CHAPTER 3

The World Is Flat

> We do not always realize that the theory of perspective developed in the fifteenth century is a scientific convention; it is merely one way of describing space and has no absolute validity.
>
> —Herbert Read, *The Art of Sculpture*

> The soul never thinks without an image.
>
> —Aristotle

> It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.
>
> —Oscar Wilde

Every representational image is a promise of depth, a surface separating the realms of mind and matter, a sort of window into somebody else's experience. I have always wondered how other people see things. Once, in school, a teacher asked me to take a colorblindness test. After I told him what number I was seeing on a pattern of circles, he told me, as a prank, that I was colorblind. Instead of being worried, I began to imagine a myriad of parallel visual worlds, subjective to every viewer's physiology. I was very happy to discover that people saw things differently, leaving my frustrated teacher with the impression that, indeed, I had some neurological disorder. He told me: "I am sorry to tell you that you're not colorblind. You're just insane."

My first motivation in making art is this negotiation with the viewer about the way we perceive the visual world. It is as if I do not trust my own eyes and have to see it through someone else's. I have never thought of making art for myself; if I did, I would be so ashamed of it that I would never show it to anybody. Art objects are inanimate, sad bits of matter hanging in the dark where no one is looking. The artist only does half the work; the viewer has to come up with the rest—it is by empowering the viewer that art achieves its miraculous force. The artist must not please, but should always *challenge* the viewer in this engagement, and must never, ever say that he is working for himself only. I make art so I can watch people looking at it. I watch their faces smiling or frowning, hear their comments and complaints—and it is never the way I imagined it would be, as I was contemplating the work. I become aware of how particular, how unique everyone is. The world becomes a kaleidoscope—I feel colorblind again.

When I worked in advertising, I was forced to imagine a world of statistical perceptions, calculated but simple. You create identities for liquids and powders; give them names and colors; associate them with ethnic, social, economic, and age groups; and assume that the message will be perceived by these groups in a homogeneous way. That's the main problem I had with this approach. I wanted to speak to people in a more primitive, one-to-one way—to discover patterns outside the generalized groups. I did not want only to broadcast, but to have a conversation. My other problem with advertising was the misuse of images. The first century of photography was all about making a decent picture. After that, it was mostly about making something look decent or indecent *in* a picture. I had too much contact with images and felt that I had to work on the other end of the spectrum. I imagined a

Clown Skull, from "Relics," 1989

reverse-technology situation in which the advertising man was forced to create the products he had to sell.

The road I chose in order to exorcize my iconoclasm was through product design. For my first shows, I created a series of works called "Relics." They were basically studies of objects' identities with regard to their functions—objects suffering from identity crises. Certain early works—*Clown Skull*, *Ashanti Joystick*, and *Pre-Colombian Coffee Maker*—already outline attitudes that have been consistently present throughout my work. These things seem like *objets trouvés*, but they are faux readymades (testifying to my disregard for Duchampian doctrines). They are funny—I have always taken humor very seriously. Humor and visual gimmicks operate at the most basic level of art appreciation. They create physical and perceptual responses that hold the viewer in front of the work a bit longer than usual. Once you achieve this tenacity, you can afford to be deep and erudite.

Most great paintings are wonderful visual gimmicks. Humor helps the viewer to relax and lower his self-censure, allowing larger quantities of visual information to slip in. Humor and visual illusion often utilize the same mechanical organization. They rely on a constructed, logical structure that suddenly collapses, leaving the spectator momentarily without a floor beneath his feet—a feeling that is at once pleasant and terrifying. When we tell someone a joke, we build in real time a structure that is abruptly dismantled with the punch line; visual illusions play with structures built in the course of our entire lives as we learn to see the world around us. That's why jokes are not funny when told twice, whereas visual illusions always work, no matter how many times we look at them.

As I started to show these objects in the gallery, eventual sales brought about a need for documentation and dissemination of images of these "sculptures." The gallery owner called a professional photographer to do the job. He brought to the gallery the most wonderfully complicated and arcane paraphernalia that I had ever seen. It looked like he wasn't there for art photography, but for a fireworks display. He set up the view-camera and with the help of an assistant lit the works to perfection with long, halogen lamps. I was so flattered by the amount of gear that was carted for the sole purpose of documenting my work that I started seeing documentation as the ultimate goal of the art object, its passport to posterity and fame, a kind of apotheosis.

The photographer's pictures were lavishly beautiful 4-by-5 transparencies with flawless color and light. I had never seen images that looked so sharp. I took them home and inspected them for hours and hours on a little light-box. But despite their technical strength, something was terribly wrong about them. On one hand, the images seemed to me to work as well as the objects—to the point that they could replace the objects. On the other hand, the sculptures depicted in them did not seem to be mine anymore—they looked as if they had been created and produced by the photographer who took the picture. Puzzled by this feeling, I went to an electronics dealer on 14th Street and purchased the first camera I ever owned, a point-and-shoot Minolta with fixed-focus, and went to the gallery to re-photograph the works. I took the pictures without a tripod, with the wrong film, the wrong light, the wrong aperture and speed, and then had them developed at the wrong one-hour photo store on the corner of my block. The verdict: although there was no way to compare my photographs to the ones made by the professional, mine looked more *real*, more authentic, and more mine, and for that reason they seemed much better than the others. But I knew that there had to be something other than pure chauvinism to make me compare the two kinds of images in that way.

I thought about this for a long time before reaching this conclusion: the world is flat.

As we grow from an infant state and become more acquainted with generalized visual stimuli, we gradually stop seeing things as abstract volumes, allowing language to permeate our visual experience. Generalizations, while very necessary to help us locate ourselves within the time-space conundrum, limit the exercise of our capacity to abstract sensorial data. According to some studies, autistics, who struggle to maintain a relationship between the senses and language, can have a far greater ability to rotate objects visually inside their heads, a skill that we also tend to lose as we get older.

Ashanti Joystick, from "Relics," 1989

Pre-Colombian Coffee Maker, from "Relics," 1989

Sculpture has always been regarded as an all-around approach to art. We imagine the sculptor carving the stone from every angle, orbiting the object, rescuing and refining the meaning that has "inhabited" the rock from the time of its removal from the earth—although certain rocks will yield only to certain subjects. It seems fair to say that generally the artist picks the theme before he chooses the material; otherwise, there would be a constant stream of births of new mythological characters emerging from the shapes of rocks. Instead, the artist imagines the character in a certain size, in a certain position, made from a specific material, and most important, *from a very specific vantage point*. He carves the stone based on that mental notion and measures his success in relation to the sculpture's faithfulness to that image in his brain. To do this he places himself in front of the sculpture, trying to locate the precise vantage point that will locate the work of art at the same angle in which his mental image was conceived. He sees what he saw before, when the work was just a possibility, the visual impression of the materialized result fuses with the image of the original idea, the cycle is completed, and the artist is satisfied.

This takes us back to the reason why I preferred my pictures to the ones the professional photographer took. When I took the photographs, I intuitively searched for a vantage point that would make the pictures identical to the ones in my head before I'd made the works. My photographs matched those mental images. I not only evidenced my idea by making the piece, but also documented it with an object as thin and ephemeral as an idea.

No matter how great an object or sculpture is, there is always an ideal angle at which the object can be perceived, and this angle always has something to do with the way the object was imagined in the first place. The fact that we can walk around sculptures does not necessarily mean that we are experiencing the objects in relation to what was intended at the moment of their creation. In fact, many Renaissance sculptors—such as Donatello, Verrocchio, and Michelangelo—tried to *limit* a viewer's access to only specific vantage points from which their works would be optimally perceived. Other artists, as early as the ancient Greeks, having no say in the placement of their works, manipulated the forms themselves so the sculptures would appear as they had imagined them. It is said that once a great competition was held for the creation of a statue of Athena, to be placed on a high pillar above Athens. The talents of Phidias and Alcamenes were to be pitted against one another. Alcamenes's image was astonishingly beautiful at close inspection, while Phidias's seemed grotesque and distorted—inspiring the judging committee to nearly stone the sculptor for blasphemy. However, when placed up high where the statue was to stand, Phidias's goddess regained her proper proportions and looked beautiful, while Alcamenes's looked like an obese woman with a small head. So, viewing a sculpture is not an act of sensorial envelopment of the entire form, but rather a search for an ideal point from which the experience of the form coincides with the form imagined by the artist.

