite telecast.) How do we produce an art that elicits dialogue rather than uncritical, pseudo-political affirmation?

Looking backward, at the art-world hubbub about "photography as a fine art," we find a near-pathological avoidance of any such questioning. A curious thing happens when documentary is officially recognized as art. Suddenly the hermeneutic pendulum careens from the objectivist end of its arc to the opposite, subjectivist end. Positivism yields to a subjective metaphysics, technologism gives way to auteurism. Suddenly the audience's attention is directed toward mannerism, toward sensibility, toward the physical and emotional risks taken by the artist. Documentary is thought to be art when it transcends its reference to the world, when the work can be regarded, first and foremost, as an act of self-expression on the part of the artist. To use Roman Jakobson's categories, the referential function collapses into the expressive function. A cult of authorship, an auteurism, takes hold of the image, separating it from the social conditions of its making and elevating it above the multitude of

lowly and mundane uses to which photography is commonly put. The culture journalists' myth of Diane Arbus is interesting in this regard. Most readings of her work careen along an axis between opposing poles of realism and expressionism. On the one hand, her portraits are seen as transparent, metonymic vehicles for the social or psychological truth of her subjects; Arbus elicits meaning from their persons. At the other extreme is a metaphoric projection. The work is thought to express her tragic vision (a vision confirmed by her suicide); each image is nothing so much as a contribution to the artist's self-portrait. These readings coexist, they enhance one another despite their mutual contradiction. I think that a good deal of the generalized esthetic appeal of Arbus's work, along with that of most art photography, has to do with this indeterminacy of reading, this sense of being cast adrift between profound social insight and refined solipsism. At the heart of this fetishistic cultivation and promotion of the artist's humanity is a certain disdain for the "ordinary" humanity of those who have been photographed. They become the "other," exotic creatures, objects of contemplation. Perhaps this wouldn't be so suspect if it weren't for the tendency of professional documentary photographers to aim their cameras downward, toward those with little power or prestige. (The obverse is the cult of celebrity, the organized production of envy in a mass audience.) The most intimate, human-scale relationship to suffer mystification in all this is the specific social engagement that results in the image; the negotiation between photographer and subject in the making of a portrait, the seduction, coercion, collaboration, or rip-off. But if we widen the angle of our view, we find that the broader institutional politics of elite and "popular" culture are also being obscured in the romance of the photographer as artist.

The promotion of Diane Arbus (along with a host of other essentially mannerist artists) as a "documentary" photographer, as well as the generalized promotion of introspective, privatistic, and often narcissistic uses of photographic technology both in the arena of art photography and that of the mass consumer market, can be regarded as a symptom of two countervailing but related tendencies of advanced capitalist society. On the one hand, subjectivity is threatened by the increasingly sophisticated administration of daily life. Culture, sexuality, and family life are refuges for the private, feeling self in a world of rationalized performance demands. At the same time, the public realm is "depoliticized" to use Jurgen Habermas's term; a passive audience of citizen-consumers is led to see political action as the prerogative of celebrities. Consider the fact that the major television networks, led by ABC, no longer even pretend to honor the hallowed separation demanded by liberal ideology

between "public affairs" and "entertainment." News reporting is now *openly,* rather than covertly, stylized. The mass media portray a wholly *spectacular* political realm, and increasingly provide the ground for a charismatically directed, expressionist politics of the right. Television has never been a realist medium, nor has it been capable of narrative in the sense of a logical, coherent account of cause and effect. But now, television is an openly *symbolist* enterprise, revolving entirely around the metaphoric poetry of the commodity. With the triumph of exchange value over use value, all meanings, all lies, become possible. The commodity exists in a gigantic substitution set; cut loose from its original context, it is metaphorically equivalent to all other commodities.

The high culture of the late capitalist period is subject to the unifying semantic regime of formalism. Formalism neutralizes and renders equivalent, it is a universalizing system of reading. Only formalism can unite all the photographs in the world in one room, mount them behind glass, and *sell* them. As a privileged commodity fetish, as an object of connoisseurship, the photograph achieves its ultimate semantic poverty. But this poverty has haunted photographic practice from the very beginning.

