

ISSUES & COMMENTARY

What "Evidence" Says About Art

A recently revived exhibition of uncaptioned documentary photographs offered multiple lessons about how (and how not) to interpret artworks.

BY CARTER RATCLIFF



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Over a quarter of a century ago, two young photographers, Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel, approached a number of institutions with a strange request: Let us look through your photographic archives, copy certain images and present them as our work. They met little resistance, in part because they bore a letter from the National Endowment for the Arts identifying them as recipients of a grant for 1975. Certified by a federal agency as professional artists, Sultan and Mandel were given free rein just about everywhere they went. Professional methods and purposes often seem mysterious to outsiders. Why not assume that these artists were up to something useful or at least harmless?

For two and a half years, they combed through the image-vaults of nearly 80 bureaucracies of various kinds: federal agencies, aerospace corporations, university laboratories, fire and police departments. They were in search of something elusive: a hint of the strange or the sinister in pictures intended as neutral records of business as usual. One of their discoveries is a black-and-white print of three men gazing intently into the spray given off by a fanlike device. Even odder than this peculiar gizmo is the look of studious, almost reverent attentiveness on each of the men's faces. What is going on here? We can't know because Sultan and Mandel have removed the caption from this and all the other images they collected. In a sense, they stripped these pictures naked, not to uncover their meanings but to put them up for grabs.

As Mandel recently recalled, "We usually were looking at 4-by-5 contact prints, which permitted us to examine a lot of material very quickly. One day, at the Los Angeles Water Department, Larry started at one end of the room, I started at the other. Between

us, we looked at 400,000 images."¹ In all, they eyeballed over two million photographs before settling on about 500. From these they selected 57, which were shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1977. From San Francisco, the exhibition traveled to the Fogg Museum of Art at Harvard, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and on to several other venues. It then entered an archive of its own, at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, Tucson. For nearly three decades, the Center has been the repository of the entire project—the 57 images that went on view in "Evidence," as the exhibition was titled; prints and file negatives of the 500 photographs from which the smaller group was selected; as well as correspondence and other paperwork generated by the project.

At the time of the show, the artists published a book that bore the same title and presented the same sequence of 57 images.

For years, "Evidence" could be seen only in the pages of this book. Then, early in 2004, the Center for Creative Photography mounted an exhibition of the original images. Re-titled "Evidence Revisited," it traveled from Tucson to the Loeb Art Center of Vassar College, where I saw it, and on to the Photographer's Gallery in London. There were, as well, selections from "Evidence" on view at the Stephen Wirtz Gallery in San Francisco, and last summer a version of the show was seen at the Berlin Biennial. On the occasion of "Evidence Revisited," the artists published a new edition of the book. This one contains two more images than the original edition, as well as an introduction by Sandra S. Phillips, senior curator of photography at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and an afterword by Robert F. Forth, dean of the California College of the Arts.

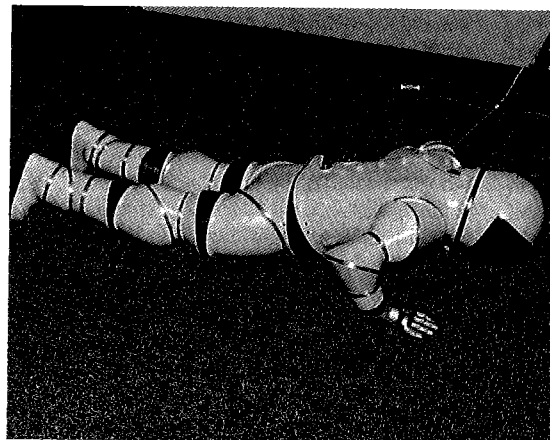
Before "Evidence," Sultan and Mandel collaborated on other works, among them a series of enigmatic

billboard images seen along the freeways of Los Angeles. More recently, they have worked together on large photographic murals for public places, among them the San Francisco International Airport and the Children's Center for the Administration of Children's Services in Manhattan. These vast pictures are mosaics: fields of small ceramic tiles, each one bearing an image-bit transferred from a photograph. This variation on a traditional medium is Mandel's invention, and he has employed it to carry out a number of mural projects on his own. Recently, he and his wife, the artist Chantal Zakari, revamped the medium again, this time for the digital age. Exchanging photography for Internet pictures, they produced a wall-sized mosaic



of Webcam sex titled *Suzi*, which was on view at Gasp Gallery in Boston for six weeks in 2005. Here, tiles functioned as pixels to generate virtual imagery at the walk-in scale of architecture.

Sultan's solo works include *Pictures from Home* (1992), a portfolio that mixes images from his family's snapshot and movie archives with the artist's formal photographs of his parents. Thus the familial myths sustained by old pictures are questioned from a later, more detached point of view. *The Valley* (2003) shows men and women relaxing in the living rooms and on the patios of houses in the San Fernando Valley—the site, as well, of *Pictures from Home*. Naked or clad in bathrobes, these figures are porn actors and actresses. Each of these houses, in all its suburban banality, has been rented for the three-day period it takes to make an "adult" film. The master fiction of pornography is that a person can be all body and the body can be entirely sexual and thus completely manipulable. Sultan's pictures of porn-bodies off-camera do not attack this fiction directly. These



All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, are from the exhibition "Evidence Revisited: Larry Sultan & Mike Mandel." Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson.

are not didactic images. Rather, they draw us into speculative contact with a variety of informal portraits, many of them exasperatingly opaque. Yet the opacity of these faces and postures is engaging, as is the indecipherable strangeness of the images in "Evidence." Whatever their subject, Sultan and Mandel bring it to life by putting it beyond the reach of reductive analysis. (My praise for the elusiveness of "Evidence" should not be taken as a sign that I am a relativist or doubt the possibility of objective truth. There is much about which we can make objectively true statements—an obvious point that has no bearing on art, because art raises no issue of truth. Art is fictional, though not all fictions are art. To count as art, a fiction must



be complex enough—one might say, resourceful enough—to resist all our attempts to assign it a settled meaning.)

Mandel and Sultan were of course glad to see "Evidence" reemerge as an exhibition after nearly three decades in mothballs. However, as both artists note, the Center for Creative Photography's "Evidence Revisited" presented some difficulties. "The Center imposed its own curatorial design," says Sultan. "The images were resequenced, in an attempt to supply thematic coherence. Our intention in 1977 was to leave it open, to make room for the viewer. And we were careful to avoid the kind of sequence that would congeal around formal qualities." At the Berlin Biennial, too, the curators "wanted to have their own way" with "Evidence," according to Sultan. The result, says Mandel, "wasn't the perfect show." Nonetheless, he adds, the walls where this version of "Evidence" appeared "were so decrepit and debased" that "the narrative inherent" in the work was reinforced, atmospherically.

"Narrative" may be a misleading word. There is no story to be read into "Evidence," however its images are arranged. Still, in its original sequence—the one reestablished by the new edition of the book—the work uses technology's self-images to shine a questioning light on its imperative: to shape and control. In one photograph, a man stands with a bag of some translucent material over his head. Another man holds a blow torch to the bag. What on earth is going on here? In the absence of a caption, the viewer has no idea,

just as it is impossible to know why men are wading into the wall of foam that advances from the background of another photograph. To traverse the eye-level row of pictures is to drift from one conundrum to the next. What are the silhouetted figures doing inside the translucent cube? Why does the gloved hand cover the monkey's face? How did the space suit come to be lying face down on a stretch of office carpeting? We can't even tell if there is anyone—or anything—inside the suit.

