

Short Statements and Notes for Gallery/Museum Press Releases and Exhibition Catalogs

2000 – Catalog Statement for *Between Earth and Heaven*, Museum of Modern Art, Ostend,
Belgium



This exhibition includes two photographs from a larger body of work, *The Rome Project*, which depicts the spaces where historical artifacts are stored (archives) and displayed (museums). In this work my interests were in history or, more accurately, in a dialectic between a past, present, and imagined future (all three are probably imagined). In other words, I suspect that historical forms persist because, as we stand in a present, they give comfort by providing evidence of a continuous, shared past as well as offering the grist for dreaming the future. I realize, at the same time, that classical forms have been used both to support this ideal of shared histories (Jacques Louis David and the French Revolution for example) and to suppress those with different – perhaps less “European” – pasts (as was the case with the Nazi’s manipulation of classical forms). In this latter example,

millions of people were anything but comforted by the reappearance of classicism.

Both neo-aestheticism and neo-classicism, if improperly presented within a museum exhibition, could create a false message, one that is anathema to my own work. Such a message would suggest that rational order is returning to the world; and, in contrast, that the ugly and frightening are disappearing, being replaced by a new order of beauty, harmony, and homogeneity. In America such a message is associated with politically conservative, even reactionary, politics where “ugliness” and “otherness” have been forced to the margins in order to accommodate “the beautiful” and “correct”. As mentioned above, Europe has its own history of intolerance in the name of “order”.

In this post-Kantian era I’m not sure we could all agree as to what comprises the distinctions between order and disorder nor what difference it might make to continue insisting on them. After all, who in this time could argue that pronouncements of what constitutes such categories are anything but subjective or that aesthetic perception is free from contamination by interest?

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2000 – Note to Andrew Grundberg Concerning His Essay for a Forthcoming Catalog

Dear Andy,

This package contains some information I think you'll find helpful. I've tried not to bombard you with too much and apologize if I've done the opposite. I spoke with Trish. and Rena at some length this morning regarding their hopes for the essay and I'll try to reiterate what was said.



The short of it is that they would like some discussion of why my work has turned more toward large format photography and away from video installation. (This isn't totally accurate since I'm working on an elaborate video installation in Germany). I attempted to shed some light on that during our brief conversation yesterday evening. As I said, I come to photography through the back door, via video and installation. As a result my original interests were less photographic and more spatial (see below). I'm thinking about some of the earliest large format photography of corridors and the Non-place series from 1989-91. I suppose I didn't, at the time, know the photo world well enough to see the relation of my interests in constructed space to contemporary photographic practice, particularly that coming out of Germany.

As I explained to you on the phone, I felt a need in the late 80's, to stop the flow of time that surrounded my (video) images. I wanted to arrest the image,

bring it to a standstill. I felt then, and continue to believe, that high resolution photography – the kind that large format provides – allows a scrutiny of the image that's impossible when the flow of time propels the image (and the narrative contained within it) as it does with video or film. The image at a standstill also begins to function allegorically or so I believe. Its stark literalness, when freed from its context, isolated on a gallery wall, perhaps. and at a scale that has a relation to our own bodies, allows the image to insinuate itself into our consciousness.

I think the pivotal work for me in terms of these issues is the video installation *People In Buildings*. It's the work that most clearly goes after architectural or (more accurately) constructed space and mundane everyday existence. It was this work that led me to photograph institutional corridors and all else that has followed. An interesting aspect of these early hallway photographs is that they are actually filled with people but they don't show up because the exposures are so long. Someone once said of these that they were the photographic equivalent of the Neutron Bomb, an analogy that I particularly liked. More recently, people have entered into the pictures. For me this seemed like a next and necessary step. But I'm interested in coming to the people through the spaces they inhabit and not the other way around. It's these spaces that most interests me



and I've found, in some cases anyway, that the presence of the people helps explicate the spaces, making the ordinary seem that much more strange o(r is it allegorical?). As was the case in *People In Buildings*, I'm still interested in human yearnings or strivings (for pleasure, knowledge, or for just getting by) that so often take place within the most mundane and sometimes extraordinary settings.