III

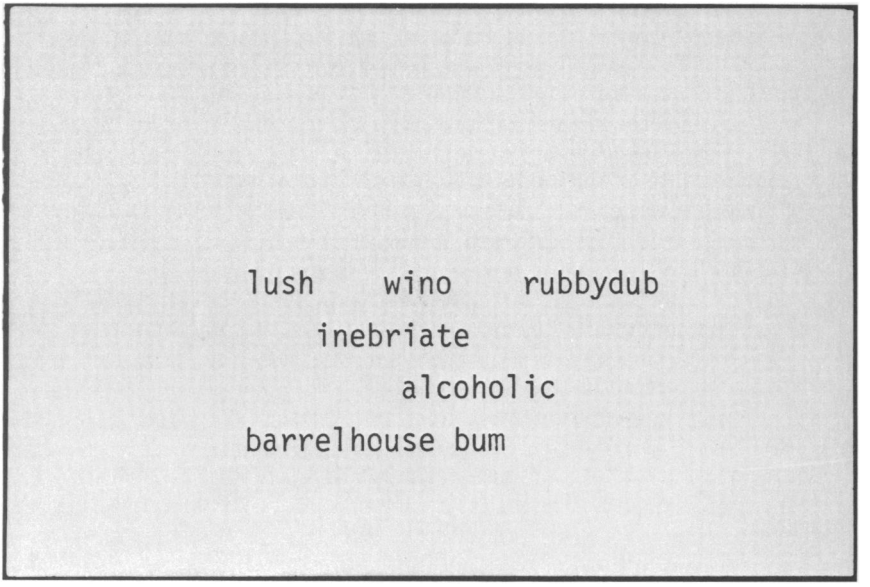
I'D LIKE, FINALLY, to discuss some alternative ways of working with photographs. A small number of contemporary photographers have set out deliberately to work against the strategies that have succeeded in making photography a high art. I've already outlined the general political nature of their intentions. Their work begins with the recognition that photography is operative at every level of our culture. That is, they insist on treating photographs not as privileged objects but as common cultural artifacts. The solitary, sparely captioned photograph on the gallery wall is a sign, above all, of an aspiration toward the esthetic and market conditions of modernist painting and sculpture. In this white void, meaning is thought to emerge entirely from within the artwork. The importance of the framing discourse is masked, context is hidden. These artists, on the other hand, openly bracket their photographs with language, using texts to anchor, contradict, reinforce, subvert, complement, particularize, or go beyond the meanings offered by the images themselves. These pictures are often located within an extended narrative structure. I'm not talking about "photo essays," a cliché-ridden form that is the noncommercial counterpart to the photographic advertisement. Photo essays are an outcome of a mass-circulation picture-magazine esthetic, the esthetic of the merchandisable column-inch

and rapid, excited reading, reading made subservient to visual titillation. I'm also not talking about the "conceptual" and "post conceptual" art use of photography, since most such work unequivocally accepts the bounds of an existing art world.

Of the work I'm dealing with here, Martha Rosler's *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1975) comes the closest to having an unrelentingly *metacritical* relation to the documentary genre. The title not only raises the question of representation, but suggests its fundamentally flawed, distorted character. The object of the work, its referent, is not the Bowery per se, but the "Bowery" as a socially mediated, ideological construction. Rosler couples twenty-four photos to a near-equal number of texts. The photographs are frontal views of Bowery storefronts and walls, taken with a normal lens from the edge of the street. The sequence of street numbers suggests a walk downtown, from Houston toward Canal on the west side of the avenue, past anonymous grates, abandoned shopfronts, flop house entrances, restaurant supply houses, discreetly labeled doors to artists' lofts. No people are visible. Most of the photos have the careful geometric elegance—they seem to be deliberate quotations —of Walker Evans. The last two photographs are close-ups of a litter of cheap rosé and white port bottles, again not unlike Evans's 1968 picture of a discarded pine deodorant can in a trash barrel. The cool, deadpan mannerism works against the often expressionist liberalism of the find-a-bum school of concerned photography. This anti-"humanist" distance is reinforced by the text, which consists of a series of lists of words and phrases, an immense slang lexicon of alcoholism. This simple listing of names for drunks and drunkenness suggests both the signifying richness of metaphor as well as its referential poverty, the failure of metaphor to "encompass," to explain adequately, the material reality to which it refers.

We have nautical and astronomical themes: "deck's awash" and "moon-eyed." The variety and "wealth" of the language suggests the fundamental aim of drunkenness, the attempted escape from a painful reality. The photographs consistently pull us back to the street, to the terrain from which this pathetic flight is attempted. Rosler's found poetry begins with the most transcendental of metaphors, "aglow, illuminated" and progresses ultimately, through numerous categories of symbolic escape mingled with blunt recognition, to the slang terms for empty bottles: "dead soldiers" and "dead marines." The pool of language that Rosler has tapped is largely the socio-linguistic "property" of the working class and the poor. This language attempts to handle a irreconcilable tension between bliss and self-destruction in a society of closed options.

The attention to language cuts against the pornography of the



From MARTHA ROSLER, *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems,* 1975, photographs and text

"direct" representation of misery. A text, analogous formally to our own ideological index of names-for-the-world, interposes itself between us and "visual experience."

Most of Rosler's other work deals with the internalization of oppressive namings, usually with the structuring of women's consciousness by the material demands of sex and class. Her videotape, *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1976) portrays documentation as the clinical, brutal instrumentality of a ruling elite bent on the total administration of all aspects of social life: reproduction, child-rearing, education, labor and consumption. A woman is slowly stripped by white-coated technicians, who measure and evaluate every *component* of her body. A voice-over meditates on violence as a mode of social control, on positivism, on the triumph of quantity, on the master's voice from within. Rosler refers to the body as the fundamental battleground of bourgeois culture.