"Evidence" offers glimpses into a world where hard hats are often worn with suits and ties, as mid-level functionaries employ procedures and pieces of equipment intelligible only to the most specialized expertise. And there are excursions to scrubby landscapes inhabited only by down-to-earth hardware. A series of metal retaining walls shapes a hillside. A platoon of triangle-headed objects—sensors of some sort?—crowd into the foreground. Three beds stand in an open field, accompanied by trash cans and fire extinguishers. These images form a suite of indecipherable puzzles, yet the frustration they induce is a small price to pay for the uneasy pleasure of immersion in their oddness.

One photograph shows a man carrying a black case as he negotiates a heap of stony fragments at the bottom of a concrete-lined pit. Another is a tight shot of broken stones piled up and confined by gridded wire. Pictures of various substances chipped, torn and otherwise fragmented comport nicely with stop-time images of explosions. Measuring devices appear frequently, as do close-ups of

ropes, cables and various species of rigging. Though many of these pictures show a step in the accomplishment of some complex task, the exhibition is haunted by a sense of highly sophisticated futility—or worse. A man in high rubber boots stands ankle deep in the dark liquid flowing into the even darker depths of an immense conduit. Viewers eager to nail down a meaning could see him as a guide to an underworld where the intrepid traveler discovers that the effects of technology are even direr than we imagine.

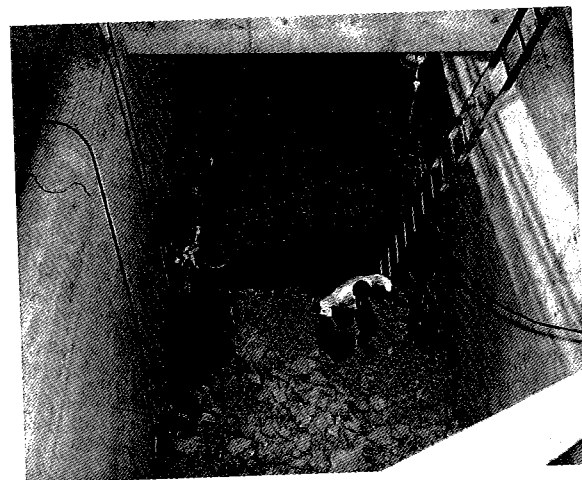
Sultan and Mandel grew up in the San Fernando Valley, just east of Los Angeles and well within the aerospace industry's sphere of influence. When they were young, advanced technology was aglow with utopian promise, not all of it merely implied. Though they find that promise unpersuasive, they are not Luddites nostalgic for the imaginary idyll of preindustrial times. They feel, rather, that our times are too easily seduced by the hope of total control, whether technological or social or political. The rundown walls in Berlin on which the most recent version of "Evidence" was exhibited are those of a school for Jewish girls. Long in ruins, never renovated, this setting has a "rough history," as Sultan notes. With

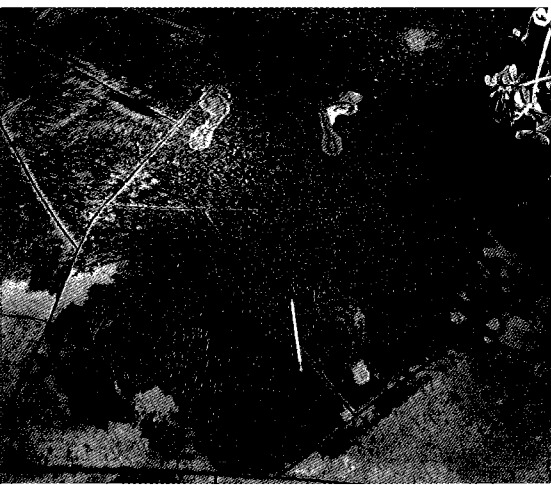
this understatement, he recalls the 20th century's most atrocious attempt at social control—Nazi genocide, which made deathly use of technology.

2

Those who expect art to perform community service will insist on seeing "Evidence" as an indictment of technology. Undeniably, Sultan and Mandel's selections are well calculated to endow advanced technology with a spooky aura. But conjuring up an aura is not to be confused with bringing an indictment and making it stick. To do that, one must present a coherent argument and support it with solid evidence. This is precisely what "Evidence" does not do, what it cannot do. The exhibition's lack of verbal explication of any sort removes every last ounce of evidentiary weight from the images it puts on display. "Evidence" is a thoroughly ironic title for these pictures. Yet Sultan and Mandel are ironists only in passing. Their overriding aim is to loft us out of our usual ways of thinking. They want to send us into speculative orbit around images that we will never be able to interpret with any certainty.

"Evidence" begins with a photograph of footprints on flagstones. A bit later in the sequence, there are pictures of handprints and burnt-out fuse boxes—all of them taken, presumably, by a crime scene photographer from one of the police departments that appear in Sultan and Mandel's list of sources. Labeled, these traces of a human presence would be far less mysterious. Unlabeled, they remind me of that moment when Robinson Crusoe crosses the beach toward his boat and is "exceedingly surprised with the print of a man's naked foot on the shore." Crusoe describes himself





see them as art? The answer is obvious or, if you like, readymade: having selected certain images, Sultan and Mandel made them into art by displacing them to the art world. This Duchampian procedure works because it is partial. As these pictures were found, their captions were lost. Liberated from documentary servitude, they were free to be seen as art and thus they became art.

An artwork is not the upshot of an investigation. It is not the "Evidence" that supports an investigation's findings. A work of art is an image or object or installation that encourages us to be conscious of our effort to figure it out—to become aware of ourselves as incessant interpreters. Through blankness and simplicity (as in Minimalism) or extreme complexity (Cubism) or intractable ambiguity

as standing "like one thunderstruck, or as if I had seen an apparition. I listened, I looked around me, I could hear nothing, nor see anything." Of course, this turns out to be the footprint of the black man Crusoe christens Friday.

Crusoe has been seen as the Western individual in primordial form and, more recently, as a proto-colonist. In light of Sultan and Mandel's "Evidence," I see him in yet another way: as an exemplary instance of a person pressed by circumstances to make sense of those very circumstances, in minute and unending detail. Ordinarily, we are hardly even half-aware of our need to interpret our surroundings. Language, the look of things, the daily flow of events—these are for the most part so effortlessly understood that the world's intelligibility hardly seems an issue. Things are different for Crusoe. Cast away on a desert island, he must work out the meaning of just about everything from scratch, and I think that his willingness to take on this task is what gives him his appeal. Crusoe is the archetypal interpreter, and we admire him for doing consciously what most of us, most of the time, are satisfied to do as a matter of unconscious routine.

