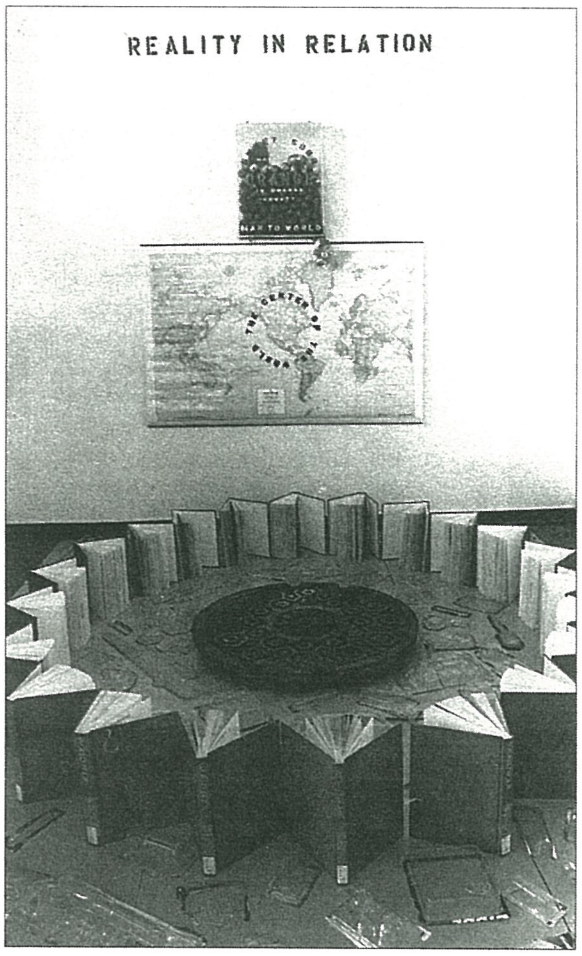
PHOTOGRAPHY



Jerry Burchfield, *The Center of the World,* 1996, mixed-media installation.

between 'grass roots and astro turf' movements," he concluded that the "zeitgeist in the age of digital PR and artificial paradigms may be hard to discern ... What is needed is developing a means and habit for critically looking at things."

Moreover, he believes that the convergence of art, technology and entertainment will have an impact on what is called "traditional blue-chip art photography"—the prints of Arbus, Frank, Adams and the like. Yet, in his opinion, the net effect is not now clear, and might result in quite contradictory situations. As he said, "... familiarity may erase and/or raise the value of (unique) objects."

Whether the interactive "point and click" format of on-line presentations will inevitably dampen our response to more static forms of photographed imagery, and, indeed, whether the very mode of delivery will itself become the central interest (as opposed to content), is something that troubled Flick at first: "I initially thought so, but as we get past being 'information junkies' and get more focused on particulars, there seems to be a new kind of 'vertical,' i.e., in-depth interest in the 'considered.'" Consequently, "... showing a Bill Viola tape in a computer class situation was an eye-opening experience."

Though much can be gained by new computer means, might there be some small measure of wishful thinking in the assumption that a city can be "captured," even through something as visionary as ISLA and other such long-range electronic enterprises? "I don't know," Flick said. "Lenticular imagery tends to render what is in front of the lens. The massive visual sweeps that I am involved in will reflect some of the visual conditions that exist in this city at this particular time. In a way, what is being collected is still invisible because of its familiarity. Only time will tell, but I am trying to make something visible by developing a number of inclusive strategies for rendering segments of the city during a particular time period. Doing this digitally will allow many different forms of interpretation and presentation to occur."

Though the work of Jerry Burchfield in some respects sits on the opposite end of things when considered alongside Flick's pieces, Burchfield's well-received constructs also manifest a strong sense of engagement with photography, an involvement that seeks to impress upon the viewer a notion of time and position, an inquiry into the movement of light and shadow as a way of getting at the individual and the culture at large. To this end, Burchfield's latest installation at the Sasso/Cribb Gallery explores the notion of place with a particular spotlight on suburbia, and how it has defined the American experience.

Burchfield, who teaches at Cypress College and is the photography gallery curator there, notes: "I am a suburban expressionist who is reconsidering the myth of the American Dream, the so-called 'middle class,' and the American 'world view.'" He goes on to say that his art is "... a personal reflection and exploration of the changes in the routinized life of suburbia today." Rather than existing as a literal telling of event and incident, however, he wants photography to surrender a greater underlying truth, an awareness of actualities beneath such journalistic considerations and particulars as dress and style.

As he recently explained, "I use material as a means of creating artifacts directly through an event and circumstance." In this manner, he undertakes to concretize the fleeting, ephemeral characteristics of happenstance and experience not usually attainable through orthodox photography, concerns that have to do with things and their "... interaction with light, and its relationship to time.... So I use [photography's] characteristics in a different way than other photographers, to draw attention to things I am interested in. Part of the difference, too, is that work changes over time." Here, Burchfield refers to the use of photographic paper that often is a key component in his pieces, light-sensitive sheets altered by the arrangement of objects in front of them, and by the changing illumination that strikes their surface and so records specifics. Once "fixed," the sheets then become a literal record of what has occurred.