Since I've mentioned video, I ought to point out that the most developed critiques of the illusory facticity of photographic media have been cinematic, stemming from outside the tradition of still photography. With film and video, sound and image, or sound, image, and text, can be worked *over* and *against* each other, leading to the possibility of negation and metacommentary. An image can be offered as evidence, and then subverted. Photography remains a primitive medium by comparison. Still photographers have tended to believe naively in the power and efficacy of the single image. Of course, the museological handling of photographs encourages this belief, as does the allure of the high-art commodity market. But even photojournalists like to imagine that a good photograph can punch through, overcome its caption and story, on the power of vision alone. The power of the overall communicative system with its characteristic structure and mode of address, over the fragmentary utterance, is ignored. Brecht's remarks in "The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre" are worth recalling on this issue, despite his deliberately crude and mechanistic way of phrasing the problem:

> The muddled thinking which overtakes musicians, writers and critics as soon as they consider their own situation has tremendous consequences to which too little attention is paid. For by imagining that they have got hold of an apparatus which in fact has got hold of them they are supporting an apparatus which is out of their control. . . .

The critical anti-naturalism of Brecht, continued in the politically and formally reflexive cinematic modernism of Chris Marker, Godard,

and the team of Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet, stands as a guide to ideologically self-conscious handling of image and text. Americans, schooled in positivism from infancy, tend to miss the point. It was Americans who mistranslated the reflexive documentary methods of Dziga Vertov's Kino-Pravda and Jean Rouch's cinema-verite into "direct cinema," the cult of the invisible camera, of life caught unawares. The advent of the formalist reflexivity of "structural film" hasn't helped matters either, but merely serves as a crude antithesis to the former tendency.

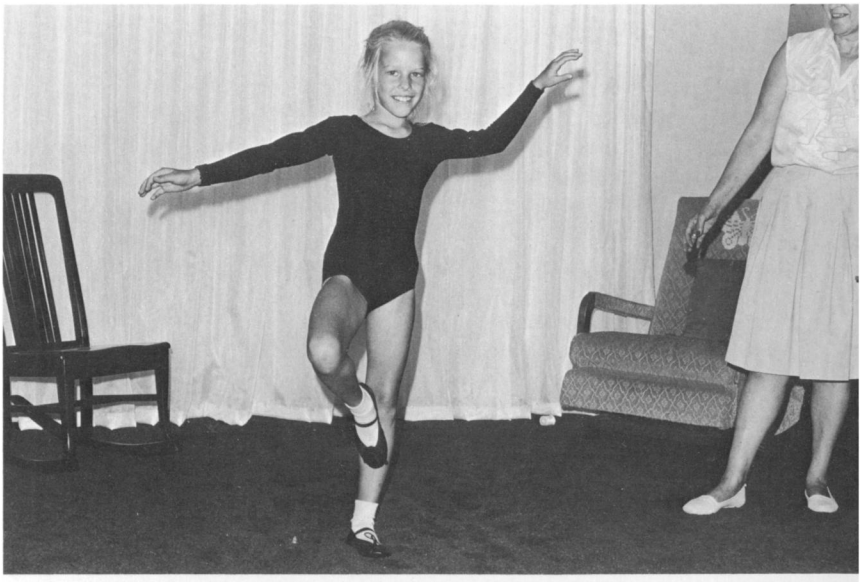
Jon Jost's film *Speaking Directly* (1975) and Brian Connell's videotapes *La Lucha Final* (1976) and *Petro Theater* (1975) stands as rare examples of American works that write a developed left-wing politics with an understanding of the relation between form and ideology within the documentary genre. *La Lucha Final* dissects the already fragmented corpus of television news by constructing (perhaps deconstructing is the more appropriate word) a detective story narrative of American imperialism in crisis. The story emerges on the basis of scavenged material: State Department publicity photos, Tet offensive news footage, bits of late night television movies. American agents are always asking the wrong questions too late. Another of Connell's tapes, *Petro Theater,* decodes mysterious photo-postcard islands floating off the coast of Long Beach, California. These man-made oil drilling operations are disguised as tropical paradises, complete with palm trees and waterfalls. The derricks themselves are camouflaged as skyscrapers, made to pose as corporate headquarters. Connell's tape reads the island as an image of colonial territory, as nature dominated by an aggressive and expansionist corporate order. The islands are named for dead astronauts, allowing the derricks to assume the glamor of moon rockets. Connell plays the offshore mirage against the political economy of the "energy crisis." Photography like that of Lewis Baltz, to give a counter example, suggests that the oxymoronic label, "industrial park" is somehow natural, an unquestionable aspect of a landscape that is both a source of Pop disdain and mortuarial elegance of design. Baltz's photographs of enigmatic factories fail to tell us anything about them, to recall Brecht's remark about a hypothetical photograph of the Krupp works. Connell, on the other hand, argues that advanced capitalism depends on the ideological obliteration of the base. In California, we are led to believe, no one works, people merely punch in for eight hours of Muzak-soothed leisure in air-conditioned condominium-like structures that are somehow sites for the immaculate conception of commodities.