Nearly undone upon the discovery of Friday's footprint, he flees to his hut "like one pursued . . . I slept none that night; the farther I was from the occasion of my fright, the greater my apprehensions were."² Maybe, he thinks, the footprint is the work of the Devil. Maybe it is a trace of "savages" from the mainland. Maybe the footprint is his own; maybe he imagined it. With no way to provide the footprint with a convincing explanation—a plausible caption—he fears that the world's order is unraveling. Or that order persists but his mind has failed, and he is being cast away once again, to a limbo of irremediable doubt. Terrified, he feels his humanity vanishing as panicky "vapors" fill his head. Those vapors vanish in their turn when Crusoe eventually meets Friday and they invent their micro-society. By contrast, Sultan and Mandel want to preserve the uncertainty they induce with their captionless world. Like the post-footprint, pre-Friday Crusoe, the viewer of "Evidence" can only wonder, never conclude. Unlike Crusoe, that viewer has no reason to panic.

Art galleries and museums are safe havens, places where uncertainty, ambiguity, even vagueness—all the varieties of the "difficulty" so prized by early modernist critics—can open the way to pleasure. But "Evidence" is an array of documentary images found in institutional archives. Why should we

(the images in "Evidence"), a work of art offers no reliable cues to its meaning. Denying all hope of certitude, it nonetheless engages us. It "rouses the faculties to act," as William Blake says in a letter. For Blake, a work of art is successful to the degree that it creates a kind of emergency. We need not respond, but if we do, the work will at once embrace and resist us. No conclusion will be entirely conclusive. The crisis for meaning will persist.

Because one of Blake's phrases points to the possibility of perceiving art this way, I see him as an exemplary figure. Yet I have to admit that even he doesn't want to leave meanings undecided. His praise of vagueness appears in the course of a characteristic tirade:

That which can be made explicit to the idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients considered what is not too explicit as the fittest for instruction because it rouses the faculties to act. I name Moses, Solomon, Aesop, Homer, Plato.

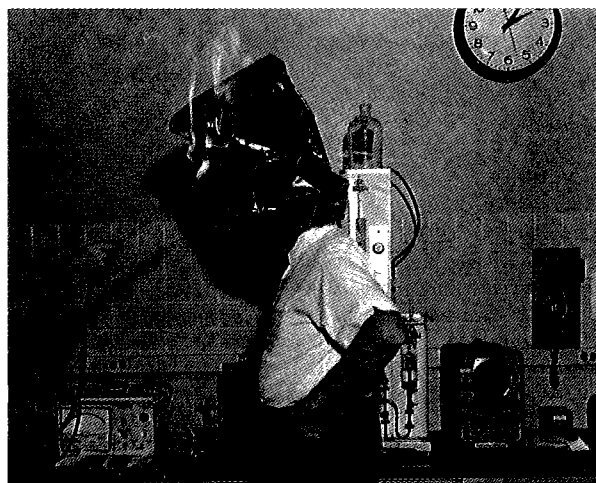
Later on in the same letter he asks why the ancient writers are so "entertaining and instructive." Because, he says, their work is "addressed to the imagination, which is spiritual sensation."³

To stay on track, I'll sidestep the labyrinth of Blake's doctrine on the imagination and zero in on his image of great writing as "entertaining and instructive," for it mirrors Sir Philip Sidney's claim that the point of painting and poetry is "to teach and delight." Sidney's catchphrase is, in its turn, a Renaissance reprise of the Roman poet Horace's maxim to the same effect.⁴ As venerable as it may be, this assumption about the double purpose of art is alive and well, all the more vigorously because we hardly ever question it—though some of us are not especially keen on the pleasures of art.

In a review of the last Whitney Biennial, Martha Rosler indicts contemporary painting for an "aestheticism" that can offer, at best, irresponsible diversion. According to her, artists ought to be investigating "the United States' role in the world" and other salient issues. There are truths to be discovered, lessons to be taught, and if art wants to be any good it will get on with the instructional task. Rosler finds a few artists in the Biennial who are living up to their responsibilities but most are lost in the byways of "subjectivity" and expressionist "structures of

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feeling."⁵ Self-expression can be a dreary and inconsequential thing, no doubt. Rosler's militant indifference to pleasure is also rather trying. But my main charge against her is one I bring, as well, against Blake and Sidney and Horace and everyone else who has ever said that works of art ought to teach us something—Denis Diderot, for instance, who exhorted Jean-Baptiste Greuze to carry on with his tableaux of bourgeois virtue. "Keep it up," wrote Diderot, in a note on a painting Greuze sent to the



Salon of 1763. "Keep on putting moral lessons in your paintings."⁶

I am not against morality. I agree with Diderot—and Greuze—that parents should love their children and their children should reciprocate. I agree with Rosler that the American adventure in Iraq is a vicious error. I cannot, however, be sure if I agree or disagree with whatever moral doctrine lurks in Blake's *Jerusalem* and his other exercises in rewriting Scripture. The lessons of his apocalyptic effusions are too elusive for me to grasp, and that is why I count these works as art. Still, Blake is always trying to persuade me of something, and when he forces himself to be explicit I usually agree with him—on the virtues of sexual freedom, for example. But I see his didactic poems as art only if their imagery, or some of it, cannot be reduced to a high-minded maxim. Blake said that John Milton was on the side of liberty—a member of "the Devil's party"—despite the more or less orthodox theology of *Paradise Lost*.⁷ I say that Blake is an artist—an inventor of endlessly open imagery—despite his hope of persuading us to accept a flock of grand, apocalyptic speculations as truths, simple and absolute.

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3

Though interpretation may be endless in principle, it must, in practice, stop somewhere. So the question is this: what do you make of your stopping point? Do you see it as a stable and dependable truth about an artwork's meaning or its value or, at the very least, its likeability? No interpretation looks that way to me. I see them all, including my own, as incorrigibly provisional. Moreover, I approve of that incorrigibility, unlike Plato, who deplored all works of the imagination—paintings and poems, stage plays and flights of rhetorical invention—precisely because they permit us to make no fixed sense of them. Unstable meanings destabilize the psyche, or so he believed.⁸

St. Augustine was no less troubled by promiscuities of interpretation. Scriptural language is ambiguous, he admitted, and yet the center wouldn't hold, there would be nothing but heresy, if there were no standard of permissible readings. To establish one, he appealed to the knowledge delivered by the faith that is prior to every attempt at interpretation. Though it is unable to settle all questions about the meaning of Scripture, knowledge of this God-given sort keeps the faithful on the path to salvation.⁹ Plato likewise posited an inward capacity for truth that leads us, if we will let it, beyond the contingencies of mere appearances to ultimate realities.¹⁰ There is a Platonic faith comparable to Christian faith. Yet doubt persists, as the perplexities of Socratic dialogue and Biblical exegesis suggest. Even the most compelling interpretation is unable to impose absolute defeat on every rival. Unvanquished, these rivals proliferate. That is why Plato and Augustine and nearly all later interpreters invent ways to regulate meaning. For my purposes, which concern neither philosophy nor theology but art, this is not a good thing. Yet many art

critics and even artists have worked just as hard as philosophers and theologians to corral meaning, to bring it under control.