This early encounter with photography helped me to understand the medium for what it is; photography does not reveal the world as a whole, but a carefully edited version of it. It's not linked to truth in any circumstance, because it is bound to an opinion, making it more human than mechanical. Also, photography has the power of rendering visual input not as the eye perceives it, but as the brain develops it—as a finished intellectual product.

The human eye, when compared with the eyes of other species, is very primitive—actually far less complex than eyes found in fossil trilobites five hundred million years old. We owe a great part of our brain development to this handicap: there is a direct relation between eye development and brain size in nature. Animals equipped through evolution with more sophisticated eyes tend to have smaller brains, and vice versa. Human eyes have a cumbersome array of ganglion, bipolar, and horizontal cells that obstruct light from coming into direct contact with the photosensitive cells called *rods* and *cones* in the retina. Only in one small area can light fall on these receptors directly; this area is called the *fovea*, and its function accounts for the meager two degrees we are able to see

completely in focus. All the rest is blurry peripheral vision. To compensate for this shortcoming, the eye moves in precise but jerky motions that scan the entire visual field. These movements are called *saccades*. The picture in our head is nothing but a composite of thousands of little pictures that the brain organizes to provide a continuous sensation of a completely sharp image.

Since photographs are invented by the brain and not by the eye, their language conforms to mental images, rather than raw optical input. Also, photography relies heavily on memory and form recognition. When taking a picture of a novel scene, the photographer moves the camera in front of his head, and while he does this, he is subliminally searching an amazingly vast database of compositional attitudes accumulated through a lifetime of visual information exposure. He scans the physical world until he finds a template that fits with his mental database; only then does he press the shutter.

Basically, we artists make art so we can evidence the materialization of an idea, to test it in the material world, only in the end to transform it back into actual visual stimuli, making a connection between ourselves and the world we live in. No matter how heavy or gargantuan a work of art is, it is made primarily for the sake of that flat mental image in our minds, our own version of the world—the only one that really matters.

A renewed enchantment with the image, through photography, entered my work slowly but surely. By the end of my second year in the gallery I still wasn't ready for images yet because there were so many sculptures I hadn't had time to make. As I struggled to keep sculptural elements in my work, I came to a compromise with images: I started to make works that were hybrids of image and object. When I look at them now, I clearly realize the creative struggle I was going through. Works such *Two Nails*, *Tug of War*, and *Tilted Milk* reveal, with a certain humor, an enormous tension between image and material. This was something I could never figure out how to get rid of, so I started to work with it.

Partly inspired by experiments of the 1960s and 1970s, by artists such as William Wegman, John Baldessari, and Richard Artschwager, I started to make use of framing devices and flawed narratives to create pictures that really did not function as either image or object. These works were in part an effort to convince myself of what an image could not be.

This haggling between form and material went on for a good three years, during two of which I lived in Paris, awaiting "permanent alien status" from U.S.

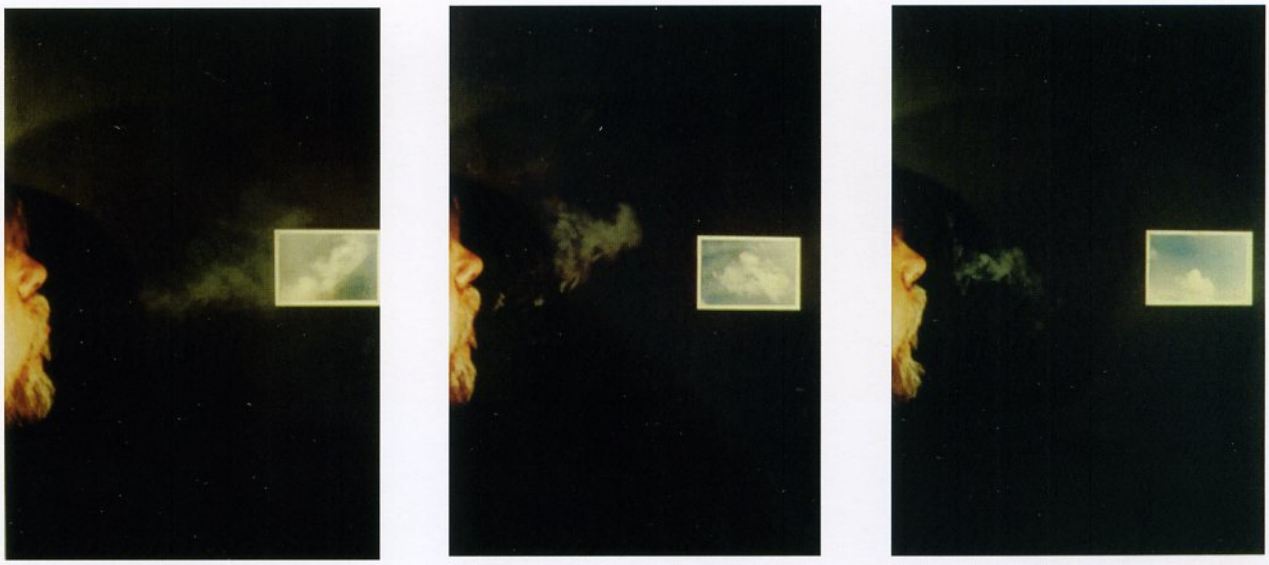
William Wegman, *Photo under Water*, 1971

immigration—a painful separation from my wife and son. The delay in the procedure, and the deep American recession of the early 1990s, nearly killed my nascent career. I returned from Europe broke and lonely, and no one seemed to remember who I was or what I did. The situation was extremely hard, but it provided a perfect opportunity to reinvent myself as the artist I really wanted to be.