Jost's *Speaking Directly* is a rigorously phenomenological attempt at political autobiography, setting Jost's own subjectivity as film-

maker, as he-who-speaks, as: particular and emblematic male, as American, as war resister, as rural dropout, as intellectual, as lover, friend, and enemy to numerous Others. Against its determinations and constraints, Jost is continually exposing the problematic character of his own authorship, suggesting his own dishonestly in attempting to construct a coherent image of "his" world. The film skirts solipsism; in fact, Jost resists solipsism through an almost compulsively repetitive rendering of a politicized "outer world." American defoliant bombers waste a section of Vietnam again and again, until the viewer knows the sequence's every move in advance. Magazine advertisements pile up endlessly in another sequence. The "politics" of Jost's work lies in an understanding it shares with, and owes to, both the Women's Liberation Movement and sections of the New Left; the understanding that sexuality, the formation of the self, and the survival of the autonomous subject are fundamental issues for revolutionary practice.

These concerns are shared to a large extent by Philip Steinmetz in a six-volume sociological "portrait" of himself and his relatives. The entire work, called *Somebody's Making a Mistake* (1976), is made up of more than six hundred photographs taken over several years. The pictures are well-lit, full of ironic incident and material detail, reminiscent of Russell Lee. Steinmetz pays a great deal of attention to the esthetics of personal style, to clothing and gesture, to interior decoration. His captions vary between sociological polemic and personal anecdote. The books are a curious hybrid of the family album and a variety of elegantly handcrafted coffee-table book. The narrative span of the family album is compressed temporally, resulting in a maddening intensity of coverage and exposure.

While covering intimate affairs, Steinmetz offers a synecdochic representation of suburban middle-class family life. At the same time the work is a complex autobiography in which Steinmetz invents himself and is in turn invented, appearing as eldest son, ex-husband, father, alienated and documentation-obsessed prime mover, and escapee with one foot in a suburban petit-bourgeois past. The work pivots on self-implication, on Steinmetz's willingness to expose his interactions with and attitudes toward the rest of the family. The picture books are products of a series of discontinuous theatrical encounters; the artist "visits the folks." Some occasions are full of auspicious moments for traditional family-album photography: a birthday, a family dinner. Here Steinmetz is an insider, functioning within the logic of the family, expected, even asked to take pictures. At other moments the camera is pulled out with less fanfare and approval, almost on the sly, I imagine. Other encounters are deliberately staged by the photographer: on a weekend visit he photo-



Mom: "Traci has learned how to set a beautiful table. She has your artistic abilities."

DAD: "This isn't like communist Russia where they set down the rules and feed the people only one kind of propaganda until they believe that white is black."

From PHILIP A. STEINMETZ, *Somebody's Making a Mistake,* 1976, photographic books with text

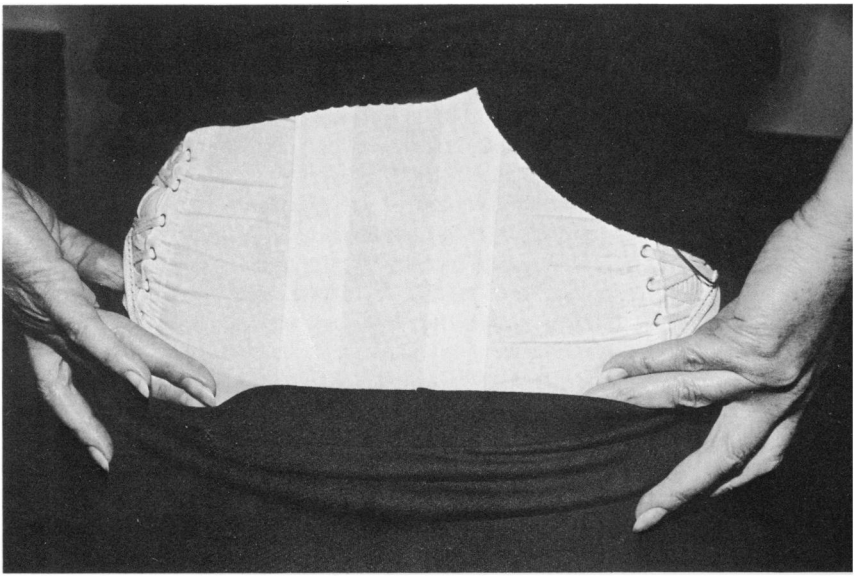
graphs his daughter in front of an endless toy-store display of packaged games. She smiles rather quizzically. Judging from the titles, the games are all moral exercises in corporate virtue, male aggression, and female submission. I'm reminded of a frame from Godard, but this picture has a different affect, the affect of real, rather than emblematic, relationships.

Eventually the artwork became a familial event in itself. Steinmetz visited his parents with a handful of his books, asking them to talk captions into a tape recorder. Other artists and photographers have done this sort of thing with family archives; Roger Welch is an example. The difference here is that Steinmetz is not particularly interested in memory and nostalgia in themselves. His pictures are geared to elicit ideological responses; they are subtle provocations. The work aims at revealing the power structure within the extended family, the petit-bourgeois ambitions of the men, their sense of ownership, and the supportive and subordinate role of the women. Steinmetz's father, a moderately successful building contractor, poses by the signpost for a subdivision street he named: Security Way. The photographer's mother sits in the kitchen reading a religious tract entitled *Nervous Christians.* He comes closest to identifying with his daughter, with the possibility of her rebellion.