Guided by Augustine and his intellectual heirs, allegorists devised iron-clad systems for interpreting not only Scripture but ordinary events. Obedient to these systems, painters and sculptors produced illustrations in need of decoding. Whenever a medieval painter showed Jonah emerging unharmed from the belly of the whale, a medieval viewer was to read the image as an allegory of Christ rising from the tomb. Am I saying that allegorical art is illustration and nothing more? Not exactly. What I am saying is that when a 12th-century painter took guidance from a system of religious allegory, he was not an artist in my latter-day, secular sense of the word. He was a craftsman in the service of a rigorously regulated doctrine. It is easy enough for me to see his allegorical image as a work of art, but when I do I commit an anachronism. I commit another if I look beyond the lessons offered by Greuze's moralizing tableaux. For Diderot was right about him: he painted to enliven the generalities of moral precept with the particularities of illustration. Viewers who got the illustrative point of the image could rest, for they had taken away all that the standards of the time authorized them to receive. Secular allegory can be as rigid as the religious kind. When Greuze showed a sorrowful young woman with a broken vase, he expected his audience to reflect on the perils that beset virginity.

But how can an artwork be at once intelligible and ultimately resistant to any conclusive interpretation? John Keats hints at an answer to these questions with his remark on the trait that goes "to form a man of achievement, especially in literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *negative capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."¹¹ I am arguing that a work qualifies as a work of art when it shows a parallel capability: offering as many meanings as we are able to find, or invent, it gives us no good reason to settle on any of them. This argument has a corollary. If we insist that a work of art does have a single, delimited meaning, it can only be for a bad reason: to promote some agenda, for instance, or because we can't stand uncertainty.

It's not that all interpretations are of equal value. Some are lively, generous, resilient and fecund, and most are not. But no matter how admirable one's take on an artwork may be, its virtues do not include that of being demonstrably true. Or, to approach the point from another angle—in modern times, works survive and take on the aura of art only if they manage, somehow, to elude all attempts to reduce them to vessels bearing a single meaning. Or so I am convinced by my understanding of the role of art in Western culture during the past three and a half or four centuries. I don't define art this way because I believe in elusiveness for elusiveness's sake. The point of a work that both invites and eludes interpretation is to lead one, in the course of grappling with it, to a sense of oneself.

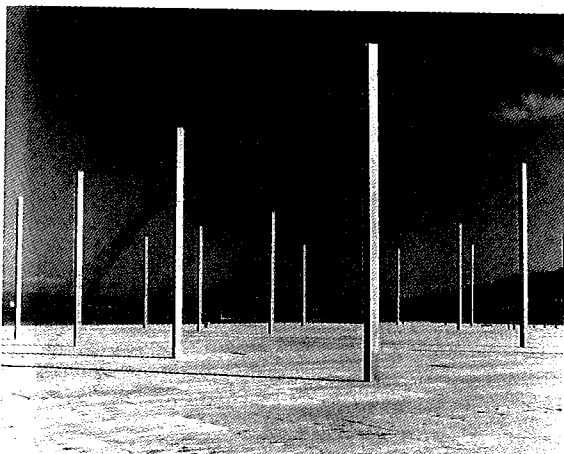
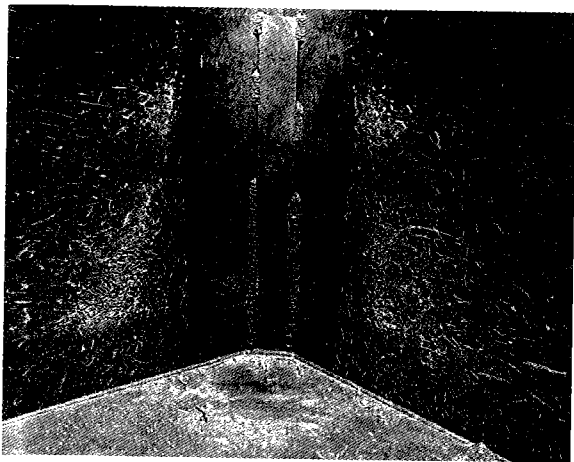
Who am I, who must I be, to be responding this way? If it is not cut short, the interpretation of art becomes self-interpretation, as one rages against the

denial of closure in a Pollock drip painting or, if one is a different sort of person, exalts in the Whitmanesque openness of the image. Such readings are not entirely—or even primarily—inward-looking. Though Robinson Crusoe was alone before he met Friday, he was nonetheless immersed in a world. His idea of himself could cohere only in some connection to his surroundings, present and remembered. I suppose this is an obvious point. These days, few of us believe in the self as an inner essence untouched by anything outward. Even one's genetic endowment, it seems, is not so much a given as a set of possibilities that develop in response to the contingencies of this or that environment. Individual nature evolves in concert with nurture in the form of historical pressures, cultural endowments, "social construction" and all the rest of it. One becomes, at least in part, whoever one learns to be.

Cued by Michel Foucault's theories of power, many have pictured the self's becoming as an exercise in passivity. For him, large forces of culture and society do the shaping. What is shaped is the person. Indeed, and yet we are all, among other things, interpreters of ourselves, of others and of our shared surroundings. If we allow that meanings are up for grabs, then we might glimpse an active rather than passive role for the self amid the forces that shape it.¹² Of course we cannot be—nor would most of us want to be—like Crusoe, castaways obliged to make sense of everything from scratch. Yet we do expect to have some part in saying what things mean. We want to decide what to make of the situations in which we find ourselves, and to understand for ourselves the actions and utterances of others. We become who we are in the course of these efforts.

The point of art, then, is to provide exemplary instances of interpretive difficulty—and pleasure. Because the effort to understand art is continuous with the ordinary, ongoing interpretations that connect us to the world, it has a sort of usefulness, if no clear utilitarian goal. In roundabout ways, art encourages us to be more alive to ourselves, to our world, and to our ways of being in the world. This roundaboutness is important. Much new work invites no questions, no drift, speculative interpretation. Viewers are guided directly to a clear conclusion: environmental degradation is bad, patriarchy is





to shape American life, "Evidence" can be read as an oblique sort of satire, so long as we do not give in to the temptation to reduce it to some definite thesis. Captionless and irreducible, these pictures float free of all arguments, demonstrations and investigations. Together, they become a work of art that challenges our interpretive powers to the point of exhaustion.

Like all artworks of high ambition, "Evidence" makes a theme of art itself. The beds in an empty field recall the paintings Giorgio de Chirico called "Furniture in the Valley," which show armchairs and an armoire abandoned in a deserted landscape. Elsewhere in "Evidence," a few stalks of marsh grass stand in isolation against a large sheet of white cardboard. The cardboard suggests monochrome painting. The grass reminds me of the New Image painters' riposte to monochrome: figurative forms reduced to silhouettes and plunked onto blank fields of color. A photograph of rough welding looks like a close-up of a piece of macho sculpture. In another, we see a large sheet of plywood propped up on a lawn. A woman in casual clothes has assumed a more or less fetal posture as a second woman, in a nurse's outfit, pins her against the plywood, about 3 feet above the ground. A man hovers, adjusting the women's shoulders. Shades of performance art?