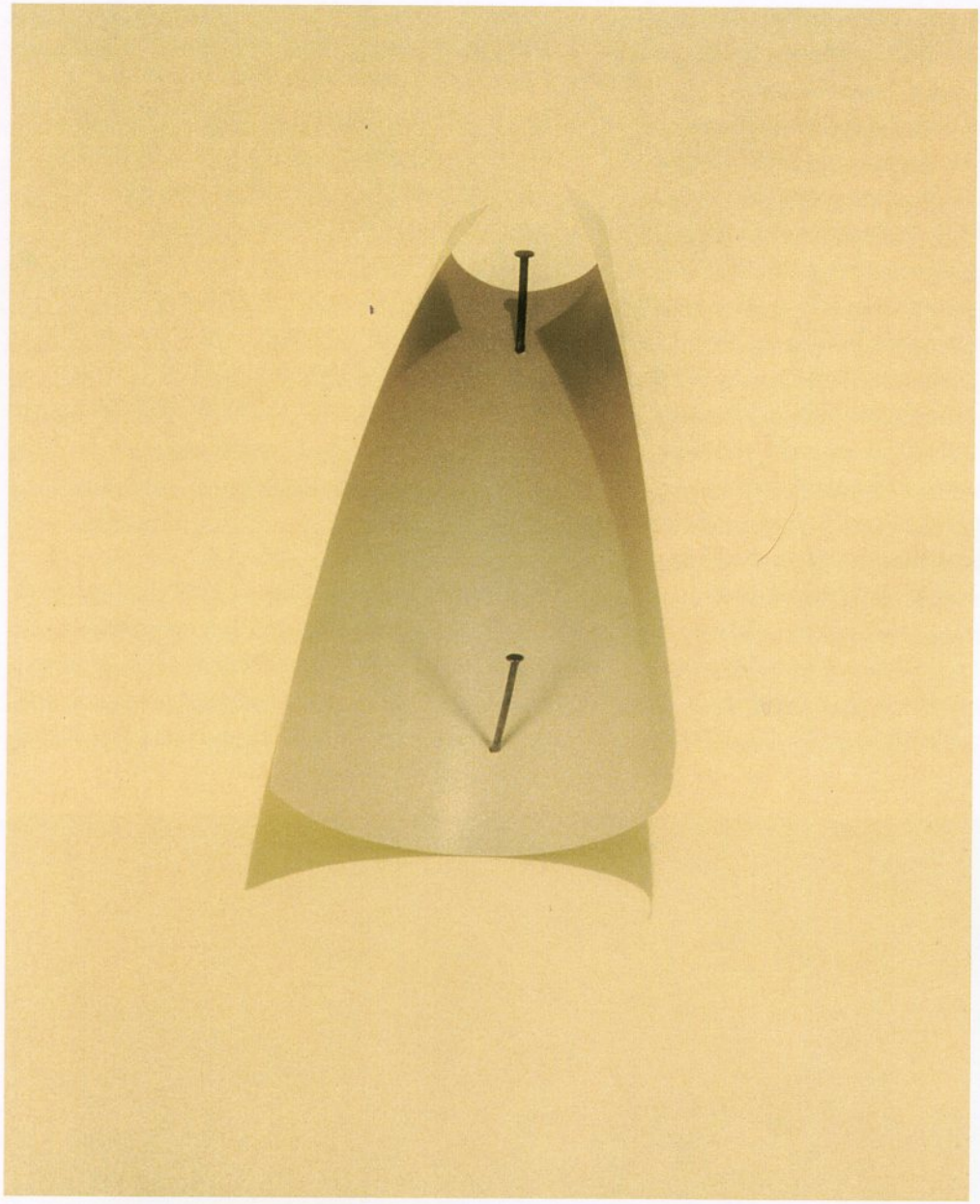
Around that time, I received an invitation from Kim Caputo, the owner of a large photo lab in Chelsea, to collaborate on a new publication about photography called *Blind Spot*. As the magazine's Associate Editor, I helped Kim get the magazine off the drawing board; in exchange, she offered to print my work for a show I was trying to put together. Back in my abandoned studio, the only thing remaining from my old New York work was a single chunk of white plasticine. Now back from exile, I was anxious to work with my hands—but I did not want to make sculptures any longer, nor could I afford to. I thought about sculpture for quite some time. I spent an entire day at the New York Public Library looking at books about Rodin, Medardo Rosso, and Constantin Brancusi, melancholically trying to figure out a way to work with sculpture—until I realized: I was not looking at *sculpture* at all, I was looking at *pictures of sculptures*. The next day, I changed the focus of my research to photographs of sculptures.

> Sculpture seduced photographers from the beginning. The languor of its sublime inanimacy made the decision of what to photograph easy. Viewed by the first camera technicians, sculpture became "the triumph of the apparatus," for the milky luminescence of the marble or plaster casts required few tradeoffs. There were no light-absorbing densities, like grass or green leaves, to further confuse the foundering chemistries, no cloudless skies to burn the salts into visual incomprehensibility, no sitters' complaints of harsh lines turning their faces cadaverous in the prime of life.
>
> —Eugenia Parry Janis, "Fabled Bodies," from *The Kiss of Apollo*

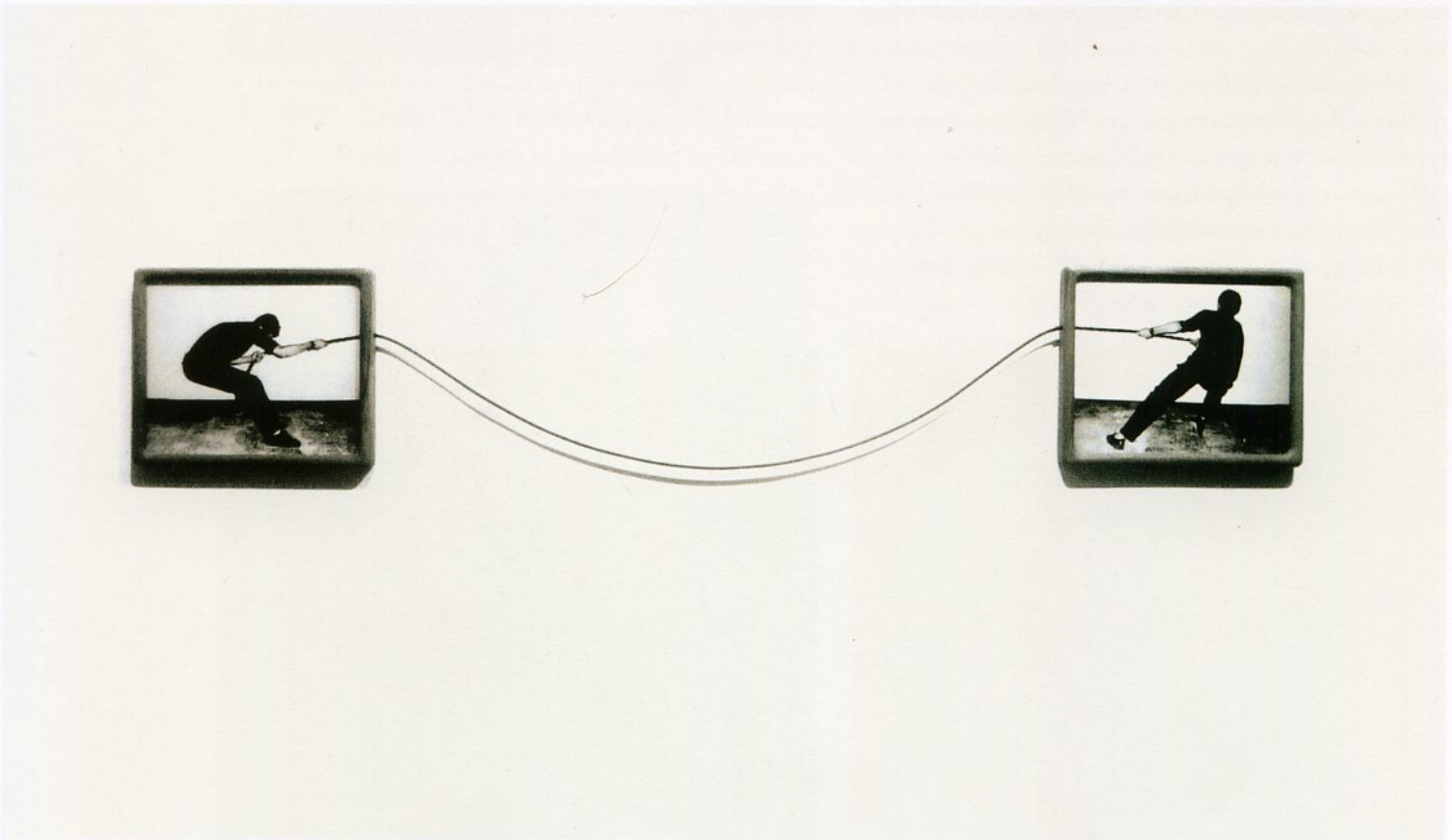
Photographing artworks from a critical or technical standpoint seemed an exhausted, but nevertheless interesting, practice. It appeared very early in photography's history because of the technical limitations the subject could bypass. From William Henry Fox Talbot



John Baldessari, *Cigar Smoke to Match Clouds That Are Different (By Sight-Side View)*, 1972–73