Specifically, what intrigues Burchfield about photography in the context of an overall piece is its "... interaction with the physical elements, with light and time." As well, he talks about its "documentary nature" and its "layered aspect," as well as its inherent paradox, that is, to be perceived as inherently truthful even as it remains subject to manipulation. "The innate sense of photography is 'innocent,' but people also realize that it's an illusion and a fabrication. And that is something I play upon all the time. I use that double standard, the belief in its veracity, even though every photograph has a bias. People are now concerned that electronic images are tampered with. But photography has involved alterations from the beginning. The lens, where the photographer stands. Even such 'straight' photographers as Smith and Adams manipulated images. They were representing their feelings."

Indeed, while the means and strategies that Flick and Burchfield employ in their photo-inclusive art are dissimilar, what the two share is a resolute commitment to grappling with the nature of photography and what it is capable of conveying. And in an ironic way, this harkens back to the original mission of the photographer who sought to deliver experience to those unable to directly witness or personally experience it. Yet, unlike the lensmen of old, these two artists "see" the image as the jumping-off point, the point of departure to a far more complicated narrative that is more about the hidden shadow than the overtly illuminated.

Miles Beller is the Los Angeles contributing editor of *Psychological Perspectives* and chief television critic for the *Hollywood Reporter.*

A conversation with Marnie Gillett, executive director, SF Camerawork

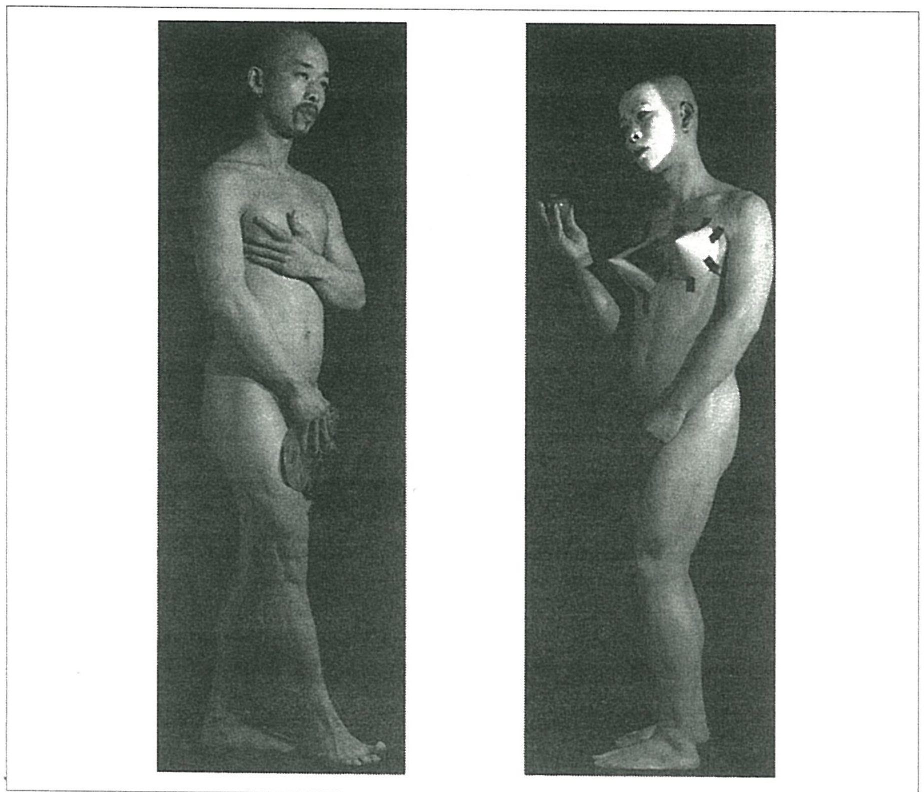
By Meredith Tromble

Not long after she graduated with a BFA in photography from the University of New Mexico, Marnie Gillett landed a job at *Aperture*. As an archivist there, she worked with the original prints of Paul Strand. Following a stint as Exhibitions Curator at the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, she worked in a commercial photography gallery in New York and taught at Columbia College in Chicago. As Executive Director of San Francisco Camerawork, a nonprofit gallery for progressive photography-based work, she has helped bring national recognition to the organization. Most recently, she shepherded Camerawork's long-awaited move across downtown San Francisco to a site near the Museum of Modern Art.

Artweek *What are the important issues in photography today?*

Marnie Gillett Probably the biggest has to do with the truth of photographs. We still believe them, because we were brought up that way. When you open the newspaper, for example, you don't question the pic-

Donna Reidland Bourret, *Virginia Woolf and I,* 1993-95, digitally altered C-print, 18" x 24", at SF Camerawork, San Francisco.



