

PHOTOGRAPHY



and LANGUAGE

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Camerawork Press
San Francisco

Reinventing Documentary¹

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A small group of artists in Southern California are working on an art that deals with the social ordering of people's lives. Most of their work involves still photography and video; most relies heavily on written or spoken language. I'm talking about a representational art, an art that refers to something beyond itself. Form and mannerism are not ends in themselves. These works might be about any number of things, ranging from the material and ideological space of the "self" to the dominant social realities of corporate spectacle and corporate power. The initial questions are these: "How do we invent our lives out of a limited range of possibilities, and how are our lives invented for us by those in power? If these questions are asked *only* within the institutional boundaries of elite culture, only within the "artworld," then the answers will be merely academic. Given a certain poverty of means, this art aims toward a wider audience.

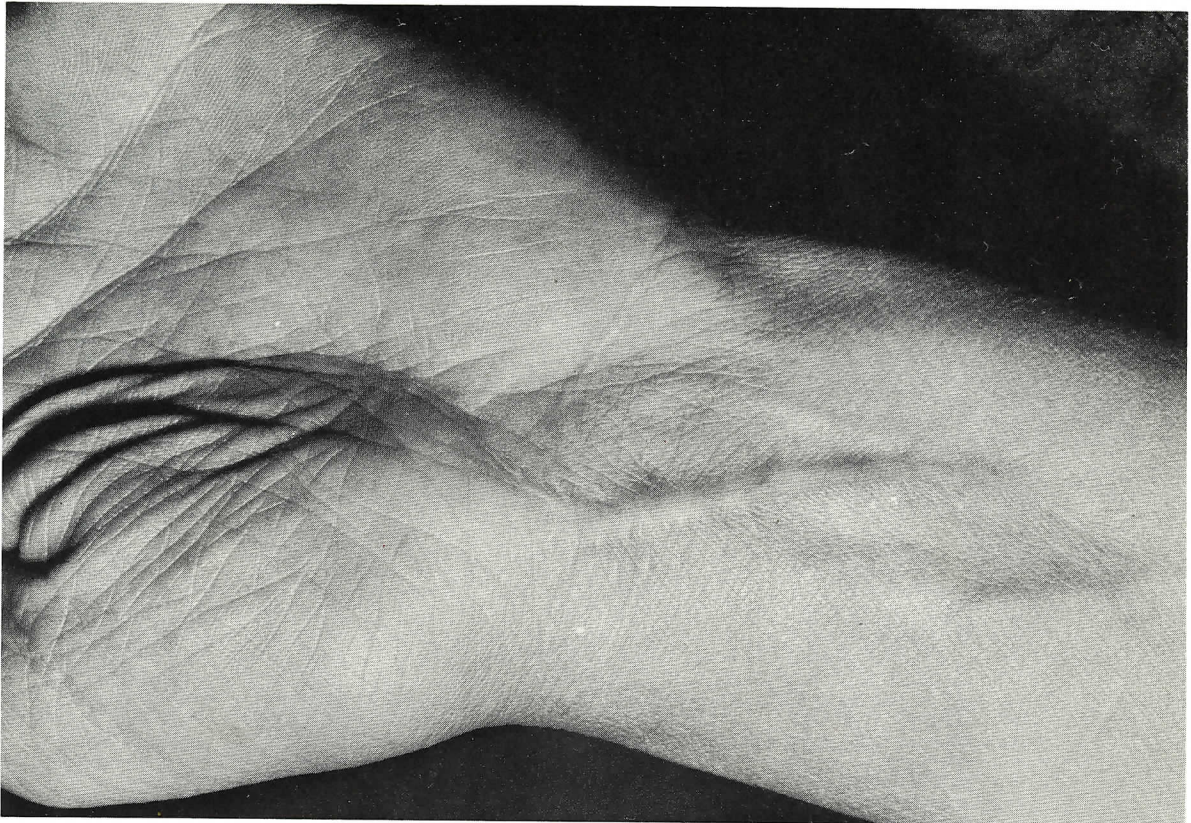
We might be tempted to think of this work as a variety of documentary. That's all right as long as we expose the myth that accompanies the label, the folklore of photographic truth. The rhetorical strength of documentary is imagined to reside in the unequivocal character of the camera's evidence, in an essential realism. I shouldn't have to point out that photographic meaning is indeterminate; the same picture can convey a variety of messages under differing presentational circumstances. Consider the evidence offered by bank holdup cameras. Taken automatically, these pictures could be said to be unpoluted by sensibility, an extreme form of documentary. If the surveillance engineers who developed these cameras have an esthetic, it's one of raw, technological instrumentality. "Just the facts, ma'am." But a courtroom is a battleground of fictions. What is it that a photograph points to? A young white woman holds a submachine gun. The gun is handled confidently, aggressively. The gun is almost dropped out of fear. A fugitive heiress. A kidnap victim. An urban guerrilla. A willing participant. An unwilling participant. A case of brainwashing. A case of rebellion. A case of schizophrenia. The outcome, based on the "true" reading of the evidence, is a function less of "objectivity" than of political maneuvering. Reproduced in the mass media, this picture might attest to the omniscience of the state within a glamorized and mystifying spectacle of revolution and counterrevolution. But any police photography that is publicly displayed is both a specific attempt at identification and a reminder of police power over "criminal elements." The only "objective" truth that photographs offer is the assertion that somebody or something—in this case, an automated camera—was somewhere and took a picture. Everything else is up for grabs.

