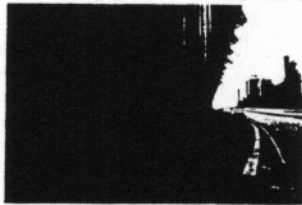


Kevin Concannon, "Words and Pictures, " *Views: The Journal of Photography in New England*, Volume 5, Number 2, p. 16.

WORDS AND

P I C T U R E S

I returned to Pittsburgh, hoping to bring the truth of the...
 measure was that such a simple shot of light shows on...
 the side view of glass that I was without about when



I was young, when everything looked freedom, got used at
 all the same. Pittsburgh, so the head was beautiful and...
 like a great and mature man still full of his strength.
 but a little, remembered in his wisdom.

Duane Michals, *I Remember Pittsburgh*



Anne Turyn, from *Dear John Series*, 1981

Brent Sikkema/*Vision Gallery*, 216 Newbury St.,
 Boston, January 10–February 4.

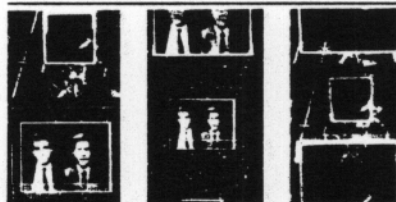
By Kevin Concannon

"Words and Pictures" presents the work of ten photographers united by their common use of text with image. Within this basic framework, however, several different approaches to this long-debated practice are evident.

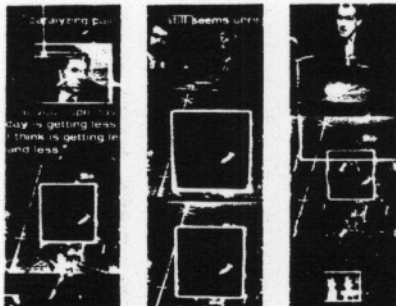
Perhaps coming closest to the root of this essentially photojournalistic tradition is the work of Mark Klett, represented here with four silver gelatin prints from his *Landscape Series* (1980-1983). At least one of these pictures, *Ellen Above the Green River Where C'Sullivan Stood Over 100 Years Ago*, is taken from the William Henry Jackson rephotography project in which Klett participated, duplicating frame by frame the original views, demonstrating the ravages of time. On each print, the handwritten text in silver ink disappears at certain viewing angles. These are straightforward descriptive captions which serve to catalogue.

In contrast to this apparently objective use of text, Duane Michals' *I Remember Pittsburgh* (1983), a sequence of nine photographs, exploits text in order to promote the viewer's understanding of the photographer's subjective experience. Various scenes of downtown Pittsburgh are accompanied by the photographer's handwritten comments about the childhood memories evoked by each scene. The steel beam of a bridge reflected in a car's sideview mirror prompts the memory of his grandfather who was a steelworker. While Klett's captions seem almost tautological, Michals' interest is not in the "truth" of photography, but rather in its ability to sentimentalize, its inherent capacity for nostalgia.

Laura Blacklow suggests not memories, but dreams, with her photographs; the "actions" which take place are clearly not real-life events. In *Star Cazer* (1983), the image of a woman looking surprised and guilty is "explained" by the caption. The woman has hidden from the authorities under her kaftan an "insurrectionary weapon," a device which measures stellar heat and locates heavenly



Nation



Paul Berger, from *Seattle Subtext*, c. 1984

bodies. The applied color on this xerographic print further promotes our reading of the image as unreal. Initially confronting the picture, we immediately sense that something has just transpired. What is going on? The woman stares directly at us, anticipating our reaction. Even the information supplied leaves us hanging; why should such a device be considered a threat? Ultimately we are left with a nagging sensation as if not quite recalling a dream on the morning after.

While Klett, Michals, and Blacklow all operate within basically photographic parameters (insofar as cataloguing, memory, and dream are widely exploited photographic sensibilities), Bonnie Gordon, Paul Berger, and Rita DeWitt all fall into the somewhat dubious category of Structuralism. Certainly the strictest of these is Paul Berger, represented with four panels from his *Seattle Subtext* series (1982-83).

For the artist, *Seattle Subtext* is an imaginary and reordered magazine, a hypothetical alteration of the context and composition of all the "information" that pours into one's home. The individual panels are set up to resemble two-page spreads from *Time* magazine. Rephotographed images from television monitors are gridded out, interspersed with news headings (THE NATION), and computer (or word-processor) commands. What results is a banal illustration of the meaninglessness of media information. And while the artist asserts that a visual cadence is created by the formal placement of the elements within the page, the pieces exhibited here seem to address the superficiality of the media tautologically. The problem with this type of work as visual art is that it must, to some extent, seduce in order to repel. There is, of course, always the risk that seduction will be too complete.

This, in fact, is the problem with the collages of Rita DeWitt. Susan Sontag might well meditate on the structuralist implications of a snapshot of a nude woman against an embroidered sofa, "stitched" to the surface of a photo of hands and overlaid with a card representing the sign language alphabet, but the artist might better keep it to herself. The empty questions tagged onto these images come off as entirely superfluous and affected. DeWitt should concentrate instead on her obvious talent for purely visual puns.

Bonnie Gordon's work, stretched photomechanical halftone prints of images and word definitions lifted from dictionaries, maintains its structural-

stand it was a little boy, I thought as I saw the...
 right, and I was at once a little...
 very reasonable of them when the...
 very reasonable of them when the...
 very reasonable of them when the...



night, of course, my dad was not working and he...
 down all was dead. Before we used to...
 of felt sorry for their children...
 their people were just like...

Duane Michals, *Orange*



Laura Blacklow

ist integrity without stooping to such pedantry. In *Four Words Beginning With the Letters PEL* (1975), the words are represented typographically along with their dictionary definitions. *Pelagic* (pertaining to the open sea) and *pellicle* (a thin skin or film) are illustrated by the waves printed on the page and the evidence of the process which put them there respectively. While Gordon's pictures recall the typographical work of Marinetti and Apollinaire, she extends those artists' correspondences to further levels of meaning. The work operates positively to promote an understanding of linguistic and visual communication whereas Berger and DeWitt seem more interested in confusing the issue.

If structuralism seems a bit tired in 1984, it is perhaps directorial photography which has usurped its place in contemporary discourse. While maintaining her foothold in "photography and language," Anne Turyn has her lenses set squarely toward the stage. The four photographs at Brent Sikkema/*Vision Gallery*, from the *Dear John* series (1981), are consistent in their inclusion of the familiar "Dear John Letter," our clue that whatever the melodrama excerpted in the photograph might have involved, it is now over. As with Cindy Sherman's early work, the artist presents a scene which we immediately identify as a "still" from a larger story. In Sherman's case, the characters become the focus of our curiosity; with Turyn it is the "script." In many of the *Dear John* pieces, our unsatisfied curiosity is distracted by humorous visual elements which pick up on the text. *I'm Cutting Sweets Out of My Life—And That Includes You* shows a wedding picture from which the groom has been cut out and set aside on a table littered with candies. In others, the protagonist contradicts her stated intentions. In *(Mud)* she extends her white-gloved hand to accept a gift from her rejected suitor. Within these domestic vignettes, a narrative is constructed which doesn't really tell much about the people involved. (They are as generic as the letters themselves.) Rather, Turyn captures in these pictures that frozen moment which we all at one time encounter: the need to move before we know where we are going.