Clockwise from above: Pipo Nguyen-Duy, *Adam and Eve*, 1995, gelatin silver print diptych, 22" x 10" each; Dan Estabrook, *Untitled Portrait*, 1993, tintype; Rachel Murray, *Daily Meditation*, 1996, mixed media, in *Moveable Feast*, at SF Camerawork.

tures. But we may eventually get to that point. Channel 44 has been running a program called "Nowhere Man," with a plot that revolves around the authenticity of a photograph. The CIA is involved, and it seems that not only was the photograph altered, the photographer's mind was altered, too. He's totally confused … stay tuned for the next episode.

AW *If anxiety about the truth of the image can spark a television adventure series, then it must be pretty widespread. What about issues of copyright? I understand that you're planning an installation by the Israeli artist Simcha Shirman which uses archival photographs of the Holocaust. Camerawork has taken a strong position in its efforts to advance artists' interests. Do you see a contradiction between protecting the rights of some photographers, called "artists," and appropriating the images of other photographers?*

MG A lot of those photographs are anonymous. Christian Boltanski has done the same thing with concentration camp pictures, and soon, as the technology continues to develop, you'll see artists using historical images all the time. Bill Gates recently bought the Bettmann archive, and it will be interesting to see what he does with it and whether it will still be accessible for people to reproduce images.

AW *I'm curious about the label "anonymous." When Western artists delved into African art, many of the pieces that were labeled "anonymous" actually had identifiable makers, if anyone bothered to ask. I wonder if perhaps we have a blind spot about the authorship of photographs.*

MG Rights to photographs certainly is becoming an issue on the Internet, but I don't have any answers to that one. It probably will be decided in Congress. It's always been an issue. People just have to work together. Half of it is trust. Some people believe that if you put an image on the Internet, you've put it out there for people to use. It's becoming more of an issue because more people have access to those images now than in the past, people who can utilize your image without letting you know about it.

AW *Photographs also are losing their "object" status. That seems to be an important development for your constituency.*

MG The person who's really challenging these ideas is Ed Earle at the California Museum of Photography. He's doing a lot of work with computers and artists. Several organizations have been looking at the idea of a consortium, so that we could have access to different collections, or share exhibitions on the Internet, but it does raise questions of copyright. Earle went into the Internet and took photographs from the Eastman House and the Center for Creative Photography, put them on a disk, then used the disk for a lecture. A curator from the Center objected. Her opinion was that we have these institutions, museums, to preserve the intentions of the artists. And the artists' intentions weren't for the work to be used in any other way. His response was, "It was on the Internet. I just took it." There aren't any definitive answers right now.

AW *Camerawork was one of the first venues to examine trends in digital photography, and the catalog from your 1988 exhibition is still used to teach the subject. What would you identify as some of the important issues in this area of photography?*

MG Our exhibition policy is extremely diverse and it's always been that way. The artists who make the work identify the trends if they're out there. Our strength is that we support the artists, and support what they're creating. Artists are still dealing with subjects that have been major themes historically, such as nature, landscape, references to art-historical work, the body. And ideas of identity. Audiences are getting a little tired of seeing that kind of work, but it's still important to the artists and so I don't think you can just write it off and say it's dead.

AW *Your current exhibition [*Moveable Feast: Camerawork's Inaugural Exhibition*] includes a popular CD-ROM by Christine Tamblyn. Do you have any comments on interactive photographic media?*

MG Artists who use computers now are in the same situation as those artists who worked with video when it first came out. They're still trying to learn the tools and the timing of a piece. The computer has a whole different sense of time. To go through Christine's piece takes ninety minutes. Most people who come into a gallery just want to walk through, but, surprisingly, quite a few people sit in front of that computer for half an hour or forty-five minutes, which I think is encouraging.

AW *Have you seen the entire piece?*

MG All ninety minutes, no. I did see it in a show at the International Center for Photography, however, and I was on vacation then, so I had more time to look at it.

AW *That demonstrates the dilemma, doesn't it?*

MG That kind of work might possibly be more appropriate for a library than a gallery. A library is quieter, and it's arranged so that you can sit and spend time with a piece. Galleries are going through an exploratory phase about how computers are going to act in exhibitions.

AW *Camerawork already has an illustrious history in the Bay Area. What are some of your long-term goals?*

MG Our goal is to make our core programs stronger—exhibitions, publications, lectures and educational activities. Our real purpose is to help support artists. We're not interested in expanding in too many directions. A push for constant growth can distance an organization from its members. You can grow to the point that you lose touch. Part of Camerawork's strength has been our accessibility to our members and artists.

Meredith Tromble is a painter based in the Bay Area and a contributing editor to *Artweek*. She also is a commentator on "West Coast Live," an internationally syndicated public radio program.