Two Nails, 1987

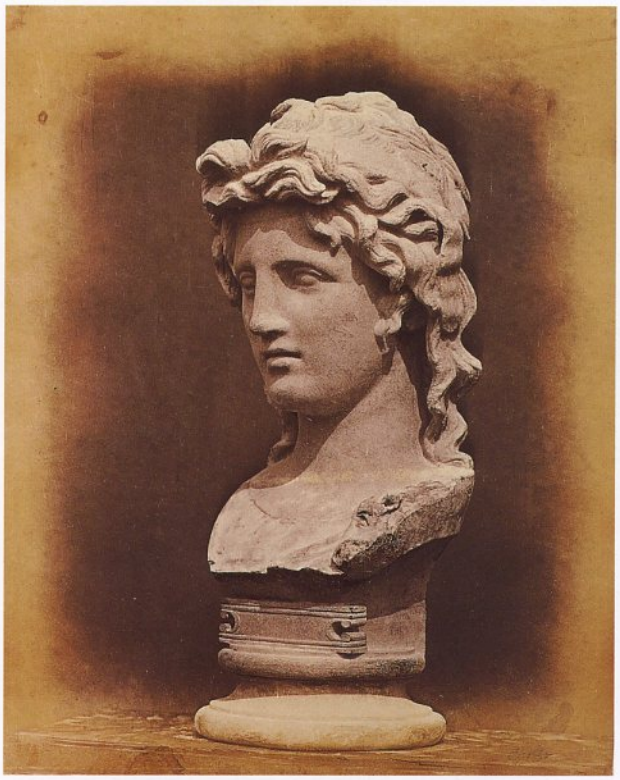


Tug of War, 1989

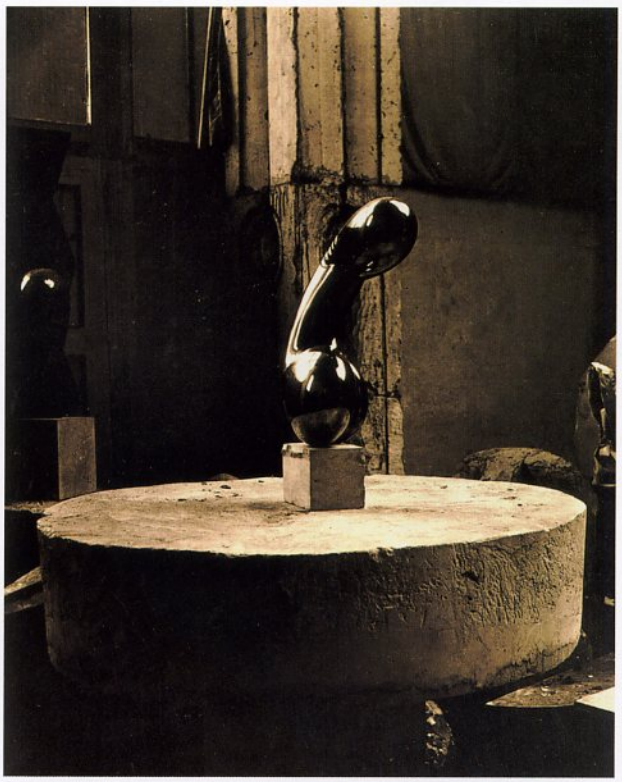
to Louis Daguerre and Hippolyte Bayard, who adopted the subject in the earliest developments of the medium, to Roger Fenton, Philip Henry Delamotte, Charles Nègre, Henry Le Secq, and the Bisson brothers, who took a more historical and taxonomical approach in their documents of artworks—we can sense a steady mediation between material and imaginary worlds. The documents charged the originals with an enhanced sense of time and position. The object in the picture seemed to satisfy an eternal longing for its own sublimation—a body, freed from infinite materiality, meeting its own spirit.

The most obvious example of this transcendental quality is found in photography executed by sculptors themselves. Photographs by Brancusi and Rosso, although supposedly executed as "light studies" for their three-dimensional works, seem to have functioned as go-betweens—middle steps linking ideas to the objects made after those ideas. Even when taken after the work's execution, the photographs seem to fulfill the object's ritualistic project from conception to materialization to become an idea again. The images of the sculptures are idealized objects. Seen from the perfect vantage, they offer no clues as to scale, material, or weight. Their flatness leaves room for myriad interpretations; their ambiguity renders them part of anyone's experience. They have become mental objects.

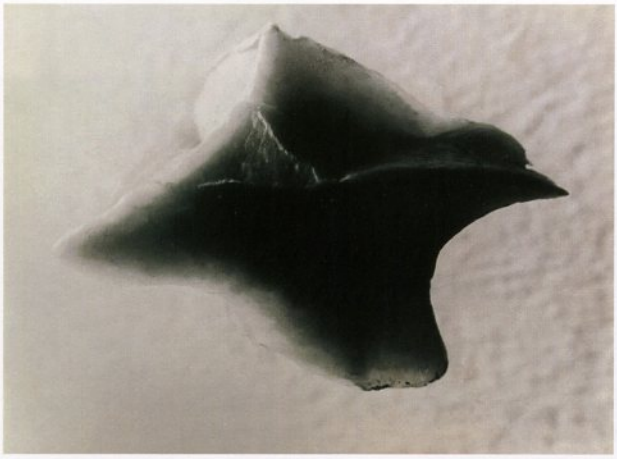
At this point, I understood that, with a few exceptions (most notably the collaboration between Salvador Dalí and Gyula Brassaï, titled *Sculptures involontaires*) hardly any images had been produced that took into consideration all the vectors of this equation. Not many artists until then had produced objects having only *documentation* as the main objective. I found a little historical loophole, a tiny niche for me to explore. I had no idea how big that hole would become.



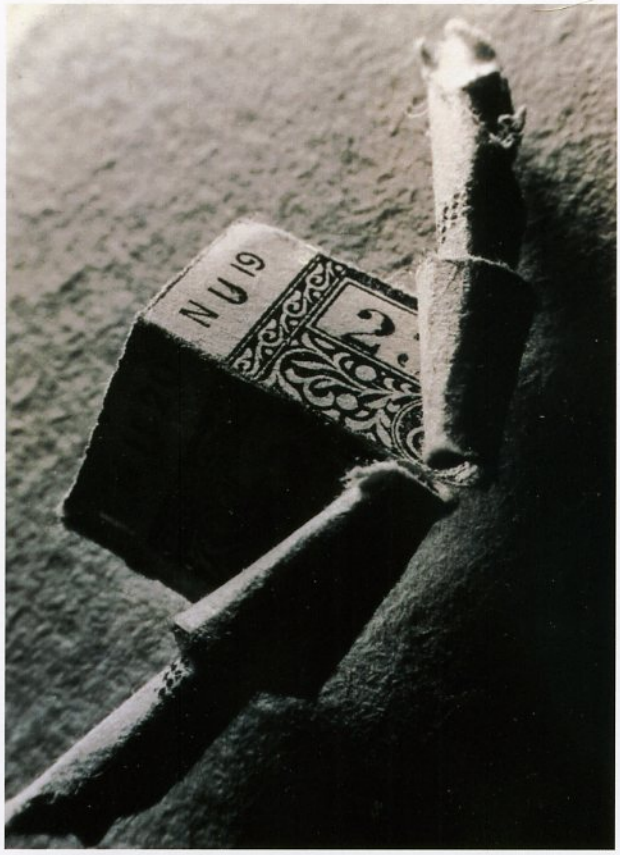
Roger Fenton, *Apollo*, ca. 1856



Constantin Brancusi, *Princess X*, 1916



Gyula Brassaï, *Involuntary Sculpture: A Piece of Soap*, 1933



Gyula Brassaï, *Involuntary Sculpture: Rolled Bus Ticket*, 1933

I returned to the studio and to my lump of white plasticine. I borrowed a friend's Hasselblad camera (pretending I was interested in buying it). I used the entire chunk of plasticine to make the first object. I set up rules for myself: the objects could not look completely organic or geometric, they could not look artificial or natural, their forms were to be as ambiguous as their material. I made the first object in an "art-therapy" style, and took a picture of it. (I tried to make the image slightly out of focus, bearing in mind the dreamy way David Hamilton photographed his prepubescent girls.) I wanted to erase the memory of my hands on the object. As I did not have money to buy more material, I had to destroy the first object to make the second—and so on. This exercise took place sixty times, until I ran out of film and patience. I printed these sixty unique images as platinum prints at modest dimensions and exhibited them, along with empty pedestals of various sizes. The series was called "Individuals." The public gazed at the empty bases and imagined the different sculptures in the space; they tried to project their size and material onto those pedestals. Ignorant of the fact that the photographs of all the various forms were in fact pictures of *the same thing*—a single lump of material metamorphosed into different forms—they imagined variety and difference where there were none. The works reanalyzed an old pre-Socratic paradigm: Parmenides's claim that everything comes from the same matter and that all mutability is an exercise in illusion or likeness—for "the same thing is there both to be thought and to be."