Well, I've probably gone on too long. You know how to reach me; and thanks again for doing this. Oh, yes, and one other thing: Rena wanted you to know – and this has been checked by the catalog designers – we have room for @1300 words (maybe even up to 1400) if you're feeling more verbose.

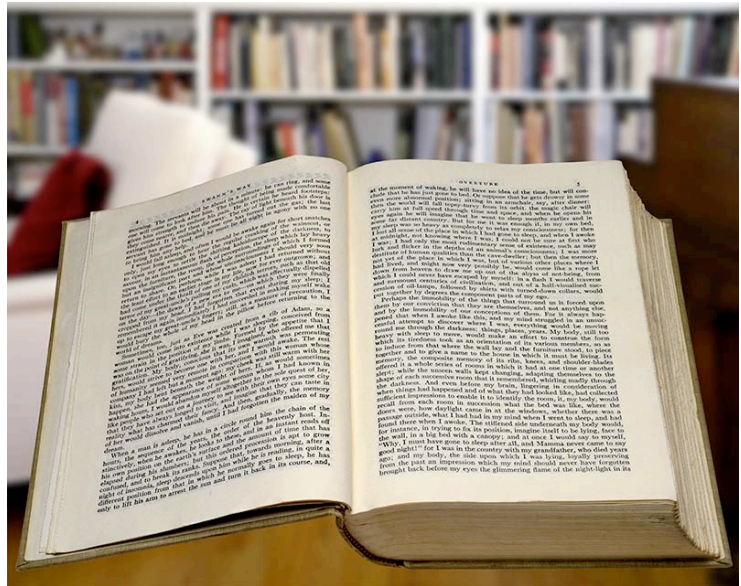
2001 – Note to the Co-director of Rena Bransten Gallery Explaining the Photographs of Books

Dear Jenny.

Let's see if I can shed some light on this new series of photographs of books, since they are somewhat of a departure, both formally and conceptually, from what I've done most recently. Most notably they're different in that they are looking *in* rather than *out* (or at least this is how I think of them as I try to gather my thoughts). Books represent ways we can travel through our imaginations while remaining physically stationary. So in a sense we could say that it's one way that we look out (onto the world) while looking in (into our selves).

Books of all kinds have been crucial to me. I love them. Or more to the point I love what some books

have to tell us. Professionally – that is an artist – they have helped me construct the intellectual foundation from which I operate. For years I'd been thinking about ways I might be able to incorporate some of the texts that have influenced me into photographic works. I've done this before with media installations. Both *Terminal Landscape* and *The Order of Things* incorporate found text as an audio track. Bringing written language into visual images is another thing and, in my opinion, is fraught with problems. One of the most significant is that when text is juxtaposed with images, there's usually (from my perspective anyway) an uneasy truce between the two. Often times it is unclear how the text is supposed to function and the dynamic between the two ends up feeling either too literal and didactic or too illustrative. One way I thought I might be able to get around this was to make the text, itself, the focus of the picture. Or more specifically the words on the page within a book. That way there would be a real connection between the content of the image (the text in the book) and the image itself (the text in the book). Treated this way one would have to "read the image" in order to make sense out of it. In the photos I've done so far the text and the book that contains it are in extremely sharp focus so that the text is easily readable. It's important that one can read the words in the images. With the possible exception of De Sade's *Justine*, I've been extremely careful in selecting specific passages. It was also crucial that the photos be luscious: something worth looking at. A lot of image/text work is, I think, visually uninteresting.



Concerning the question “why these particular books:” They are all books that have had a deep influence on me in one way or another. If I were able to complete this project the way I would like (and I probably won’t) I would photograph all of the books with salient passages that have mattered the most to me. So far I’ve photographed the Overture from Proust’s *Swann’s Way*, the second to last page of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, a section from David Wojnarowicz’s *Close to the Knives*, the final two pages from the first chapter of Camus’ *The Stranger*, and a fairly random section from De Sade’s *Justine* (still working on this). Currently I’m photographing a page from one of the *Barbar* books that I had as a child. In all instances I’ve been trying to place the book in a context that is relevant to its content, although I think the *Barbar* pages will be against a black background. Others are planned and since my travels to Iran have been curtailed due to the September 11 attack it appears I’ll have considerable time to work on them over the next several months.