Because allusions like these are accidental, one can't be absolutely sure that Sultan and Mandel expect us to notice them. Nonetheless, it would be odd if artists of their sophistication didn't at least hope that we would see the joke, obscure as it may be. After all, "Evidence" appeared in the wake of Minimalism and its offshoots—performance and process art, modes that borrow materials and methods and even bits of ordinary behavior from the world beyond art. Surely the point of "Evidence" was, in part, to show that documentary images of that larger world sometimes hold up an unintended mirror to the world of art. Life imitates art that imitates life—not in every one of the pictures in "Evidence," but in a remarkable number of them. Reminders of earthworks are especially noticeable.

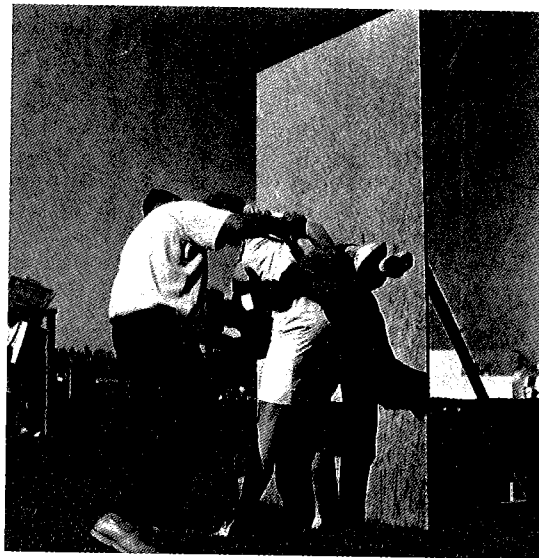
The stony hill wrapped in wire looks to me like the work of an unknown colleague of Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer, and the picture of a deep pit with sharply angular corners makes me think of Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969). Another photograph records the dust clouds stirred up as a series of explosions climbs a hill. The scar that must have been inflicted by this procedure recalls Heizer once again, this time the "drawings" he made in the Western desert by doing massive wheelies on a motorcycle. Admittedly, this is a stretch, but elsewhere in "Evidence" a set of poles evenly spaced in a flat, desolate landscape makes a direct reference to Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* (1974-77)—or, rather, to photographs that give most art lovers the only view of *Lightning Field* that they will ever have. This art-life coincidence, it turns out, is too good to be true. Sultan found the poles readymade and took the picture himself.

Having included this image in the 1977 version of "Evidence," Sultan and Mandel made a bet with John Humphrey, the original curator of the show. To win, he had to spot the "ringer," as the artists call it. He did and his prize was a bottle of scotch. I didn't spot it, though I console myself with the thought that, if I had

known there was a ringer in "Evidence," I'd have been able to single it out. In any case, I see this fabricated image as an in-joke with large implications, for it mimics the photography that had begun to proliferate in the art world of the 1970s.

As the 1960s ended, earthworkers and performance artists were filling gallery walls with scads of documentary photographs. Some of these images gave "evidence" about art in new, fugitive modes—performance pieces and works of process art. Others, as I've said, provided views of earthworks built in remote places, corners of the Western desert that few were likely to visit. Gianfranco Gorgoni's photographs of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) are stunning and have become, understandably, iconic images of American art. Nonetheless, Gorgoni is a documentary photographer, not an artist. Moreover, when Smithson included snapshots in his *Non-Sites*, he made it clear that these were elements of his art but not to be seen as art. They were documents for which an artist had found a use. Smithson drew this art/documentary distinction time and again, insisting that, no matter how often he employed photographs, he was not an artist-photographer.

Nonetheless, critics sometimes compared photographs of his earthworks to Ansel Adams's evocations of the American sublime. Smithson objected, strenu-



bad, equality is good. I agree with those conclusions. But precisely because my agreement is so quick, so predictable, I disagree with the policy of presenting such works as works of art. They are works of propaganda, of political persuasion. Uninterested in telling us what to think, a work of art manages to keep the ball forever in our court.

4

Returning for a moment to Sultan and Mandel's image of three men gazing into a fan, we might admire their dogged dedication to a task. Just as reasonably, we could see them as comic figures: three technocratic stooges. Truth or error is not to be found in the interpretation of the image, for every surmise about the meaning of an artwork is too tentative, too subject to amendment, to be right or wrong. We can be right or wrong only in our assessments of the selves revealed by this or that interpretation of an artwork's ambiguities. What interests, which values, emerge from a long look at the photograph of the helpless monkey or the one that shows a man content to leave his head in a bag while the bag goes up in flames? Rescuing interpretation from routine, art lures our habits of feeling and thought to light. Thus the facets of our humanity come into focus, to be recognized and, it may be, refined.

Deprived of their power to document the truth, the pictures in "Evidence" force us back on fictions. For my part, this show prompted invention of an imaginary world full of eerie details, oddly anonymous people and indecipherable threats. As Sultan and Mendel were hyper-aware of the power of high-tech

ously, noting that photography was Adams's medium but not his. The art of *Spiral Jetty* is in the palpable object.¹³ For the materiality of the jetty to be felt full force, the distinction between documentary images and works of art would have to be maintained, or so he believed.¹⁴ It is easy enough to maintain this distinction, if that is what one wants to do. Between the ambiguities of artworks and the certainties of documents is a difference so sharp it verges on antipathy. Yet possibilities were evolving quickly in the wake of Minimalism, and by the end of the 1960s certain artists were insinuating ambiguity into photographs of the simplest, most straightforward kind.

Douglas Huebler accompanied his snapshot arrays with commentaries that sound like extended captions but raise as many questions as they answer. The first of his *Location Pieces*, 1969, has the look of an inves-

The photo-conceptualism of Douglas Huebler, which pairs snapshot arrays with commentaries, uses documentary devices to defeat the documentary impulse, and thus opens the way to the realm of art.

tigation of some sort, with photographs as "evidence" and a text to lay out the proposition the "evidence" supports. As the text explains, the piece's 13 pictures show stretches of terrain photographed from an airliner window. We are told, further, that the artist took these pictures on a flight from New York to Los Angeles, snapping the shutter over each of the states his plane traversed. Yet none of this adds up to a graspable conclusion. Huebler's photo-conceptualism uses documentary devices to defeat the documentary impulse and thus opens the way to the realm of art.

By the mid-'70s, Peter Hutchinson, James Collins, Bill Beckley and others were including documentary photographs in flagrantly fictional works. This was a move of daunting inventiveness, and it left many baffled, unable to sort out the rapidly evolving relations between documented facts and invented fictions.¹⁵ This was the state of play when Sultan and Mandel's "Evidence" first appeared. By displaying their found images without captions, they converted hardcore documentation—the kind that resides in the files of laboratories and police departments—into the stuff of an entrancing fiction. With this conversion, they joined their contemporaries in expanding art's territory.