Although I did not sell a single work from that show, the "Individuals" series marks my final exorcism of the world of immediate material interaction, and my final decision to dedicate myself to the medium of photography. (I got a couple of good reviews as well.)

Grid of *Individuals*, 1992–93

From "Individuals," 1992–93

CHAPTER 4

The Image Within: Apparitions and Likenesses

> Hokusai tried to paint without the use of his hands. It is said that one day, having unrolled his scroll in front of the shogun, he poured over it a pot of blue paint; then, dipping the claws of a rooster in a pot of red paint, he made the bird run across the scroll and leave its tracks on it. Everyone present recognized in them the waters of a stream called Tatsouta carrying along maple leaves reddened by autumn.
>
> —Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*

> Sometimes we see a cloud that's dragonish;
> A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,
> A tower'd citadel, a pendant rock,
> A forked mountain, or a blue promontory
> With trees upon't that nod unto the world
> And mock our eyes with air. . . .
>
> —William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*

> And yet relation appears,
> A small relation expanding like the shade
> Of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side
> of a hill . . .
>
> —Wallace Stevens, "Connoisseur of Chaos"

When I first moved to the United States in 1983, for a while I had a really hard time meeting people. I bought a used bicycle and roamed the streets of the motionless Chicago suburb where I lived in search of information about my new surroundings and some social interaction.

One thing that really intrigued me about the way Americans lived were the garage sales people would organize on Saturdays. In Brazil, people would *never* parade their used belongings for public scrutiny, no matter how much money was offered. Garage sales provided an excellent study of American habits, a way to find out what people liked and disliked, what they read and ate. And it was also a great way for me to practice my English: I would haggle for hours without buying anything.

Around this time, I started to collect family pictures from other people. It was quite amazing that the pictures of these people, at some point, divorced themselves from their owners, transforming what was once a memory into a mystery. I would buy the photographs at garage sales and at night I would inspect them, trying to find clues, residue that would lead me to figure out who these people were: their names, their ages, their relationships to the photographers. I think I collected the pictures basically because I missed my family in Brazil, and I was trying to invent a replacement for it.

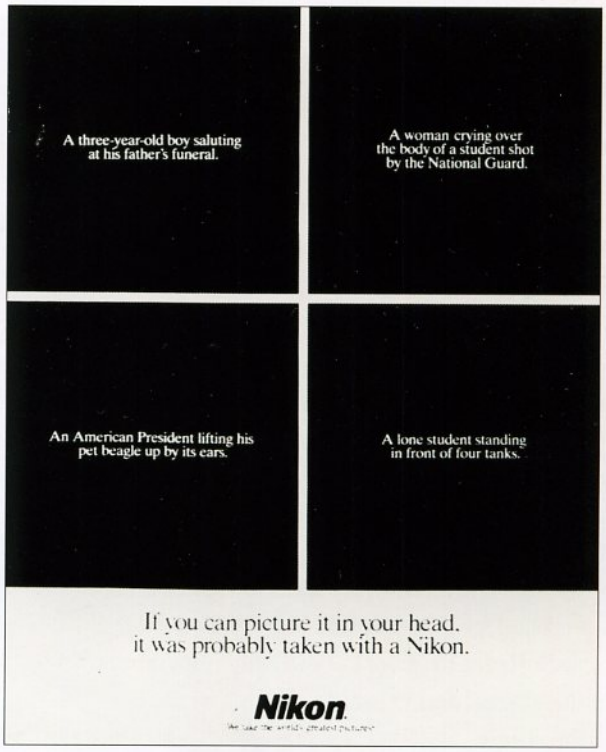
One day while I was looking for pictures, I found a book I had wanted for some time: *The Best of "Life,"* a wonderful collection of well-known pictures taken by some of the best photographers in the world, who had worked at *Life* magazine. It was the first book I bought

in the United States. When I gazed at the book's photographs, something felt familiar about them; it was a sensation very similar to the one I had while looking at family photographs. These were images people already knew, but were compelled to look at from time to time, just to recharge their memory of them. The only difference was this: while the family pictures, although very similar from album to album, spoke of very specific and personal information, *The Best of "Life"* pictures depicted the "family of man" as a whole. I could stop virtually anyone on the street, point to any image in the book, and ask: "Remember this?" The person would say: "Yes," as if he or she had been physically present at the time of the historical event. I would say: "Me too." We would be complicit just by being contemporaries. It felt very much like being around family, checking out old photographs, asking: "Do you remember Uncle Rob, the Maine vacation, the time you broke your arm skateboarding?" etc.

The Best of "Life" was the only "family" reference I had at the time. I learned to love those images. The Margaret Bourke-Whites, the Alfred Eisenstaedts—the feeling of sharing a picture, the sensation that two or more people know the same thing, lived the same moment.

I kept that book as a personal treasure—a bit obsessively, I confess—for I carried it with me everywhere, to the most unlikely places. And it was in one of these unlikely places that I lost the book in 1987. I took it to the beach, and left it there when I went home that evening. I spent most of the following morning looking for it in vain—the tide had taken it. Back at the cottage where I was staying, I started remembering the images in the book, and the fact that I wouldn't be able to see them anytime soon made me aware of how little I really *remembered* those images.

Around this time, Nikon started circulating a very interesting ad in magazines, showing four empty black squares and with them *just the captions* of some of the world's most famous images. The viewer was compelled to project onto the squares residual images of the described pictures. The line below the squares read: *If you can picture it in your head, it was probably taken with a Nikon*. The ad was perfect, not only



Nikon Inc. advertisement, *If you can picture it in your head, it was probably taken with a Nikon*, 1990

because of the objective simplicity of its design, but also because the designer managed to display in the viewer's brain four of the most famous photographs ever taken—without having to pay a penny to the photographers who took them! Moreover, the ad dealt with something that was already there, in the mind of the viewer: *the image within*, with its projective quality and its binding capacity to the factual world.

For years, I tried to do something with such iconic photographs. I drew them, wrote about them, and collected all sorts of information about them. Interestingly, it was only when I no longer had the photographs in front of me that their meanings started to really reverberate in my mind. My memory of the images was sketchy and fleeting. I felt compelled to *fix* them in some way, so I started to draw them. In the beginning, the greatest challenge, again, was to find the right vantage point. I found that building the images by relying exclusively on memory was something of a sedimentary effort. Of course, I remembered some images better than others, and realized that in some cases I did