The last of the six books deals with his ex-wife's second wedding. Steinmetz appears at a dress rehearsal—as what? Guest, interloper, official photographer, voyeur, ghost from the past? His wife's new in-laws look troubled. The pictures have a curious sense of the absurd, of packaged roles poorly worn, of consumer ritual. The camera catches a certain awkwardness of tuxedo-and-gown-encased gesture and movement. The groom is late, and someone asks Steinmetz to stand in for him. The affair takes on a television situation comedy aspect as familial protocol lapses into absurdity.

Fred Lonidier deals more with public politics than with the family. *The Health and Safety Game* (1976) is about the "handling" of industrial injury and disease by corporate capitalism, pointing to the *systemic* character of everyday violence in the workplace. Some statistics: one in four American workers is exposed on a daily basis to death, injury, and disease-causing work conditions. According to a Nader report, "job casualties are statistically at least three times more serious than street crime." (So much for TV cop shows.)

An observation: anyone who has ever lived or worked in an industrial working-class community can probably attest to the commonness of disfigurement among people on the job and in the street. Disease is less visible and has only recently become a public issue. I can recall going to the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry and visiting the "coal mine" there. Hoarse-voiced men, retired miners,



WAITRESS'S BACK. "He said he had known other comp. attorneys in the past that would work for the workers and really get in there and get for them what they deserved. Then the first thing you know they'd be becoming more pro-company, pro-company because it's easier."

OIL WORKER'S BURNS. "When it really comes down to the nitty-gritty it's the employees themselves who won't really make a stand on safety. When it comes down to the bread-and-butter issue, if you make a strike issue over a safety matter, it's going to take a lot more education, in my opinion."

From FRED LONIDIER, *THE HEALTH AND SAFETY GAME: Fictions Based on Fact,* 1976, photographs, text, and videotape

led the tourists through a programmed demonstration of mining technology. When the time came to deal with safety, one of the guides set off a controlled little methane explosion. No one mentioned black-lung disease in this corporate artwork, although the evidence rasped from the throats of the guides.

Lonidier's "evidence" consists of twenty or so case studies of individual workers, each displayed on large panels laid out in a rather photojournalistic fashion. The reference to photojournalism is deliberate, I think, because the work refuses to deliver any of the empathic goodies that we are accustomed to in photo essays. Conventional "human interest" is absent. Lonidier is aware of the ease with which liberal documentary artists have converted violence and suffering into esthetic objects. For all his good intentions, for example, Eugene Smith in *Minamata* provided more a representation of his compassion for mercury-poisoned Japanese fisherfolk than one of their struggle for retribution against the corporate polluter. I'll say it again: the subjective aspect of liberal esthetics is compassion rather than collective struggle. Pity, mediated by an appreciation of "great art," supplants political understanding. Susan Sontag and David Antin have both remarked that Eugene Smith's portrait of a Minamata mother bathing her retarded and deformed daughter is a seemingly deliberate reference to the *Pietà*.

Unlike Smith, Lonidier takes the same photographs that a doctor might. When the evidence is hidden within the body, Lonidier borrows and copies x-ray films. These pictures have a brute, clinical effect. Each worker's story is reduced to a rather schematic account of injury, disease, hospitalization, and endless bureaucratic runaround by companies trying to shirk responsibility and liability. All too frequently we find that at the end of the story the worker is left unemployed and undercompensated. At the same time, though, these people are fighting. A machinist with lung cancer tells of stealing samples of dust from the job, placing them on the kitchen griddle in a home-made experiment to detect asbestos, a material that his bosses had denied using. The anonymity of Lonidier's subjects is a precaution against retaliation against them; many are still fighting court cases; many are subject to company intimidation and harassment if they do make their stories public.

Lonidier's presentation is an analog of sorts for the way in which corporate bureaucrats handle the problem of industrial safety, yet he subverts the model by telling the story from below, from the place occupied by the worker in the hierarchy. The case-study form is a model of authoritarian handling of human lives. The layout of the panels reflects the distribution of power. Quotes from the workers are set in type so small that they are nearly unreadable. The titles

are set in large type: "Machinist's Lung," "Egg-Packer's Arm." The body and the life are presented as they have been fragmented by management. Injury is a loss of labor power, a negative commodity, overhead. Injury is not a diminishing of a human life but a statistical impingement on the corporate profit margin.

The danger exists, here as in other works of socially conscious art, of being overcome by the very oppressive forms and conditions one is critiquing, of being devoured by the enormous machinery of material and symbolic objectification. Political irony walks a thin line between resistance and surrender.

Above the case studies, Lonidier presents an analysis of the strategies employed by corporations and unions in the struggle over occupational health issues. The final corporate resorts are closed factories and runaway shops. But implicit in Lonidier's argument is the conclusion that work *cannot,* in the long run, be made safe under capitalism, because of the absolute demand for increasing capital accumulation under escalating crisis conditions. Most businessmen know this, and are resisting reforms for that very reason. The health issue exposes an indifference to human life that goes beyond ethics, an indifference that is structurally determined and can only be structurally negated.