When the territory of art is enlarged, meaning skitters, saunters and sails beyond anyone's power to regulate it. Not everyone is happy when this happens, as Sultan learned early in the 1980s on a visit to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. After giving a talk about "Evidence," he invited questions and received, among other things, bitter recriminations for having removed the captions from the pictures he and Mandel had collected. As Sultan remembers it, they were being reproached for ignoring the policy on captions laid out by Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 1936. The indictment was blunt: Sultan and Mandel had indulged in "poetics." To correct this deviation from proper art practice, they would have to control the meaning of their images with functional captions. Otherwise, they would stand guilty of encouraging what Benjamin called "free-floating contemplation."¹⁶

Benjamin had been thinking about the relations between caption and image since the late 1920s, the time of his rapprochement with Bertolt Brecht. He was particularly impressed by Brecht's ideas about "literarization," a neologism Brecht had coined to describe the process of attaching bits of prescriptive language to visual images. The point is to limit their meanings to the kind considered proper.¹⁷ Ideally, no image would appear without a caption or its equivalent. In the "Mechanical Reproduction" essay, Benjamin extended the theory of "literarization" from still images to movies, noting that "the directives given by captions to those looking at images in illustrated

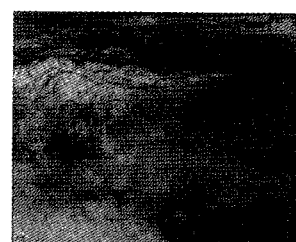
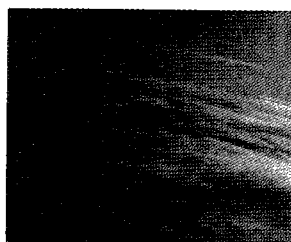
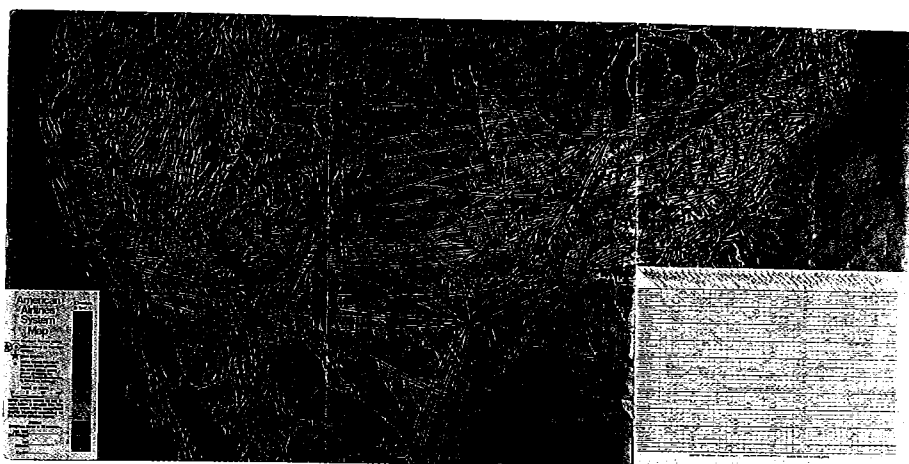
magazines soon became even more precise and commanding in films, where the way each single image is understood seems prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding images."¹⁸ The order of images tells one what to think about the entire sequence. Montage functions like captioning. Anyway, that is what Brecht and Benjamin believed, all the more strongly as the Nazis came to power in Germany and learned to exploit clichés about individual genius, racial destiny and the transcendent truths of history. Watching Nazi propagandists exploit these clichés with dreadful success, Benjamin and Brecht were appalled. People were being terribly misled. "Literarization" needed to be implemented immediately, to oppose the Fascist regime's carefully controlled play of word and image—in short, Hitlerian "literarization" had to be fought with its own weapons.

Crises drive us to extremes. One can sympathize with Brecht and Benjamin's conviction that the Ger-

ages it to do. Nonetheless, it seems clear that many in the contemporary art world benefit—or believe that they benefit—from a tight regulation of meaning. For art-world space, real and virtual, is crowded with regulatory machinery: labels, press releases, prescriptive essays, and art-school curricula designed to turn students into latter-day proponents of "literarization." The caption has triumphed.

5

When it was new, "Evidence" offered the art world an opportunity to grapple with the distinction between documentary images and the images of art. The former are limited, the latter are not, and it is among the great achievements of secular, Western culture to have arrived at an idea of art as utterly open-ended—possessed, one might say, of an exemplary freedom. Revisited in 2004, "Evidence" offered an effective reproach to the art world's massive machinery of



Above and right, Douglas Huebler: Location Piece #1, New York—Los Angeles, 1969, map, photos, typed statement.

man public needed, in the mid-1930s, to be told what to think. It is difficult, however, to extend the same sympathy to a denizen of a Canadian art school nearly half a century later. What Sultan encountered at the Nova Scotia College of Art was a policy of rigid control being sustained on false pretenses. If that seems harsh, ask yourself this: in those days, the early 1980s, what crisis had become so dire that the meanings of artists' images needed to be regulated by captions? A further question: Who benefits from regulation of that sort? Not those who seek, as I do, the pleasures of "free-floating contemplation" that art offers. Not those who value the engagement with others, with society and with history that develops when contemplation of that sort turns empathetic, as the best art encour-

Location Piece #1
New York - Los Angeles

In February, 1969 the airspace over each of the thirteen states between New York and Los Angeles was documented by a photograph made as the camera was pointed more or less straight out the airplane window (with no "interesting" view intended).

The photographs join together the East and West coast of the United States as each serves to "mark" one of the thirteen states flown over during that particular flight.

The photographs are not, however, "keyed" to the state over which they were made, but only exist as documents that join with an American Airlines Systems Map and this statement to constitute the form of this piece.

February, 1969Douglas Huebler

The hapless skier in Luc Tuymans's *The Architect* is faceless and, of course, not identified by the title. It's as if a more revealing title had been lost. There are no prescriptive cues—viewers are on their own.

exposition, which is driven by art theory of the kind that is associated chiefly with *October* magazine. The style of argument cultivated by the *October* writers reduces art to the illustration of statements we are to accept as unquestionable. Art serves the caption—or, to be more precise, the extended caption in the form of an essay—and in the course of this service it acquires its proper meaning. This is “literarization,” American-style, which became an explicit policy at *October*, with full credit given to Brecht and Benjamin.¹⁹

From “literarization” follows the idea that art not only can be but ought to be didactic. It must teach and, in a more active mode, investigate. The most aggressive form of art-as-investigation is “institutional critique,” which examines the intramural politics of the art world. Whatever their targets, these investigations and critiques all have points to make. To get the point is to bring interpretation to an end. You arrive at certainty, having taken guidance from an artist's statement or a prescriptive essay or the two in concert, with the essay amplifying the statement. Favoring art that addresses—or investigates—easily labeled issues, Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster and other *October* writers design their essays as extended captions. Read Krauss on modernism and postmodernism or Foster on Barbara Kruger and you will be told precisely what path to follow to which conclusion.²⁰

These critics issued their initial directives more than two decades ago. They are still at it, and they still base their prescriptions on the principle that, for purposes of interpretation, the visual can be reduced to the verbal. Thus, images are “textual.” If this were true, it would be convenient, for it would reduce interpretation to the task of reading off an unambiguous meaning, as in a rebus or a medieval allegory. But the visual is not reducible to the verbal. At most, a picture can be assigned a documentary or illustrational task. Yet much about even the simplest illustration defies conversion to language, and a painting becomes worthy of the name by permitting certainty about very little: the physical traits of the image, its style, and its subject, if it is representational. All that matters—chiefly, the meaning of the work—remains elusive, open to speculation but resistant to conclusive statements. Nonetheless, one of the *October* stalwarts, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, recently mentioned “painting's irreversible tendency toward textuality” as if it were a widely accepted historical truth. Not only is this tendency unobservable, it is unintelligible to anyone willing to see what paintings are and how they convey their meanings.