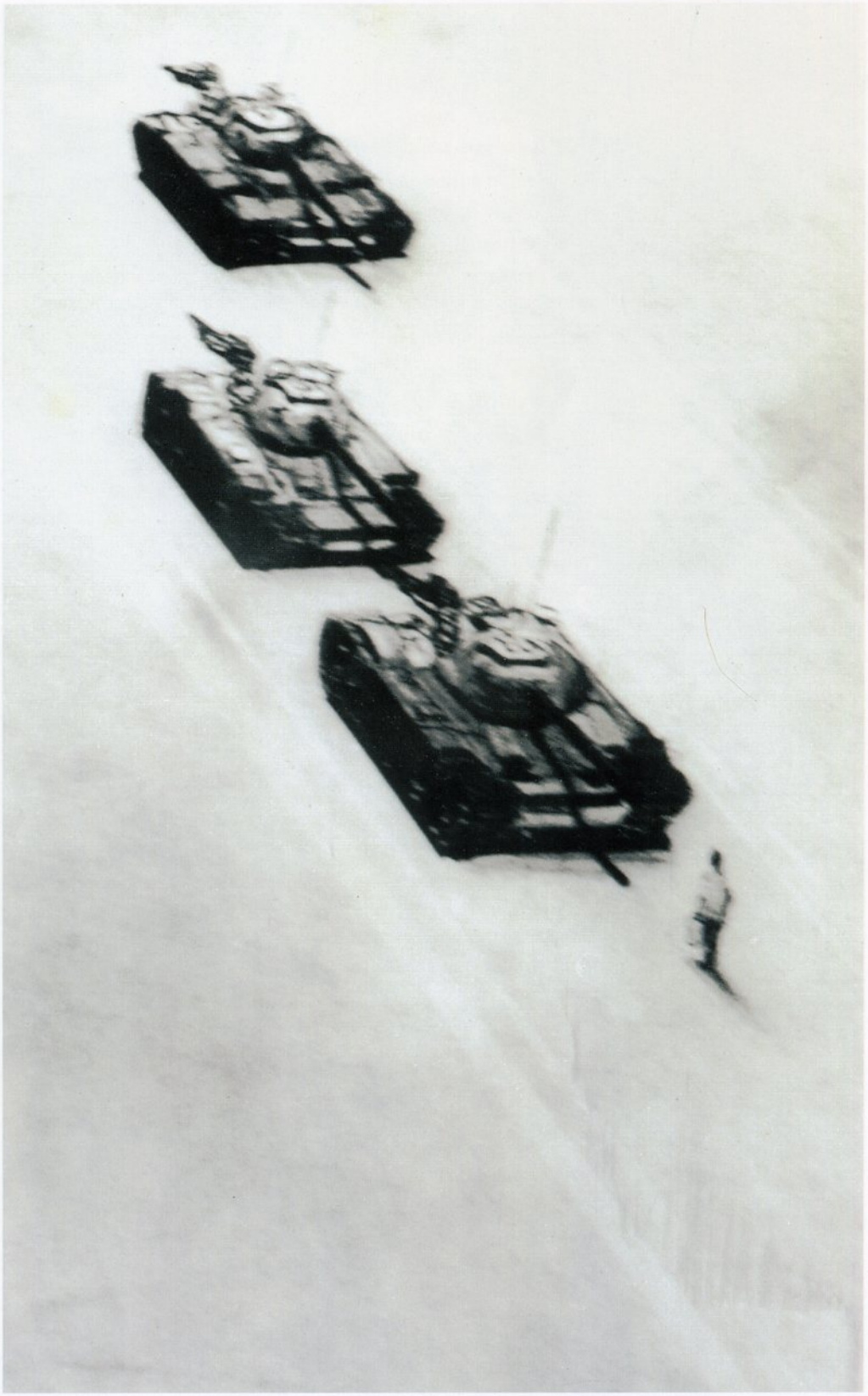
not remember enough even to begin a drawing. I kept working on a few of these drawings from memory, and abandoned some of them for a while—never checking my memory-rendering against the original. Sometimes, when gridlocked, I would call someone who was not looking at the images and ask for advice, little things like: How many buttons are on John-John's coat when he is saluting at his father's funeral procession? Is the girl crying for help at the Kent State shootings wearing a scarf? Is she wearing a watch? The outside information was also vague and unsure, so I had to edit the suggestions based on my own memory, anyway—but the process made me aware of mechanisms people use to recall details in photographs. Facial expressions were the hardest thing to remember: it is easy to remember a face, but very hard to replicate its expression. I had to abandon Lee Harvey Oswald being shot by Jack Ruby, because I could only remember the face of the guy behind Oswald—the one in the light-colored suit.

My art dealer in New York offered me a show in a small project space in his gallery and asked me if I wanted to show my "memory drawings." I declined the invitation. I thought the drawings did not work as objects, because they were crudely made; whenever I remembered a detail of a picture I would just add to the drawing with whatever medium I had at hand. Some of them were half-drawn with ballpoint pens. The other reason I said no, perhaps the most important one, is that I'd played with those drawings over the course of two years—I would visit and update them as a hobby, like someone doing the Sunday crossword puzzles—and I had become very attached to them. But then a mischievous idea occurred to me: if I were to take *photographs* of the drawings, I could disguise their defects a little bit with soft focus and sell those pictures at the gallery, keeping the originals for myself. So I photographed the drawings, trying to manipulate the focus to erase as much as I could the marks of my hand. To print them, I decided to use a half-tone screen, the same dot-pattern that we see in most printed images in the media; after all, it was through such media that I became aware of the photographs in the first place. During the exhibition, the public did not question the veracity of the images. They thought that the pictures were indeed a group of very important historical pictures, poorly reproduced. My memory-drawings were not perfect, but they were good enough to meet the viewers' memories of the images halfway. The residual image, the one that stays in our minds, needs no more than a few hints to fill the gap separating it from the original photograph. In this process, we are open to suggestion and manipulation; we are also aware of how much of the self enters the pictures we see.

I started by looking at a picture, digesting it through my own cultural filters, to come up with a similar product—except that, unlike the original photograph, which had a link to the physical world, mine was utterly mental: an idea come full circle, without radically changing its form.

The "image within" had already become an obsession in my work. Shortly after exhibiting my "Best of *Life*" pictures, I started to look into other ways of engaging viewers, of encouraging them to bring themselves into the picture to such an extent that they would become aware of this interaction, and what was once a simple exercise in interpretation would turn into a sense of being in power. I needed a perfect vessel of meaning, one that could lead to multiple interpretations, something ubiquitous yet simple. I started looking at clouds.

Jeff Widener/AP, A Chinese man stands alone to block a line of tanks in Tiananmen Square, 1989



Memory Rendering of Man Stopping Tank in Beijing, from "Best of *Life*," 1988–90

Memory Rendering of the Man on the Moon, from "Best of *Life*," 1988–90

> Moors, bishops, lobsters, streams, faces, plants, dogs, fishes, tortoises, dragons, death's heads, crucifixes—everything a mind bent on identification could fancy. The fact is that there is no creature or thing, no monster or monument, no happening or site in Nature, History, Fable or Dream whose image the predisposed eye cannot read in the markings, patterns and outlines found in stones.
>
> —Roger Caillois, *L'Écriture des pierres*

> To interpret the configuration of the future, a fortune-teller must first seek its first lineaments in the dim stains and meanders deposited by dregs in the bottom of a cup. As accident defines its own shape in the chances of matter, and as the hand exploits this disaster, the mind in its turn, awakens.
>
> —Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*

> Things look like things, they are embedded in the transience of each other's meaning; a thing looks like a thing, which looks like another thing or another. This eternal ricocheting of meaning throughout the elemental proves representation to be natural and nature to be representational.
>
> —Vik Muniz, *The Unbearable Likeness of Being*

In his book *L'Écriture des pierres* (The Writing of stones), the late French philosopher Roger Caillois mentions one particular piece of rock, probably of Italian origin, "titled" *The Castle*. In this minute mineral fragment, one sees clearly what seems to be a medieval castle with a moat by its side, sentries in every tower, some armed with spears, foliage growing from the same towers, a large tree in the foreground, and a cloud and perfectly "rendered" birds overhead. What is amazing about this rock isn't just the fact that all of these images occurred completely naturally in the stone—what is really puzzling is the mind of the individual who found and polished this edited fragment of the physical world, finding meaning in markings whose origins predate by many millennia the existence of castles and sentries.

Man's penchant for projecting his understanding of forms onto the physical world is a faculty that has been developed to ensure his survival since the time of his hunter-gatherer period. The accidental discovery of anything implies a predisposed need for that thing. No one finds what one isn't somehow looking for. It is interesting how this ability to project formal meaning onto seemingly chaotic natural patterns increases as the knowledge of forms grows through history and technological development. The more we know, the more we find. One can certainly see what seems to be an aerial photograph of a lake when looking through a microscope at a petri dish of vitamin C. But if the viewer has never taken a plane, seen a lake, or looked through a microscope, this "likeness" would not happen.