Lonidier's aim is to present his work in a union hall context; so far showings have included a number of art school galleries, a worker's art exhibition at the Los Angeles Museum of Science and Industry, the Whitney Museum, AFSCME District Council 37 AFL-CIO in New York City (AFSCME, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, is the largest union of workers in the state sector in the United States), and at the Center for Labor Studies at Rutgers University.

Since the late 1940's, anti-communism has been a dominant ideology within American organized labor. Thus, for obvious reasons, *The Health and Safety Game* only makes explicit a critique of the current monopoly stage of capitalist development, without pointing directly to the necessity of socialist alternatives. This is only one of the problems of working *through* labor bureaucracy and *toward* a rank-and-file audience. At the same time, it should be noted that a number of progressive unions, mostly in New York, are beginning to develop cultural programs. Potentially, this could amount to an attempt to counteract the hegemony of corporate culture and restore some of the working-class cultural traditions that were obliterated with the onslaught of the 1950's. Recent documentary films like Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County U.S.A.* and *Union Maids* by Julia Reichert and Jim Klein keep alive a tradition of working-class militancy, emphasizing the active role of women in struggle. Both films

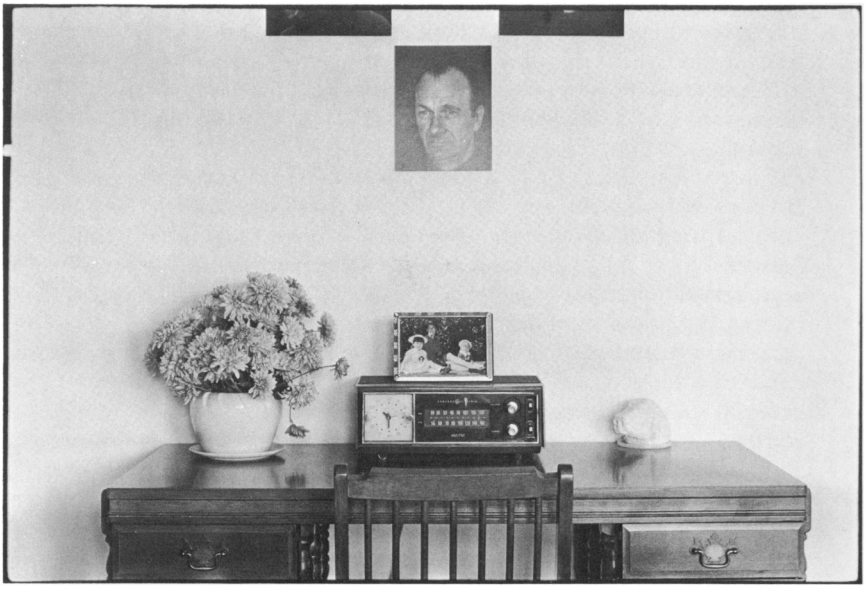
reveal the importance of oral history and song for maintaining working-class traditions, both emerge from the filmmakers' partisan commitment to long-term work from *within* particular struggles. Neither of these films qualifies as the standard "neutral" airplane-ticket-in-the-back-pocket sort of documentary.

Nearly all the work I'm discussing here demands a critical re-evaluation of the relationship between artists, media workers, and their "audiences." I'm not suggesting that the mass media can effectively be infiltrated. Mass "communication" is almost entirely subject to the pragmatics of the one-way, authoritarian manipulation of consumer "choices." I think "marginal" spaces have to be discovered and utilized, spaces where issues can be discussed collectively: union halls, churches, high schools, community colleges, community centers, and perhaps only reluctantly, public museums. Still photographers ought to consider "vulgar" and "impure" formats, such as the slide shows; but formal questions can only follow a more fundamental re-definition of political priorities. A number of cultural workers in the Oakland area are using slide shows didactically and as catalysts for political participation. Bruce Kaiper has produced work on the capitalist image of labor using a critical reading of *Fortune* magazine advertisements and historical material on scientific management. Ellen Kaiper has done a piece on the forced layoffs and "domestication" of women industrial workers after the Second World War. These shows are designed primarily for audiences of working people by people who are themselves workers. Fern Tiger is working on an extended documentation of class structure and conflict in Oakland. Her working method involves a lot of prolonged interaction with the people she photographs. She makes return visits with prints as part of an attempt to overcome the traditional aloofness of the merely contemplative sociological observer or journalistic photographer. Mel Rosenthal is involved in a similar project in the South Bronx.

My own work with photographs revolves around relationships between wage-labor and ideology, between material demands and our imaginary coming-to-terms with those demands. I use "autobiographical" material, but assume a certain fictional and sociological distance in order to achieve a degree of typicality. My personal life is not the issue; it's simply a question of a familiarity that forms the necessary basis for an adequate representational art. I've tended to construct narratives around crisis situations; around unemployment and workplace struggles, situations in which ideology fails to provide a "rational" and consoling interpretation of the world, unless one has already learned to expect the worst. What I've been interested in, then, is a failure of petit-bourgeois optimism, a failure that leads to either progressive or reactionary class identifications in periods of

". . . a political novel in which the workers were denied the privilege of psychological treatment . . . a psychological novel in which the boss invented the workers . . . a political novel in which the workers were allowed the privilege of psychological treatment . . ."