Someone once wrote of the French photographer Eugene Atget that he depicted the streets of Paris as though they were scenes of crime. That remark serves to poeticize a rather deadpan, nonexpressionist style, to celebrate the photographer in his role as evidence. In this pictorial presentation of "fact," the genre has contributed much to spectacle, to retinal excitation, to voyeurism, and only a little to the critical understanding of the social world. A truly critical social documentary will frame the crime; the trial, and the system of justice and its official myths. Artists working toward this end may or may not

produce images that are theatrical and overtly contrived, they may or may not present texts that read like fiction. Social truth is something other than a matter of convincing style.

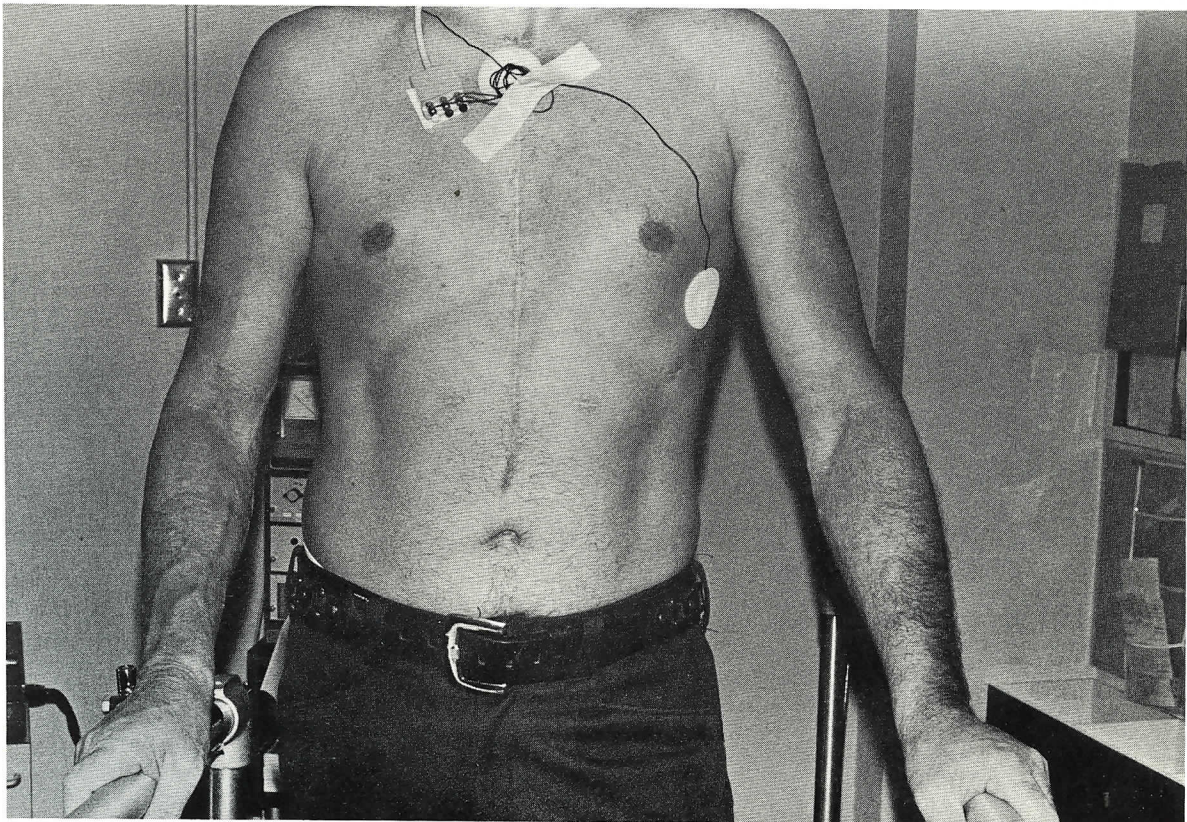
A curious thing happens when documentary is officially recognized as art. Suddenly the audience's attention is directed toward mannerism, toward sensibility, toward the physical and emotional risks taken by the artist. Documentary is thought to be art when it transcends its reference to the world, when the work can be regarded, first and foremost, as an act of self-expression on the part of the artist. A cult of authorship, an auteurism, takes hold of the image, separating it from the social conditions of its making and elevating it above the multitude of lowly and mundane uses to which photography is commonly put. The culture journalists' myth of Diane Arbus is interesting in this regard. Most readings of her work careen along an axis between opposing poles of realism and expressionism. On the one hand, her portraits are seen as transparent vehicles for the social or psychological truth of her subjects; Arbus elicits meaning from their persons. At the other extreme is projection. The work is thought to express her tragic vision (a vision confirmed by her suicide); each image is nothing so much as a contribution to the artist's self-portrait. These readings coexist, they enhance one another despite their mutual contradiction. I think that a good deal of the generalized esthetic appeal of