Buchloh made his remark about painting's “textuality” in a review of a monograph on Cy Twombly,

who often scrawls words on his canvases. Thus, says Buchloh, the artist improved on Pollock's example, “shifting from gestural to scriptural.” But why not say that the shift was in the other direction, that Twombly turned writing into painterly gesture? Or that he did both at once, with a finesse that makes it impossible to decide one way or the other? Leave both options in play and any number of other options, allusions, hints, implications and outright references will manifest themselves in Twombly's paintings—everything from “action painting” and *art brut*, which were new in the artist's youth, to the names of mythical figures who were already ancient when Western civilization was born. There is no hope of deciding which element is the key to Twombly's oeuvre, for there are no keys to be found here.

Buchloh finds one, nonetheless, in painting's “tendency toward textuality,” which he calls “irreversible” and I call an expedient demanded by theory. Make-believe key in hand, Buchloh opens the door to a speculation he offers as truth: Twombly's “textuality” turned painting into “an allegorical incantation” and a kind of mourning for the loss of “mythical experience and, ultimately . . . painting itself.”²¹ “Mythical experience” may or may not have been lost in modern times. I am certain, though, that painting has not been lost. Nor is it “textual.” Buchloh's commentary is sheer assertion: dogma in the service of authoritarian urges. Robert Storr recently compared the *October* cadre to the political machine that ran Chicago in Mayor Daley's time.²² This is a fair comparison. For all their radical posturing, Buchloh, Krauss and their colleagues are fixtures of the art-world establishment. Updating the didactic impulse, these writers have found a new way to supply the market for certainty about art.

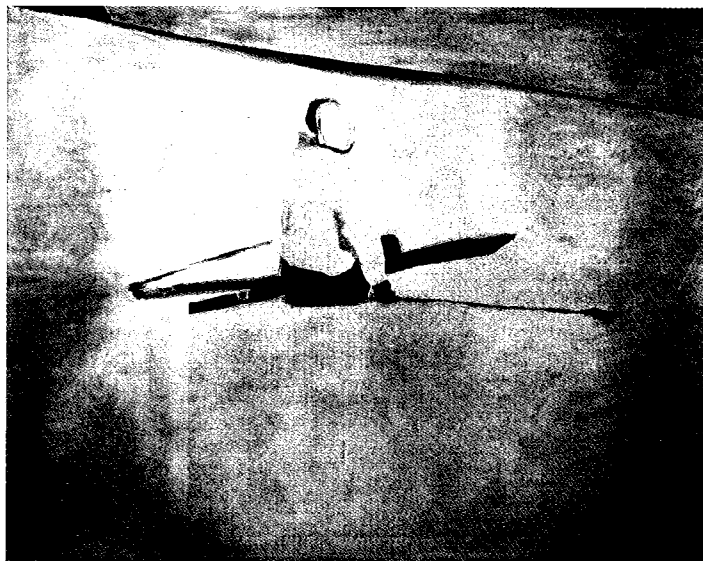
Their version of “literarization” has been amazingly influential. Hoping to wield some degree of *October*-like authority, art writers of all stripes tend to ignore the look of artworks and focus on their conceptual content. At every turn, one hears art praised for mediating between culture and nature, challenging the veracity of the photographic image, deconstructing socially constructed identities, decoding the relations between art and “the culture industry,” registering the progress of globalism, and so on. But that sort of thing is not done by art. It is done by argument, which employs language.

A visual image can support an argument only in a subordinate role, often documentary. An image becomes a document when a caption converts it to “evidence.” Sharply focused and properly labeled, a photograph of footprints may well be useful in proving that the accused was, in fact, at the scene of the crime on the night in question. For that matter, a painting in a museum of art may offer “evidence” about, for instance, the transition from knee-pants to long trousers in early modern France or the

facial features of Philip II.²³ But it is not testimony of this sort that qualifies a painting as a work of art. I'm not saying that the documentary details of a genre scene by Courbet or a portrait by Velázquez lack interest. On the contrary, those details are fascinating, and yet there is a limit to their fascination. Once we have made sense of them, they can be shelved as understood and we are free to turn to whatever it is that interpretation cannot exhaust. Grappling with these aspects of the image, we experience it as a work of art.

6

The contrast between exhaustible and inexhaustible meaning is crucial to the idea of art in a secular society leery of the attempt to regulate interpretation from on high. That is why Smithson, Heizer and other artists of their generation made such a point of noting that, as useful to their art as documentary images were, those images were not the site of their art. For the meaning of such images is easily pinned down, whereas the meaning of their art is not. This contrast is not only crucial but in perennial need of being drawn. Or so I gather from Sultan and Mandel's “Evidence,” which is just as fresh, just as pertinent now as it was in 1977. It seems that,



Luc Tuymans: *The Architect*, 1997, oil on canvas, 44½ by 56½ inches. Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp.

on occasion, we need artists to rescue us from our certainties, as Andy Warhol did by turning news photographs into dreadfully enigmatic paintings. These days, Luc Tuymans does something vaguely similar—or quite similar but in a manner that is vague, hazy, deliberately out of focus.

With *The Architect*, a painting from 1997-98, Tuymans shows a skier sitting haplessly on the snow. The figure is faceless and of course not identified by the title. It's as if a more revealing title had been lost. Tuymans has made up the deficiency by letting it be known through interviews and press releases that he based this painting on a photograph of the architect Albert Speer, Hitler's master builder. Thus he expands the title, and we continue the expansion by bringing to bear whatever we know—and feel—about Speer, Hitler, the Third Reich, Fascism, 20th-century history.

Many in the contemporary art world benefit—or believe that they benefit—from a tight control of meaning. Art-world space is crowded with regulatory machinery: labels, press releases, prescriptive essays.

Again, there are no prescriptive cues. Viewers are on their own.

We all level a harsh judgment on Speer and the regime he served. That much is certain. But how is that harshness textured as we respond to Tuymans's image of the Nazi form-giver? To what degree do we, in our everyday sense of ourselves, feel implicated by this image of a historical figure caught in a banal vacation mishap? The further banality of Tuymans's laconic realist style, at once knowing and comforting, intensifies the question. Isn't it too easy, a bit of a cliché, to assume that, by condemning the Nazis, we distance ourselves from them absolutely? It is the irreducibly visual qualities of Tuymans's image—the odd seductions of his brushwork, especially—that give these questions their insistence. For this picture keeps drawing the viewer into a troubled, somehow physical intimacy. *The Architect* is a latter-day instance, however etiolated, of history painting, the grand genre.²⁴ It does ironically what the history paintings of earlier centuries did heroically: invite us to wake up to our places in history and our relations to historical figures and events. To do this is not to learn a conclusive lesson. It is to get a glimpse of who one is, and no glimpse of that kind is ever final.