Similarly, our ability to research the world of forms and information in an organized fashion has contributed greatly to our skill in seeing images within images. Consider, for example, that on a certain day, the clouds overhead begin to form a perfect likeness of Dede Korkut astride a horse, with weapons drawn. If one is unfamiliar with the Turkic epic poem that bears the bard's name, this image passes by unrecognized.

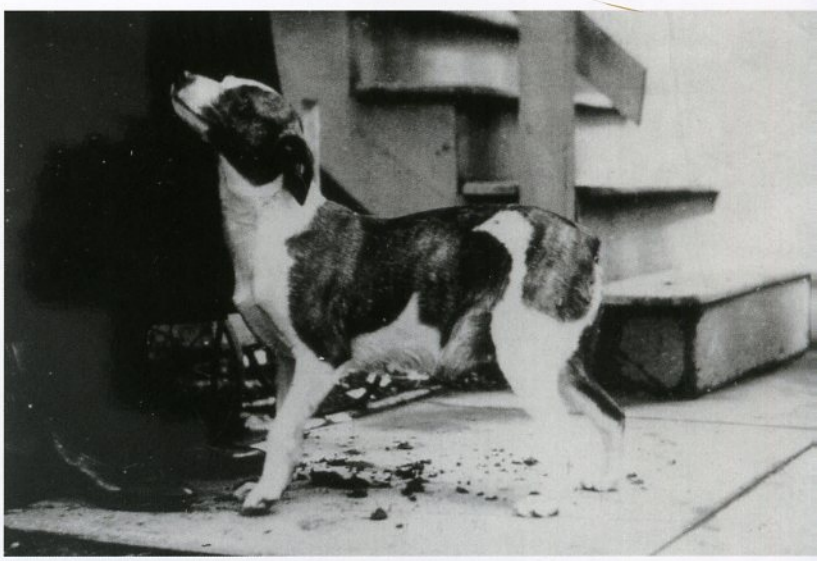
Not only rocks and clouds, but a myriad of natural forms and imagery have driven their faithful discoverers into a compulsive frenzy. A few years ago, the shape of the Virgin Mary, mysteriously formed by a humidity mark on the side of a modern office building, drew thousands of religious pilgrims to the corporate site.

"Numbers" found in the patterns on the wings of butterflies are said to have won lotteries. There are stories of people picking up pieces of driftwood in the shapes of human limbs; these natural ex-votos are said to have healed the maladies of those who found them. Patterns in tea leaves at the bottom of a cup have been read for predictions and evaluations. In the fourteenth century in the south of France, a baker drew two loaves of bread from his oven, one bearing the visage of Jesus Christ, the other bearing the perfect inscription of the word *resurgam* ("I will rise again").

Recognizable shapes in nature are as much a cause for mythical assumption as they are for simple affection. *Ripley's Believe It or Not* has through the decades cataloged hundreds of photographed documentations sent by proud owners of hermeneutical beasts: cows, horses, and a variety of other animals bearing various symbols spotted upon their hides—recorded images range from hearts to numbers to presidents' profiles to swastikas. Animals bearing pictures of other animals or even portraits of their owners are not uncommon. Such syntactical traits generally elevate their bearers to the level of mascot. But again, one sees what one knows: a particular entry describes the case of a cow whose hide bore a spot shaped exactly like an upside-down map of southern Pennsylvania.

I have tried to work with such images. A few years ago, while vacationing in the French Alps, I became bored with the bucolic surroundings and decided to do some work outside the studio. I had been asked to come up with a proposal for an event in a town in Germany. My idea was to paint the maps of countries in the (then recently formed) European Community on the hides of cows and let them wander freely around the town. Witnesses encountering the animal would at first find its presence in the town merely odd—but then, noting that the animal bore a map of, say, Hungary, Luxembourg, or Greece on its hide, they would see the entire thing as a miracle of the European biogenetic industry.

I asked a milk farmer up the road if I could paint his cows, so I could make my proposal. The Savoyard replied with a blunt "*Non*." Undaunted, I persisted with my account, emphasizing the importance of his



Unidentified photographer, *Dog with Duck on Hindquarters*, n.d.

Two Cows, 1995

contribution to the patrimony of humanity, until he finally conceded. He said: "Take that cow over there. Not that one—the ugly one. You can paint whatever country you want on the cow, but you'd better start with France. Once you are done photographing it, you can wash the animal and paint it again." In exchange, he wanted to keep the picture of the cow with the map of France.

I ran to the local art store and acquired huge quantities of washable paint, then I tied the animal to a pole in the middle of a field. (I should add at this point that my upbringing in the largest city in South America had afforded me very limited contact and familiarity with large mammals. As a matter of fact, cows have always terrified me.) With the aid of a huge and cumbersome road map, I proceeded to paint on the animal's hide. The cow enjoyed this activity immensely and, excited by my caresses, started to move in my direction. What with my fear of the beast, the wind blowing the map about, and the paint running, my rendering of France started going bad. I tried to rescue the paint stain by switching to a map of Spain, but the cow kept moving—and soon, all I could depict with the disaster was perhaps Estonia or Paraguay. Still, I felt I should continue painting on the stubborn bovine—and somehow I ended up with a picture of a cow! Not yet discouraged, I brought a bucket of water and soap, hoping to clean my canvas and start my rendition of France anew. But the "washable" paint did not wash at all. The farmer almost made me buy the cow—which, by the way, must still be walking around with an image of itself on its hide. That was the shortest series I ever worked on.

John Constable, *Study of Clouds*, ca. 1822

Socrates: What are they then?

Strepsiades: I don't rightly know; spread fleeces perhaps. . . .

Socrates: I'll put you a question.

Strepsiades: Quick, let's have it.

Socrates: Have you ever noticed a cloud resembling a centaur, a leopard, a wolf, a bull?

Strepsiades: Of course, so what?

Socrates: They turn into what they like.

—Aristophanes, *The Clouds*

Andrea Mantegna, *St. Sebastian*, 1459

The habit of looking at clouds, searching for forms, although considered a popular infantile pastime, is a perfect example of the intellectual engagement between the mind and the visual world. One generally sees what one wants to see, but suggestion may play a definite role in this process. Whenever I am looking at clouds with someone, I like to keep repeating that every cloud looks like a seal, until it becomes impossible for the other person to find anything in the sky but seals. Also, there are other, more involuntary or primeval ways in which the mind suggests itself: who hasn't, as a child, lost much of a night's sleep under the covers, terrified by a shadowy specter that in the morning light turned out to be a hanging coat or a broom? A cloud may look like a taxman if you owe the IRS.

Because of all these subtleties, but most importantly, because of their versatility of form, clouds are perfect vessels for meaning; they invite interpretation—pure interpretation—and in their vagueness, they betray visual and linguistic convictions. Their fleeting form and emptiness of meaning attracted the attention of John Constable in the same way that their adoption to serve the mind's fancies was the pleasure of Andrea Mantegna. Only something so meaningless could mean so many things at once.

But how can something mean more than one thing at once? It can't.

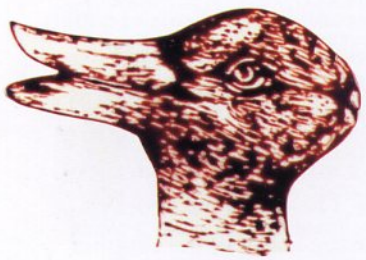
I was offered a show at a friend's gallery shortly after I made my photographs of the plasticine sculptures. I wanted to continue making sculptures just to take pictures of them, but I felt that I had to move away from abstraction itself, or rather to start using it as a counterpart to representation within a picture. I wanted to load an image with as many meanings as possible, to test my own capacity to read it.