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2002 – Notes to the Co-Directors of Feigen Contemporary Explaining Works for a Forthcoming Show

Dear Susan and Lance,

Below you will find two statements. The first, *Excerpt from the Opera House Proposal*, I used as part of my original project proposal. It might be of some help as you put together the press release. The



problem with my excerpted statement below is that I make my process sound more rational than it probably really is. In other words, I do have theoretical interests that encourage me to think along certain lines, but once I become involved in a project – that is if it’s a successful one – I start to notice things, both visual and conceptual, that become the real focus of the project. For example, in this project I became more and more aware of the scopic quality of the opera houses. What I mean by that is that, as I stood at center stage and looked back into the halls, I felt as if the halls

themselves were looking back at me so that in a sense I was photographing not just the spaces, but the act of looking itself. It interested me that their form had as much in common with the panopticism of prison architecture that Foucault writes about in *Discipline and Punish* as it does to palatial architecture. This is the real explanation as to why so many of the photographs are shot from the stage, looking back toward the hall.

In a similar vein, I noticed how the small rooms along the horseshoe shaped balconies (called palci – plural of palco – in Italian) were actually smaller versions of the larger stage (palco scenico) and that as the palco scenico framed and exhibited the performance, the palci framed the other performances, those of the families whose social aspirations and standing within the community were being architecturally inscribed. Another important interest of mine is how we dream through space. There’s

a brief mention of that below and longer one in the second statement. Opera Houses prompt their own daydreams.

The second statement, *Untitled Statement* is more general. It's not finished. I'm writing it for a book that's being published on West Coast artists.

Excerpt from the Opera House Proposal

The great concert halls that emerged in the 18th and 19th century Europe were cultural palaces in which social classes, newly arisen to power and wealth, could participate in the great cultural pageants that had previously been available only to the aristocracy. They were (and are today) dream houses whose stylistic predecessors are to be found in the royal palaces and churches of earlier periods. In the same way as the 19th century shopping arcades, grand city boulevards and train stations celebrated the awakening dreams of capital and industry, the opera houses monumentalized the emerging bourgeoisie's aspirations for cultured and aesthetic lives.

This project has similarities with others I've done over the years. For example, in 1996-7, I lived in Rome at the American Academy in Rome as a recipient of The Rome Prize in Visual Art. During that residency I photographed library archives throughout Italy. Prior to that, in 1991, I completed a project in which I documented some of the important bureaucratic spaces abandoned by the Communist government in former East Berlin. The concert hall project is a continuation of my interests in how social and cultural meanings are inscribed into architectural space and the roles it plays in forming our knowledge of the world and of ourselves in it.

Untitled Statement

We live in the world and, as we live, we dream ourselves into it. These are the dual modes: Vita Activa and Vita Contemplativa. Over the past 50 years much has been written about the debilitating consequences of the overly contemplative life: that our "human" worth is only reached by engaging (and improving) the practical world and that any sustained non-pragmatic diversion—into fantasy lets say—undermines this humanist quest for progress and perfection. Yet for many the dreamt life is the more fulfilling. Perhaps travel – both as action: going someplace and as contemplation: imagining a place through pictures and descriptions – has some relation to these two aspects of our lives: the active and the dreamed, which are not safely dichotomous at all but are constantly merging. The Daydream is, of course, the nexus of their intersection.