Arbus' work, along with that of most art photography, has to do with this indeterminacy of reading, this sense of being cast adrift between profound social insight and refined solipsism. At the heart of this fetishistic cultivation and promotion of the artist's humanity is a certain disdain for the "ordinary" humanity of those who have been photographed. They become the "other," exotic creatures, objects of contemplation. Perhaps this wouldn't be so suspect if it weren't for the tendency of professional documentary photographers to aim their cameras downward, toward those with little power or prestige. (The obverse is the cult of celebrity, the organized production of envy in a mass audience.) The most intimate, human-scale relationship to suffer mystification in all this is the specific social engagement that results in the image: the negotiation between photographer and subject in the making of a portrait, the seduction, coercion, collaboration, or rip off. But if we widen the angle of our view, we find that the broader institutional politics of elite and "popular" culture are also being obscured in the romance of the photographer as artist.

Fred Lonidier and Phil Steinmetz are two photographers who set out deliberately to work against the strategies that have succeeded in making photography a high art. Their work begins with the recognition that photography is operative at every level of our culture. That is, they insist on treating photographs not as privileged objects but as common cultural artifacts. The solitary, sparsely captioned photograph on the gallery wall is a sign, above all, of an aspiration toward the esthetic and market conditions of modernish painting and sculpture. In this white void, meaning is thought to emerge entirely from within the artwork. The importance of the framing discourse is masked, context is hidden.



MEAT INSPECTOR'S DISEASE

"I wouldn't say that they would take and explain to workers that there is a chance of them catching brucellosis and what to look for once you get sick. I don't think they would do that. I doubt if any employer would because you wouldn't have nobody working for them."