From ALLAN SEKULA, *This Ain't China: a photonovel,* 1974, photographs and text



". . . i photographed the inside of the apartment . . . i photographed his resume . . ."

From ALLAN SEKULA, *Aerospace Folktales,* 1973, photographs, text, and audiotape

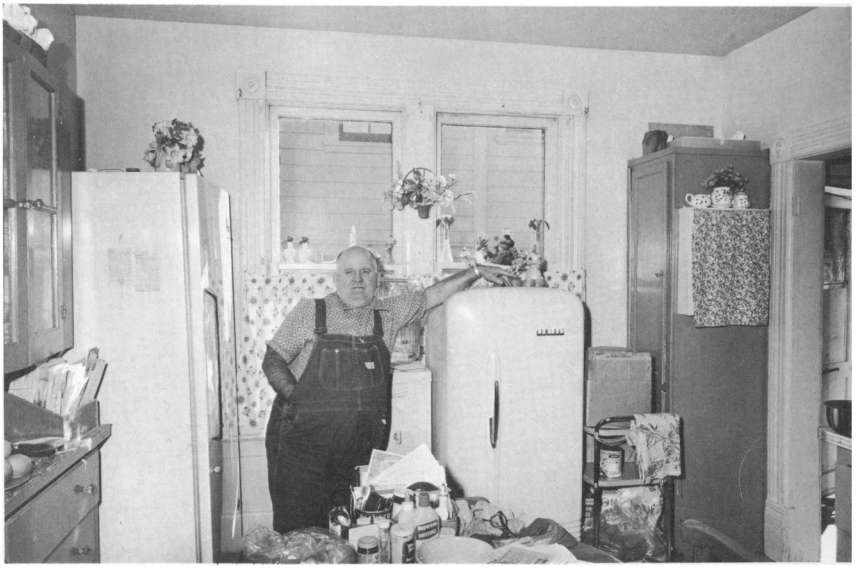
economic crisis. *Aerospace Folktales* (1973) is a family biography which focuses on the effects of unemployment on white-collar technical workers, on people who have internalized a view of themselves as "professionals" and subsequently suffer the shock of being dumped into the reserve army of labor. I was interested in the demands unemployment places on family life, in the family as refuge, training ground and women's prison. As Max Horkheimer has noted, unemployment blurs the boundaries between the private and the social. Private life becomes mere waiting for work, just, I might add, as work is increasingly a mode of waiting for life, for a delayed gratification. For men who have internalized the demands of production, forced idleness can breed both small and large insanities, from the compulsive straightening of lamps to despair and suicide.

This Ain't China (1974) is a photonovel which grew out of an attempt to unionize a restaurant. The work is a comedy about theatricalized food, about food as a central fetishized image in an organized drama of "service." Among other things, I wanted to portray the conditions under which people stop obeying orders, and in the way repetitive alienated work colonizes the unconscious, particularly work in crowded, greasy "backstage" kitchens.

Formally, I use long edited sequences of still photographs, usually broken up into "shots" of varying length, as well as lengthy novelistic texts and taped interviews. The photographs deliberately quote a variety of stylistic sources: from motion studies to a deadpan, clinical version of color food photography. The narrative moves self-consciously between "fictional" and "documentary" modes. A lot of scenes are staged. Both *Aerospace* and *China* have been shown on the wall, as books, and, most effectively in a political sense, as live slide shows for people who have something other than a merely esthetic relation to the issues involved.

Chauncey Hare is a photographer who happens to have spent twenty years of his life as a chemical engineer. This biographical note is central to the meaning of his work. Of all the people I've discussed, he has the least relation to a hybridized, pictorially disrespectful narrative approach to the photographic medium. His photography grows out of a by now established documentary tradition, characterized by a belief in the efficacy of the single image, and a desire to combine formal elegance with a clarity of detail. The radicalism of Hare's work lies in his choice of a terrain and his identification with its inhabitants.

Hare is beginning to be known for work done over the past ten years while traveling across the United States, taking careful, tripod mounted portraits of people, mostly working people, in their home environments. These images depict home life as a source of dignity



Point Richmond, California, 1976. "I was a refinery stage rigger and was hurt permanently. I get no compensation from the oil company. I still pay for my own medicines. They use you and when they are done, well . . . it's tough for you!" [signed] Orville England, Standard Oil Co.

Control Room of a Crude Oil Distillation Unit, Standard Oil Refinery, Richmond, California, 1977

From CHAUNCEY HARE, *A Study of Standard Oil Company Employees,* 1976-77, photographs and audiotaped interviews

and grace (his portrait-subjects are always on balance, sharing none of the grotesquery of Arbus or Bill Owens) and as something flawed, something invaded by the horrific sameness of a consumer culture. It is in the grasping of this dialectical character of family and private life, that Hare partakes of the same general critique I've been noting in the work of other politically aware photographers. This earlier work of Hare's, exhibited in 1977 at the Museum of Modern Art and published by Aperture as *Interior America,* continues in these contexts to reinforce the dominant American myth of the documentary photographer as a rootless wanderer, of art as the project of a contemplative, but voracious eye.