Walter Benjamin wrote at length about the simultaneously stifling and liberating aspects of the nineteenth century bourgeois interior. Stifling because it smothered its inhabitant in the heavy fabric of Victorian convention and liberating because "His drawing room [became] a box in the world theater." This interior, filled as it was with artifacts from trips taken or places imagined— mementos, postcards, photographs, prints and calendars— provided him, when viewed in the familiar comfort of his home, with evidence that he was a participant in the world. Furthermore, gathered from the world and domesticated, such artifacts underwent a shift in which their original meaning was overtaken by their capacity to elicit a new world—a dream of the world, one that was both personalized and idealized. The world out there became interiorized through miniaturization and, as miniature, catalyst to his dream of a world-with-myself-in-it. From the safety of his private box, he could become, through fantasy, an actor on the world stage.

The claustrophobia of Benjamin's Nineteenth Century domestic interior has given way to the more porous one of our own time, while the reproducible media which were catalysts to his oneiricism have proliferated exponentially, making their nineteenth century predecessors appear crude in comparison. Television is, of course, one of the primary examples of this proliferation. Television and other reproducible media (from photography to the Internet) have expanded our "box in the world theater"

in ways that would have been unimaginable one hundred years ago. But, as they fill our visual field—perhaps even enriching our fantasies—they also inundate, surrounding us in an emptiness that might be as stifling, in its own way, as the thick brocaded curtains of Benjamin’s Victorian interiors. As I write this I’m thinking of a television—my television—it’s screen glowing in a darkened room. This screen which earlier in the evening had seemed like a window onto the world feels now, in the gloom of early morning, more like a drain through which all meaning threatens to disappear.

Why is this? I think it has something to do with how contemporary media introduces an inescapable Otherness into our personal spaces, which while liberating also contributes to the destruction of whatever illusions we may have had of ourselves as the center point on a neatly organized perspectival grid. The order of the world decomposes into a palimpsest that relocates us at its periphery not its center. “The appearance of the Other in the world corresponds therefore to a fixed sliding of the whole universe, to a decentralization of the world which undermines the centralization which I am simultaneously effecting” (Satre, *Being and Nothingness*). I am peering through a keyhole: seeing and not seen. I am on the other side of the keyhole: seen and not seeing. I am alone; in a room; neither seeing nor being seen.

2003 – Artist Statement for Atelier Books

I came to photography about fifteen years ago via video and installation. From the early 1970s until the late 80s I had been working in performance, video, and installation. Around 1988 I produced a video project called, *People In Buildings*. This was a two-channel projected installation that sought private experience in public space by observing people (often using a hidden camera) in the most banal places, such as malls, offices, hospitals waiting rooms, institutional corridors, art museums, etc., as they did very ordinary things—waiting, looking, working. It was during this project that I decided to use photography to stop time so I could examine spaces and situations similar to those I’d been shooting in video. From this decision an ever-expanding body of work has emerged.

The first photographs were single-point perspective views looking down institutional corridors. I



thought I could get at people through their absence by concentrating on the spaces they (and we) inhabit. I discovered that high resolution, high amplitude photography—the kind that large format provides—encouraged a scrutiny of the image that was impossible when the flow of time propelled the event as it does with video or film. The still image seemed to become separated from its source, as if it were disconnected or set adrift. As a result, I believed it became allegorical. By “allegorical” I mean that the photograph, in its stark literalness, distances itself from the world-as-fact. Combined with other images, on a gallery wall perhaps, and at a scale that relates to our own