MANUFACTURING ENGINEER'S HEART

"The company that I'd worked for is noted for the amount of heart attacks in their people . . . I have known in the past four years of one heart attack death and about seven heart attacks had open-heart surgeries from this particular company."

Reinventing Documentary (Continued)

Lonidier and Steinmetz, on the other hand, openly bracket their photographs with language, using texts to anchor, contradict, reinforce, subvert, complement, particularize, or go beyond the meanings offered by the images themselves. These pictures are located within a narrative structure. I'm not talking about "photo essays," a cliché-ridden form that is the non-commercial counterpart to the photographic advertisement. Photo essays are an outcome of a mass-circulation picture magazine esthetic, the esthetic of the merchandisable column-inch and rapid, excited reading.

Phil Steinmetz has produced a six-volume sociological "portrait" of himself and his relatives; the entire work is made up of more than six hundred photographs taken over a period of several years. The pictures are well-lit, full of ironic incident and material detail. Steinmetz pays a great deal of attention to the clothing and gesture, to interior decoration. His captions vary between sociological polemic and personal anecdote. The books are a curious hybrid of the family album and a variety of elegantly hand-crafted coffee-table book. The narrative span of the family album is compressed temporally, resulting in a maddening intensity of coverage and exposure.

While covering intimate affairs, Steinmetz offers a synecdochic representation of suburban middle-class family life. At the same time the work is a complex autobiography in which Steinmetz invents himself and is in turn invented, appearing as eldest son, ex-husband, father, alienated and documentation-obsessed prime mover, and escapee with one foot in a suburban past. The work pivots on self-implication, on Steinmetz's willingness to expose his interactions with and attitudes toward the rest of the family. The picture books are products of a series of discontinuous theatrical encounters; the artist "visits the folks." Some occasions are full of auspicious moments for traditional family-album photography: a birthday, a family dinner. Here Steinmetz is an insider, other moments the camera is pulled out with less fanfare and approval, almost on the sly, I imagine. Other encounters are deliberately staged by the

photographer: on a weekend visit he photographs his daughter in front of an endless toy-store display of packaged games. She smiles rather quizzically. Judging from the titles, the games are all moral exercises in corporate virtue, male aggression, and female submission. I'm reminded of a frame from Godard, but this picture has a different affect, the affect of real, rather than emblematic, relationships.

Eventually the artwork became a familial event in itself. Steinmetz visited his parents with a handful of his books, asking them to talk captions into a tape recorder. Other artists and photographers have done this sort of thing with family archives; Roger Welch is an example. The difference here is that Steinmetz is not particularly interested in memory and nostalgia in themselves. His pictures are geared to elicit ideological responses; they are subtle provocations. The work aims at revealing the power structure within the extended family, the petit-bourgeois ambitions of the men, their sense of ownership, and the supportive and subordinate role of the women. Steinmetz's father, a moderately successful building contractor, poses by the sign post for a subdivision street he named: Security Way. His mother sits in the kitchen reading a religious tract entitled *Nervous Christians*. He comes closest to identifying with his daughter, with the possibility of her rebellion.

The last of the six books deals with his ex-wife's second wedding. Steinmetz appears at a dress rehearsal—as what? Guest, interloper, official photographer, voyeur, ghost from the past? His wife's new in-laws look troubled. The pictures have a curious sense of the absurd, of packaged roles poorly worn, of consumer ritual. The camera catches a certain awkwardness of tuxedo- and gown-encased gesture and movement. The groom is late, and someone asks Steinmetz to stand in for him. *Somebody's Making a Mistake* is the title of the completed artwork.

Fred Lonidier deals with a larger politics than that of the family. *The Health and Safety Game* is about the "handling" of industrial injury and disease by corporate capitalism, pointing to the systemic character of everyday violence in the workplace. Some statistics: one out of every four American workers suffers from some occupationally caused disability. An observation: anyone who has ever lived or worked in an industrial working-class community can probably attest to the commonness of disfigurement among people on the job and in the street. Disease is less visible and has only recently become a public issue. I can recall going to the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry and visiting the coal mine there. Hoarse-voiced men, seemingly retired miners, led the tourists through a programmed demonstration of mining technology. When the time came to deal with safety, one of the guides set off a controlled little methane explosion. No one mentioned black-lung disease in this corporate artwork.