I went to the market and bought loads of cotton and fishing wire. Working with upside-down shapes, to inspire a sense of gravity, I fashioned as well as I could (cotton is a very stubborn material) the likenesses of a cat, a snail, a man rowing a boat, and so on. As I gained confidence, I became rather cocky, and tried to do Dürer's praying hands of the Prophet (which wound up looking more like Mickey Mouse's praying hands). It didn't matter—what I was trying to

do did not have anything to do with verisimilitude. It had to do with basic aspects of likeness and interpretation. I came to realize that, even though I enjoyed a certain pride for my manual skills, I was after something very different from just making a good illusion.

Good illusions, great illusions, are the job of people like Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, or Pixar—people who are trying to minimize distinctions separating film from dream. My job, I felt, was to make the *worst possible* illusion. An illusion so simple and rudimentary that it would start the viewer thinking: "How the hell could anyone fall for that?" I did not want to fool people; I wanted to present them with the measure of their own beliefs—to engage them in a relationship with the image, to allow them to see in the image whatever they chose to see.

There is an optical illusion, designed by L. A. Necker in 1832 (he was interested in crystals and discovered the illusion unintentionally), in which a cube's ambiguous or "reversible" nature lets the familiarized viewer change his perception of its orientation at will. Such pictures, sometimes called "multistable images," represent perhaps the lowest and therefore most easily understood threshold of visual ambiguity. Like Necker's cube, optically ambiguous pictures such as the well-known "Duck-Rabbit" and "My Wife and My Mother-in-Law" push the viewer to the borders of visual meaning. These equivocal images have had a ubiquitous presence in psychology textbooks since the nineteenth century, and have served as models for cross-disciplinary exchange among most cognitive practices. Linguists, logicians, anthropologists, neurologists, psychologists, philosophers, and artists alike have employed "multistable" images as tools for understanding.



Duck-Rabbit (after Joseph Jastrow), 2004

> Discursive hypericons such as the camera obscura, the tabula rasa and the Platonic cave epitomize the tendencies of technologies of visual representation to acquire a figurative centrality in the theories of the self and its knowledges—of objects, of others and of itself. They are not merely epistemological models, but ethical, political and aesthetic "assemblages" that allow us to observe observers. In their strongest forms, they don't merely serve as illustrations to theory; they picture theory.
>
> —W. J. T. Mitchell, *Metapictures*

Inspired by the ambiguity of such models, I thought of extending their effects beyond the sphere of logic, and into another vast and ambiguous territory—that of aesthetics. I wanted to create images that would allow the viewer to shift readings, and to become aware of his or her own participation. I wanted the result to be cross-disciplinary, but contained within the limits of visual experience.

I photographed the cotton lumps, carefully emphasizing the material, forms, and meanings of the objects. I wanted a single object to be readable as *cloud*, *snail*, and *cotton* simultaneously. Interestingly, I found that two meanings could not be perceived at one time. Once you see cotton, you lose the snail; once you see a cloud, you lose the cotton, and so on. The fact that I had stepped away from abstraction did not make my pictures behave differently from the Necker cube, which shows us that we can't perceive its two orientations simultaneously.

I presented the works as sepia-toned prints, to confuse the age of the pictures, and to introduce an element of time that could mistakenly validate the authenticity of my invention. I named the works "Equivalents," in homage to Alfred Stieglitz, whose cloud pictures served as vessels for his life's philosophy. While Stieglitz relied

The Rower, from "Equivalents," 1993

Dürer's Praying Hands, from "Equivalents," 1993

on the ambiguity of the cloud's formations as a formal container for the complexity of his emotions, I decided to move my research into the particularities of specificity.

In 1995, I went to the Museum of Modern Art to see the exhibition *Alfred Stieglitz at Lake George.* It's fascinating how things you can't understand sometimes have a lasting effect on you. I inspected the small photographs, fighting my natural obsession with finding pictures within pictures. My mind drifted to a gaseous world of emotional possibility, fostered by the photographer's simple idea of photographing something visible only to the person who would have eyes for it. I wasn't sure if I could be that person, but I tried very hard to enter Stieglitz's vague universe through the pinhole of those images. However, my mind wandered far and wide, and again I would see sirens, dragons, and a variety of other platitudes in the pictures. Most of all, I could not avoid comparing the perpetual accidental images found in stones to the evanescent theater of forms that clouds put up from time to time.

> WHEN YOU LOOK AT A WALL SPOTTED WITH STAINS, OR WITH A MIXTURE OF STONES, IF YOU HAVE TO DEVISE SOME SCENE, YOU MAY DISCOVER A RESEMBLANCE TO VARIOUS LANDSCAPES, BEAUTIFIED WITH MOUNTAINS, RIVERS, ROCKS, TREES, PLAINS, WIDE VALLEYS AND HILLS IN VARIED ARRANGEMENT: OR AGAIN YOU MAY SEE BATTLES AND FIGURES IN ACTION; OR STRANGE FACES AND COSTUMES, AND A VARIETY OF OBJECTS, WHICH YOU COULD REDUCE TO COMPLETE AND WELL-DRAWN FORMS. AND THESE APPEAR ON SUCH WALLS CONFUSEDLY, LIKE THE SOUND OF BELLS IN WHOSE JANGLE YOU MAY FIND ANY NAME OR WORD YOU CHOOSE TO IMAGINE.
>
> —Leonardo da Vinci, *The Practice of Painting*

Leaving the museum's photography department, looking down, despairing over my inability to connect with one of my idols, I gazed at the marble floors of the old museum building, and suddenly saw in those patterns a myriad of "equivalents" that Stieglitz would probably have loved. Somehow, only then—through the filter of art—was I able to set aside my natural perceptual tricks, and to understand what the artist was trying to do. I did not see *forms within forms* any longer; I saw *equivalency*, as Stieglitz had. Having a camera with me, I photographed the floor with the aid of a flashlight and a couple of makeshift props—a painted penny and a cut-out from a black card. I printed the results on paper similar to that used by Stieglitz, and mounted the works exactly as he mounted his—I was working under the guidance of Maria Morris Hambourg and Malcolm Daniel of the Metropolitan Museum. I called this "new equivalents" series "The Museum of Modern Art."

In the museum, people are conditioned to picture-viewing, and become immediately blind to their surroundings. In the museum's marble slabs, there might well be convincing renditions of the entire collection; someone only has to discover them. The fascination

with "accidental" imagery has always inspired artists to simulate accidents of their own. Although most artists are calculating and controlling enough to disallow any unwanted outside interpretation in the perception of their works (there is a funny anecdote about Franz Kline kicking a collector out of his studio because the poor man insisted on seeing a penguin in one of Kline's abstract paintings), a great number of artists have tried to take advantage of the popular fascination with naturally formed images. From Mantegna to Arcimboldo to Dalí, the trick of immersed imagery has served as a way to maneuver the viewer's attention from subject to material, from mind to matter, from content to technique.

Still, other questions remained: what would happen if the image within the image were the product of a completely different medium? What effect would the shock of two media have on the subject and its content? Even though photography was a direct result of the general difficulties people encountered while trying to draw a picture, ironically (and to my advantage) very few people paired the two media with success. One great exception is photographer Arthur S. Mole who, with his partner John D. Thomas, created "living photographs": shortly after World War I, they visited military camps and directed the military contingents to pose by the tens of thousands in gigantic group photographs. Mole and Thomas would arrange the soldiers in an anamorphic arrangement that, when photographed from a tower, would miraculously reveal patriotic themes such as the Statue of Liberty or a portrait of President Woodrow Wilson. I wanted to do something similar, to renew the old shamanistic magic of drawing, but using the contemporary medium of photography. I did not have thousands of friends and I did not know many soldiers. Although I would later come back to this idea, I had to start with something simpler.

Alfred Stieglitz, *Equivalent HH1*, 1929

From the series "The Museum of Modern Art," 1996