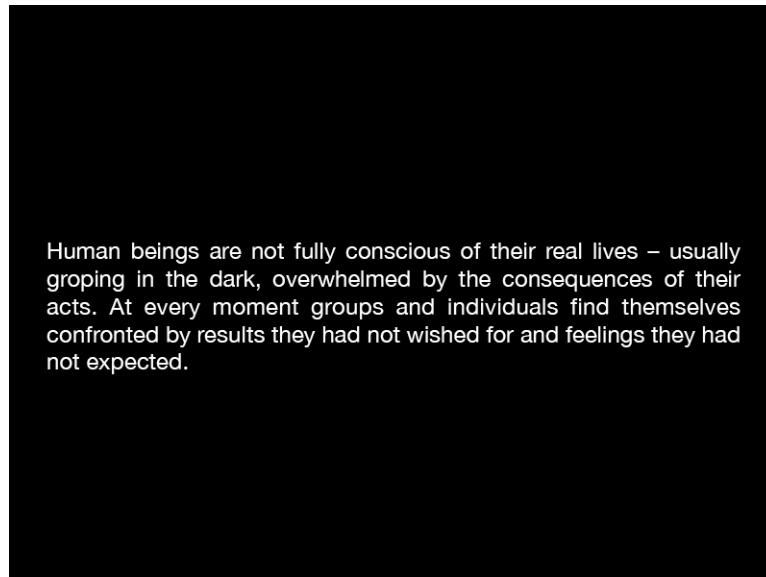
bodies, the representation insinuates itself into our consciousness in ways unlike time-based media. One reason is that we are not propelled by the photograph's built-in temporality. We can linger, meander, enter, and exit at our own speed. Perhaps it is also that the image is beyond real—not real at all and certainly not true—providing a level of detail and focal depth beyond the capabilities of the naked eye, as if its frozen literalness frees it from the literal. It becomes like a recollection that awaits our return, utterly unlike a real dream (or film for that matter) which has no patience with our dalliance. It is at the moment when we stand before the photograph that it abandons its false and irrelevant claims of accurately describing the world, and assumes its more important (and interesting) job of imaging ourselves.

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2009 – Note to the Gallery Co-directors Explaining Works for *In Retrospect*, Rena Bransten Gallery

Dear Jenny and Trish,

Language has always been an important part of my work: either as part of the process, leading to the making of images, or used in and becoming part of the works themselves. All of the works in “In Retrospect” have a direct relationship to language and, as the title implies, were selected from earlier works.



Terminal Landscape, an installation that included slides, projected from a carousel projector and integrated with projected video and audio was first shown at Rena Bransten Gallery in 1995. The work continued my thoughts about how we orient ourselves to the media images that surround and seem to engulf us. The thing that I was thinking about and tried to convey in the installation was how our imaginations appropriate these images and use them to create and nurture our own personal narratives. I thought then (and continue to believe) that the idea

of us as totally passive receptors of media images – the Guy Debord scenario – is inaccurate. Rather than being consumed *by* them we are actively engaging them to use as material to nourish our fantasies, fears, longings and obsessions.

The work that I'm showing in the gallery, *Terminal Landscape (an excerpt)*, was, in the original installation, a series of projected slides with an accompanying spoken sound track that comprised one section of the larger work. More recently, I printed the original slides and the words that were spoken in the installation as ink jet prints. The images were appropriated from numerous sources (mainly television, magazines, newspapers) and reflect the time they were



accumulated, 1994/95. They are pre-internet. Although some of the text was original, meaning I wrote it, much of it was appropriated and then re-worked to better fit the slides and express the mood of the piece. Unfortunately, I don't recall all of the sources for the text but a few that come to mind include: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Walter Benjamin, David Wojnarowicz, as well as excerpts from newspaper reports, advertisements in magazines, and the like.

The black and white photographs of corridors and what I call non-places were made around 1989/90. They grew out of my interest in architecture's liminal and transitional zones and how I thought these spaces interacted with our psyches as we moved through them – usually unconsciously. I was also fascinated, particularly in the corridor photos, by the extreme single point perspective in the photographs (and in the spaces themselves) that led us toward a place in the distance that I equated with both oblivion and infinity. I've shown these works both by themselves and occasionally with the wall texts as they are being shown at Rena Bransten Gallery. I think of the texts as images in their own right and as foils to the photographs.

The photographs of books were done in 2001. My plan was to do an extensive project that consisted of books that had, in one way or another, been important to me. The idea was to photograph the books opened to passages that I found particularly meaningful and situate them in, or juxtaposed to, scenes that reflected my associations. For some reason I didn't get as far with the project as I had intended – I think only five were done. This is one of those projects I keep reminding myself to get back to and, as often, find myself disappointed that I don't. Although single book photographs have been shown at art fairs, this is the first time that a small group of them have been exhibited together.

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