Lonidier's evidence consists of twenty or so case studies of individual workers, each displayed on large panels laid out in a rather photojournalistic fashion. The reference to photojournalism is deliberate, I think, because the work refuses to deliver any of the empathetic goodies that we are accustomed to in photo essays. "human interest" is absent. Lonidier is aware of the ease with which liberal documentary artists have converted violence and suffering into esthetic objects.

For all his good intentions, for example, Eugene Smith in *Minamata* provided more a representation of his compassion for mercury-poisoned Japanese fisherfolk than one of their struggle for retribution against the corporate polluter. I'll say it again: the subjective aspect of liberal esthetics is compassion rather than collective struggle. Pity, mediated by an appreciation of great art, supplants political understanding. It has been remarked that Eugene Smith's portrait of a Minamata mother bathing her retarded and deformed daughter is a deliberate reference to the *Pieta*.

Unlike Smith, Lonidier takes the same photographs that a doctor might. When the evidence is hidden within the body Lonidier borrows and copies x-ray films. These pictures have a brute, clinical effect. Each worker's story is reduced to a rather schematic account of injury, disease, hospitalization, and endless bureaucratic run-around by companies trying to shirk responsibility and liability. All too frequently we find that at the end of the story the worker is left unemployed and undercompensated. At the same time, though, these people are fighting. A machinist with lung cancer tells of stealing samples of dust from the job, placing them on the kitchen griddle in a home-made experiment to detect asbestos, a material that his bosses had denied using. The anonymity of Lonidier's subjects is a precaution against retaliation against them. Many are still fighting court cases. Lonidier found that quite a few of the people he initially made contact with were afraid to talk or later became intimidated by the possibility of company reprisals.

Lonidier's presentation is an analog of sorts for the way in which corporate bureaucrats handle the problem of industrial safety, yet he subverts the model by telling the story from below, from the place occupied by the worker in the hierarchy. The case-study form is a model of authoritarian handling of human lives. The layout of the panels reflects the distribution of power. Quotes from the workers are set in type so small that they are nearly unreadable. The titles are set in large type: "Machinist's Lung," "Egg-Packer's Arm." The body and the life are presented as they have been fragmented by management. Injury is a loss of labor power, a negative commodity, overhead. Injury is not a diminishing of a human life but a statistical impingement on the corporate profit margin.

I don't think that Fred Lonidier and Phil Steinmetz are presenting worlds that are all that distinct. Domestic and public, at home and on the job, the general terms of estrangement are the same. It is within the family that class values are learned, that patterns of dominance and submission take hold. These works document monopoly capitalism's inability to deliver the conditions of a fully human life.

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¹ This article originally appeared in a catalogue accompanying a part of one-person exhibitions at the Long Beach Museum of Art: Fred Lonidier's *Health and Safety Game* and Philip Steinmetz's *Somebody's Making a Mistake*. David Ross, the museum's director of television and film, curated the exhibition. Early on, the decision was made to produce an exhibition catalogue that worked against the high art fetish of limited "quality reproduction". That is, the catalogue's form (newsprint, lots of critical text) and presentation was both used as an exhibition announcement and was available for free at the museum) were intended polemically. Following Walter Benjamin, these artists see the political value of photography in its reproducibility and in its "bracketing" with speech or text.



