

designer to that of administrator/facilitator and, in Lippard's case, invited co-author. Many *Six Years* artists remain obscure while others never left what was then, now quaintly, referred to as the gallery "system." Art dealers like Leo Castelli represented and loyally supported "word guys" Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, and the ubiquitous Lawrence Weiner. Conspicuous in their historical "dematerialization," three women have acquired a mythic quality: the art/life blurring Lozano; Charlotte Posenenske, who ceased making art in 1968 and is having a posthumous revival; and Christine Kozlov, an associate of Kosuth's poignantly represented by a canister of blank 8mm film. Held up against a background of campus revolt, hippie occultism, primal screaming ex-Beatles, and Warholian decadence, *Six Years* bracketed cool art in hot times. In the 1970s, Lucy Lippard would turn her considerable energies toward feminism, political activism, and local politics, where the effects of implemented social change might be observed in everyday life.

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## UNCANNY BY COINCIDENCE

### Lost and Found: Anonymous Photography in Reflection

Ambach & Rice

Los Angeles

December 1, 2012–January 12, 2013

What makes a photograph significant? What makes a photograph resonate? Is it the composition? The facial expression of its subject? The quality of light and shadow? Does knowing who took it increase its appeal? These questions and more were put to the test in *Lost and Found: Anonymous Photography in Reflection*, a compelling exhibition that juxtaposed images by anonymous photographers with those who are well known in the field. It was the relationships among these images and the coincidental juxtapositions that made the exhibition sing. Two curators working independently selected the images. Benjamin Thelonious Fels worked with vernacular photographs from the collection of Robert E. Jackson (a Seattle-based collector who has amassed over ten thousand images taken by unknown photographers). New York City-based critic and curator Bob Nickas selected the photographs by contemporary imagemakers. Each curator chose their images independently, aware that the collaborative aspects of the project were to come during installation.

Fels spent time with Jackson's collection, which is kept in 110 books and sequenced around specific narratives and themes. The collection is fluid, as images are often traded out and replaced by



others. In his looking, Fels noted trends in the vernacular images that spoke to a kind of "American impulse toward transformation, into other selves and even other varieties of matter."<sup>1</sup> He also noticed similarities to themes in contemporary photography with respect to pose and the snapshot aesthetic that reflected a more spontaneous and less studied image.

Nickas selected fifty images by contemporary artists, both well and lesser known, many of whose main oeuvre falls outside more traditional, modernist photography. The modestly sized images were sequenced around two themes ("space as escape" and "the fugitive figure"), creating quasi-narratives. During installation, the fifty vernacular images met the fifty contemporary pictures, creating interruptions in the predetermined sequences. Each curator had created their own narrative with the images they selected, but once in the space they worked together to integrate them into a new sequence.

In some instances it was difficult to determine whether an image was anonymous or by an artist of note. The blurring of boundaries and dissolving of "authorship" was one of the most intriguing aspects of the exhibition. An anonymous photograph, *Looking Through Porthole or Pipe*, carefully frames the landscape through a circular portal. In the small black-and-white image, a circle is centered in the frame, directing the eye toward the horizon line. In the installation it was juxtaposed on one side by another anonymous image, also vignetted as if shot through a periscope; and on the other by an image of approximately the same size, although displayed in a large mat, by contemporary imagemaker James Welling. Welling's *LA-C 32 (Star Lamp)* (1977) depicts a star-shaped lamp whose circular center is silhouetted

by the light behind it. These images connected formally as well as conceptually and created a relationship between disparate abstractions of the built and natural landscape. The sequence continued with an anonymous image, *Looking Up at Electrical Wire Tower*, which becomes a crisscross of black lines against a white ground, coincidentally similar to Welling's abstract photograms (which were not in the exhibition).

Conscious of the power of photographs containing other images and the way words within pictures can direct meaning, the curators were not without humor. A sequence of images about the body was introduced by an anonymous image of a picture of a woman bodybuilder, followed by another anonymous image whose background is a wall of posters with words and phrases including "Great Society," "Love," "Grateful," and "Dead." The next image, also anonymous, showed a long-haired bearded man wearing a T-shirt proclaiming: "Vietnam has Won!" Following that was Doug Biggert's color photograph of a bikini-clad, blonde-haired woman holding a flower and a leash that extends beyond the frame suggesting she is walking a dog. Entitled *Balboa pedestrian with dog, (missing)* (2012), it is a perfect example of the snapshot in which part of the subject—in this case the dog—is missing.

Both the subjects and the authors of the vernacular images are unknown, leaving the purpose of the images up for speculation. Were they made as keepsakes, or as art, or were they perhaps mistakes? Images that are compositionally balanced or intentionally wrong caught the viewer's attention. The anonymous image *Man's Face Reflected in Mirror on Table* (n.d.) is a square photograph that carefully frames a man's head inside a circular mirror placed on a table in front of a wall. Perhaps it is an image of the photographer? The tones in the image encompass the full range from black to white. In the exhibition, this image was placed next to Vivian Maier's *Self-Portrait (Window, Mirror Reflection)* (c. 1960s). The compositional and conceptual similarities were uncanny. The anonymous photograph *Man's Head Obscured by Balloon* could be seen in this context as a nod to John Baldessari's *Wrong* (1967).

Not all the anonymous images were straight black-and-white photographs. Some were in color and some were even double exposures. These anomalies allowed the curators to play with contemporary manipulations. Wolfgang Tillman's *Lutz, Alex, Suzanne & Christoph on beach (orange)* (1993) has been colorized. Florian Maier-Aichen's *Untitled (Malibu South)* (2004) distorts the color of the natural landscape, and was sequenced next to John Divola's *Artificial Nature, Ice Palace, Warner Brothers, 1960* (2002). Divola's project elevated found photographs of Hollywood stage sets to art. This sequence also included two images by Aspen Mays in which she used a hole punch to create the illusion of stars on the photographic paper.



Images of hands were found in both sets of images, as were images that depict the landscape as a limitless plane. While there were indeed remarkable found photographs, when presented in this context the anomaly became the norm. It is obvious that Fels and Nickas had great fun curating this exhibition. Through an exploration of the arbitrary nature of framing, they have been able to meld art and non art, making it difficult at times to tell the two apart.

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NOTES: "Lost and Found: Anonymous Photography in Reflection," *Artweek LA*, January 7, 2013, <http://artweek.la/issue/january-7-2013/article/lost-found-anonymous-photography-in-reflection>.

**Above**

*Man's Face Reflected in Mirror on Table* (n.d. by unknown photographer); courtesy Robert E. Jackson Collection, Seattle



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