Neither Speer nor anyone else is visible in Thomas Demand's *Model* (2000), yet Speer haunts this photograph of a worktable bearing an architectural maquette. The surfaces of all the objects pictured here are oddly blank for the well-known reason that Demand doesn't photograph ordinary things. He photographs the mockups of things—tables and chairs, cups and saucers, everything but human figures—that he constructs with finicky precision from untextured cardboard and paper. A close look at his color prints might leave us with the suspicion that he does something of the sort. But we needn't guess because Demand has described his process in detail to a number of art writers. And we learn from Roxana Marcoci, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, that *Model* is a stripped-down recapitulation of a photograph of Speer reaching out with his right hand to adjust a detail on his model of the German pavilion he designed for the Paris International Exposition of 1937. By the architect's side stands Adolf Hitler.²⁵

Speer's design features a columned facade topped by a Germanic eagle. Though Demand's version is just as monumental, if not more so, its facade is flat and the eagle has vanished. He may hope that, by expunging all ornament, he has revealed the essence of Speer's form. Or he may want to point to a resemblance between Speer's geometries and those of Walter Gropius and other Bauhaus utopians. Or the blankness of his model

may invite us to see a void beneath the surfaces of Nazi architecture and, by extension, Nazi ideology. If so, how are we to understand this void? What, for that matter, are we to make of the formal affinities between Fascist and utopian architecture—or of the notion, which Demand invokes but never endorses, that forms reveal essences? Recycled in magazine reviews, catalogue essays and wall labels, his comments on his sources and themes sound explanatory, yet they explain nothing. Nonetheless, we listen because we would be lost without these disclosures. Having received them, we are still lost, not because the artist has given us too little to go on but because he has given us too much—an overload of historical memory at its most anguished. Never, though, does he provide any resolutions to the dreadful quandaries he stirs up. We are on our own in these airless interiors.

Each of Demand's works begins with a documentary image. The source of *Office* (1996) is a news-magazine photograph of a ransacked office at the headquarters of the East German secret police. Another news photo, of Florida election officials recounting ballots after the 2000 presidential election, led to *Poll* (2001). Through a complex process of transposition and reconstruction, Demand turns documents into art. With a single gesture, the removal of captions, Sultan and Mandel did the same thing. And they suggested an epigrammatic definition: a work of art is a work without a caption. A work unburdened by imperatives or directives. A work that forces us into a crisis like Crusoe's, an emergency requiring us to interpret everything anew. Aware of ourselves as interpreters, we begin to see the self as always subject to reinterpretation. At stake in all this is freedom, that preoccupation of liberal, bourgeois society. To be free one must have many advantages, none of which is liberating unless one has, as well, the understanding that one can always make fresh sense of oneself. Art encourages us to do that. So do other things, yet art may be the most reliably encouraging. □

1. Unless otherwise noted, comments attributed to Sultan and Mandel are from conversations with the author or e-mail exchanges between the artists and the author, August and September, 2006.

2. Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 1719, ed. John Richetti, East Rutherford, Penguin Books, 2003, p. 122-26.

3. William Blake, letter to Dr. Trusler, Aug. 23, 1799, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, New York, Anchor Books, rev. ed., 1997, pp. 702-03.

4. Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry," 1580-81, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al., New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2001, pp. 331, 332; Horace, "Ars Poetica," first century B.C., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, p. 132.

5. Martha Rosler, "The 2006 Whitney Biennial," *Artforum*, May 2006, pp. 284-285.

6. Denis Diderot, "Salon of 1763," 1763, *Art in Theory 1648-1815: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 2000, p. 605.

7. Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," 1790-92, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, p. 35.

8. For Plato's objections to art, see books 2 and 10 of the *Republic*, the *Apology*, and the *Ion*. See also Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, 2002, pp. 40-48, 72-85.

9. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Garry Wills, New

York, Penguin Books, 2006, pp. 293-301.

10. Donald Davidson, "Plato's Philosopher," 1985, *Truth, Language, and History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 223-40.

11. John Keats, letter to George and Thomas Keats, Dec. 22, 1817, *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. Duncan Wu, London, Blackwell Publishers, 1994, p. 1015.

12. For comment on the doctrine of the self as a passive product of ideology, see Steven E. Cole, "The Scrutable Subject: Davidson, Literary Theory, and the Claims of Knowledge," *Literary Theory After Davidson*, ed. Reed Way Dasenbrock, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993, pp. 59-91.

13. It should be noted that *Spiral Jetty* has three forms: earthwork, film and essay. *Spiral Jetty* the film is not a documentary treatment of the earthwork but a work of art in its own right. Likewise, "Spiral Jetty" the essay is not an analysis of the earthwork or the film but a work of speculative fiction. See Carter Ratcliff, "A Heap of Smithson," *Art in America*, October 2005.

14. Conversations between Robert Smithson and the author, 1971 and 1972.

15. Carter Ratcliff, *Out of the Box: The Reinvention of Art 1965-1975*, New York, Allworth Press, 2000, pp. 166-69, 239-64.

16. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 1936, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, p. 224.

17. For Benjamin's account of Brecht's "literarization," see "The Author as Producer," 1934, *Reflections, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, pp. 220-38.

18. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, p. 226.

19. For Krauss's endorsement of "literarization," see Rosalind Krauss, "Photography in the Service of Surrealism," 1986, *Art of the Twentieth Century: A Reader*, ed. Jason Gaiger and Paul Wood, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 123.

20. Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodern Repetition," 1981, *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Modernism*, ed. Brian Wallis, Boston, David R. Godine, 1984, pp. 13-29; Hal Foster, "Subversive Signs," 1985, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1996, pp. 310-18.

21. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Ego in Arcadia," a review of Richard Leeman, *Cy Twombly: A Monograph*, trans. Whittall, Paris, Éditions Flammarion, *Artforum*, January 2006, p. 26.

22. Robert Storr, "All in the Family," 2006, a review of Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900*, New York, Thames & Hudson, 2005. Online at frieze.com.

23. For an art historian's account of artworks as documents, see Jules David Prown, *Art as "Evidence": Writings on Art and Material Culture*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001.

24. See Emma Dexter, "The Interconnectedness of All Things: Between History, Still Life and the Uncanny," *Luc Tuymans*, London, Tate Publishing, 2004, pp. 17-19.

25. Roxana Marcoci, "Paper Moon," *Thomas Demand*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2005, p. 15.

"Evidence Revisited" was seen at the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson [Jan. 10-Mar. 24, 2004]; Loeb Art Center, Poughkeepsie [Oct. 2-Dec. 19, 2004]; The Photographers' Gallery, London [Oct. 7-Nov. 25, 2005]; and the Berlin Biennial [Sept. 26, 2005-June 5, 2006]. A new edition of the book *Evidence*, with contributions from Sandra S. Phillips and Robert F. Forth, was published in 2003 by Distributed Art Publishers, New York.

Author: Carter Ratcliff is a poet and art critic whose most recent book is *Out of the Box: The Reinvention of Art, 1965-1975* (Allworth).