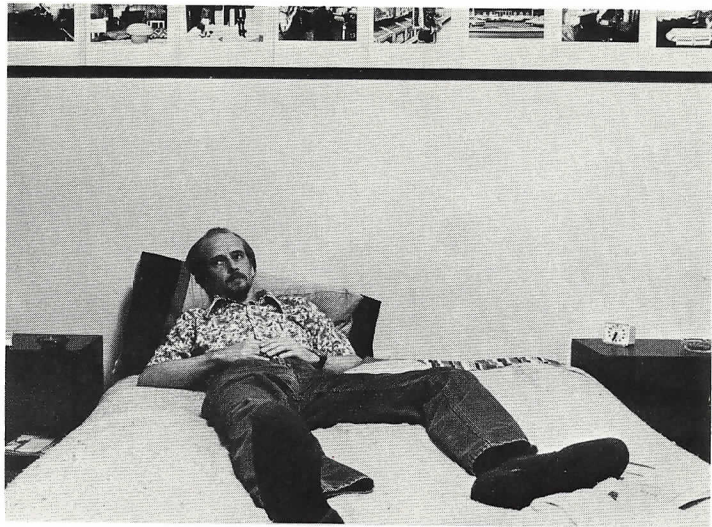
OFFICE WORKER'S NERVES

"She didn't give me the forms because she didn't want her record to look bad. It was for her own future promotion."



CARPENTER'S VERTEBRA

"Well, okay, why? One thing, well the wall was too heavy and I guess the framers, you know, they weren't careful. I guess everything was going too fast. Pushing, I guess the company was pushing, trying to get the most out of the people . . . and they were losing. They knew it and everybody else knew it. They were losing money on it."



from 3 MYTHS book

"Much of the time I just lay there listening to music and thinking about my past, present and future."



from CULTURE SHOPPING book

Mom: "We've been really swept into this whirl pool of development. As an individual you're not able to do anything. You're just carried along with the tide. Like a flood."

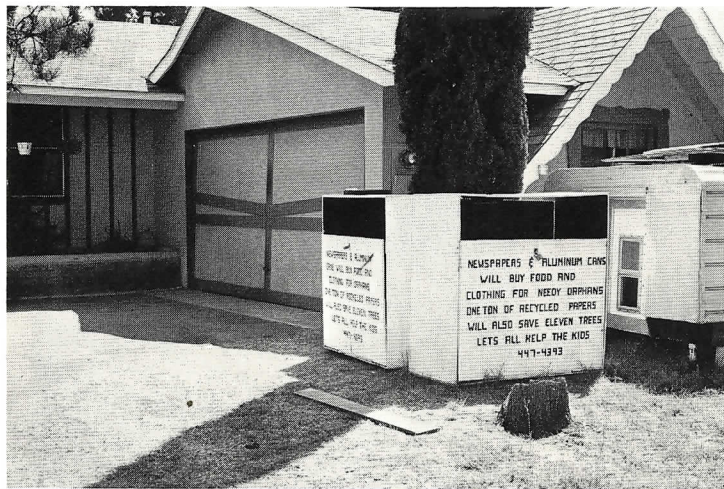


from OCCASIONS book

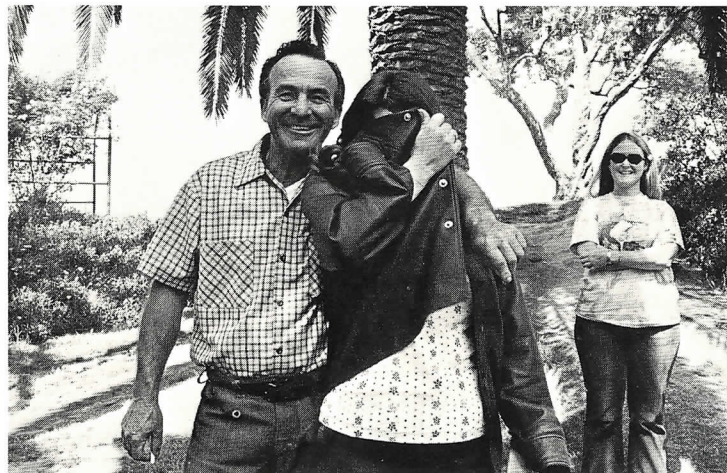
Mom: (quietly) "Mommy, Daddy."

Dad: "Just imagine, each one was five years apart."

Mom: "Your parents, too."



from ART & ARTIFACTS book



from AN ALTERATION book
My ex-father-in-law told me this was my "last chance".