Of course, Hare with his careful, sympathetic interactions, doesn't share the transcontinental anomic flaneurerie of the Robert Frank tradition. For the moment, then, I'm more interested in a more recent project of Hare's, entitled *A Study of Standard Oil Company Employees* (1976-77). It is unlikely that this work will even be exhibited at the Rockefeller-backed Museum of Modern Art which is, after all, a cultural edifice built on Standard Oil profits, notwithstanding the "relative autonomy" of John Szarkowski's curatorial decisions. Using credentials as a Guggenheim photography fellow, Hare asked his employers for a year's leave of absence from his engineering job, only that he might return to work every day and take photographs that would begin to expose what he saw as the relation between "technology and alienation." Somehow, corporate public relations agents saw the project in a positive light and approved it. After only three months of independent work, Hare's investigations were terminated by a suddenly threatened management. During his wanderings in this familiar territory, Hare photographed and interviewed at every level of the corporate hierarchy, ranging from refinery operators, maintenance workers and headquarters keypunch operators, to supervisors and executive engineers. His photographs form a kind of metonymic map of an abstract bureaucratic structure. Each portrait suggests a life and a position. One sees evidence of the elaborately coded privileges and humiliations of autocratically managed large enterprises. An executive inhabits a large office on an upper floor with a plate glass view of San Francisco's financial district. In a corner, a far corner, behind an expensive potted plant, he keeps a small photographic shrine to his wife and kids. Refinery operators, unable to leave their job sites for lunch, eat sandwiches as they stare at walls of gauges. A woman's head is barely visible in a labyrinthine word-processing cubicle. A line of refinery operators sits glumly on a bench while their supervisor lectures them about a failed valve, exhibited prominently in the foreground of the picture.

Hare's photographs demand extended captions. His interviews serve to reveal the subjective aspects of the work experience, something photographs can only suggest indirectly. Interviews allow for a kind of self-authorship that portraiture offers only in an extremely limited and problematic way. The photographer always has the edge; and a moment is, after all, only a moment, and only a *visible* moment at that. Speech allows for critical reflection, for complaints, for the unfolding of personal histories, for the voicing of fears and hopes. Hare was trained as a technocrat and a pragmatist, trained to submit all problems to the logic of an efficiency defined solely in terms of profit. This is hardly a personal attack, but merely a remark on the historical role of the engineering profession under capitalism. Hare brings an engineer's knowledge, coupled with an ethical integration of "fact" and "value," to his critique of the petrochemical industry. And yet he sees in the refinery workers an image of his own, previously unacknowledged, proletarianization. He overcomes the contempt commonly felt by professional and technical staff for the people who actually run the everyday operations of a large refinery complex. Refineries are increasingly dangerous, both to workers and to the surrounding communities. Understaffed and poorly maintained, many plants are potential bombs. Pipes wear thin and explode; operators have to contend with doubled and tripled work loads. This crisis situation is evident in Hare's pictures and interview transcripts. A lone worker is photographed in the midst of a large tank truck loading complex for which he alone is responsible, rather than the normal crew of three. A number of the workers photographed by Hare have since died of cancer. The Richmond, California area, where Hare both works and lives, is a petrochemical center with the highest per capita rate of cancer in the country. As a known member of the community and friend, Hare photographs many of the workers in their homes, in private life and retirement. It is among these older retired workers that he discovers the most variations on the theme of uncompensated injuries and epidemic carcinoma. The younger workers know what awaits them, and talk about their options.

Like Lonidier, Hare has had to protect many of his subjects from the potential consequences of their remarks, from company reprisals. However, he has chosen an altogether different approach to the problems of visual representation, preferring portraiture to a deadpan, clinical style of photography. Lonidier accepts the reified form of visual depiction, and works toward its subversion through storytelling and political analysis. Hare begins with a "humanized" image, but embeds the portrait within a larger frame, within the very midst of a bureaucratic labyrinth and a modern "automated" version of the dark, satanic mill with its routine, its boredom, its sterility and its invisible poisons.

IV

I'M ARGUING, then, for an art that documents monopoly capitalism's inability to deliver the conditions of a fully human life, for an art that recalls Benjamin's remark in the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* that "there is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism." Against violence directed at the human body, at the environment, at working people's ability to control their own lives, we need to counterpose an active resistance, simultaneously political and symbolic, to monopoly capitalism's increasing power and arrogance, a resistance aimed ultimately at socialist transformation. A naive faith in both the privileged subjectivity of the artist, at the one extreme, and the fundamental "objectivity" of photographic realism, at the other, can only be overcome in a recognition of cultural work as a *praxis*. As Marx put it in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*:

> It is only in a social context that subjectivism and objectivism, spiritualism and materialism, activity and passivity cease to be such antinomies. The resolution of the *theoretical* contradictions is possible *only* through practical means, only through the *practical* energy of man.

A didactic and critical representation is a necessary but insufficient condition for the transformation of society. A larger, encompassing praxis is necessary.