


BLIND SPOT

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A Major Minor Art, in A-Flat Minor

Tim Davis

A few weeks ago, a subtle, almost indiscernible, wildly radical paradigm shift happened in the "Goings on About Town" section of *The New Yorker*. No one but the parents of photographers with gallery shows in Manhattan noticed, but the Photography listings seemed to have lost their lease. Assimilated, desegregated, dragged from its native village, the pert list of editorially preferred exhibitions was shortened, and dispersed into the general category of Art.

If you are feeling general or categorical, the history of photography is reducible to a series of helixing sine waves representing photographers who work to make the medium conversant with longer-standing attitudes about art, and those who are more interested in cameras, and the flat, legible pictures they produce. At any point on the timeline, you can locate pictures that satisfy each urge. In 1840 there are Hippolyte Bayard's *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man*, ideological, expressive, steeped in Art Historical idiom; and Fox Talbot's *Leaves of Asparagus*, awkward, immediate, and steeped in scientific convention. In 1978 we have Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #21*, a heightened swath of artifice in which a protagonist, emoting ambiguously, and looking a lot like Monica Vitti in Antonioni's *L'Eclisse*, establishes for all time what Reuben Cox calls the "something isn't quite right here" school of photography. Contemporaneously, see Stephen Shore's *Fort Lauderdale, Florida, March 15, 1978*, also a heightened referential swath, but in this case, of photography's shadow history of blunt, practical commercial images; boring postcards, standard views.

These divisions are reductive, dualistic, primitive, and apparently, historical. I mean them as elegies for past conflicts, like a nonagenarian war vet bugling his company mess call during a VFW picnic. Though we are all now "Artists Who Use Photography" (some of us will insist on calling ourselves "Artists Formerly Known As Photographers") magazines like *Blind Spot* are good at reminding us that photography—no matter how liberated it has become from its Photographic ghetto (in the Yale Art History Department Slide Library, there

are three banks of images: Sculpture, Painting, and "Minor Arts")—raises certain essential pictorial problems.

Look through any page in this issue and ask yourself these two questions: *What is this a picture of?* and *What is this picture about?* Photographs, more than any objects on the planet, can seem at once totally transparent and totally inscrutable. A photograph is possessed of almost nothing material to define itself (actually you have two choices of photographic objects: paper or plastic), offering up almost filterless access to its form and content. In spite of that access, the near total transparency of photographic images, the meanings of most photographs are at best elusive.

Antonin Artaud wrote, "All true language is incomprehensible, like the chatter of a beggar's teeth," but I don't intend here to imply that there is any occult complexity to the photographic image. Neither do I, having revived the tired old "is photography art?" debate, intend to revive the old "Windows or Mirrors?" debate. That might be because there is no debate. Photographs are often mirrors *and* windows, completely clear and painfully obscure, like the two-way mirrors in sociology experiments that allow a total visual experience, but whose sound is muffled dumb.

Any photograph on its own is conceptually meaningless. Photographers make meaning through a process of accrual. The digital poet, Brian Kim Stefans, has noted that "with computers, you can write a life's work in an afternoon," but photographers tend to take their time. This issue of *Blind Spot* features mostly artists for whom the life work is part of the content they address. *Aperture* published an issue in the fall of 1990 called "The Body in Question." The magazine you have in hand could be called "The Body of Work in Question." It features projects of extremely narrow and extremely wide bandwidths of attention; not your standard-issue "investigation," nor your familiar gallery wall-filler; instead, images that are strange and clear, from bodies of work that chafe against constraints.



John Divola

All images from *As Far As I Could Get* courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery, New York





