PHOTOGRAPHY

Photo Opportunities

by Robert Everett-Green

Several years ago, at an auction, I bought a box of old picture frames. In one of the frames was a photograph of three late-middle-aged women in Edwardian dress, standing in a small city backyard. On the reverse, in a slender, sloping hand, someone had written: "To Bill from the Three Graces, in memory of happy times." I didn't know who the Three Graces were, or what happy times they wanted Bill (whoever he was) to remember. Probably no one alive did. Whatever reality the photograph was intended to evoke had evaporated, in a way that made the image itself quite tenuous. After all, the image—the three women—was not the subject of the photo. The real subject, according to the inscription, was the desire to memorialize experiences, by means of a picture that did not attempt to reveal what those experiences were.

That photo seemed to me to get at something essential about photography: the way in which its promise to deliver an objective record of the visible so often leads the viewer towards what cannot be seen. I thought of the Three Graces several times during "Transition, Memory and Loss," a one-day symposium on

above: Angela Grauerholz, *Secrets, a gothic tale*, 1993, work *in situ*, Centre d'art contemporain. Domaine de Kerguehennic, Bignan, Brittany. Photographs courtesy the artist.

right: *Secrets, a gothic tale*, 1993, archive: ca. 80 photos in 6 portfolio cases, 4 folders, 6 framed photos and one book.

photography held at the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba last March.

Three photographers spoke, and four curators—the hunters before lunch, and the gatherers after. Early in the day, Thaddeus Holownia answered a question about his technique of landscape photography by saying that so much depends on where you decide to stand. By the end of the morning, it seemed to me that for this particular trio of photographers—the other two were Angela Grauerholz and Diana Thorneycroft—so much depends on what you think the camera is pointing at.

Holownia made an eloquent case for a kind of natural realism (my phrase, not his). His strongest guide, he said, was instinct, and his ideal of technical equilibrium was to feel that his equipment (an antique banquet camera that simulates the wide horizon of the human eye) was an extension of himself. He travels widely, lugs the camera everywhere, hunts always for that occasion when space and time seem to conspire in his favour—and when they do, the eye and its lid yield for a fraction of a second to a prosthetic memory device. The camera is always aimed "out there," where the land and the works of humankind (a row of pylons for a vanished bridge, a barn squashed flat by time) wear at each other like a miller's stones.

Angela Grauerholz spoke with equal clarity, and more of a critic's awareness, about "memory as a kind of amnesia"—a dynamic in which loss can scarcely be distinguished from what appears to have been saved from a moment of perception that no longer exists, and never did, as a more than personal reality. Though Grauerholz never mentioned his name, the figure of Immanuel Kant seemed to haunt her remarks—not the aesthetician who theorized about the sublime, but the epistemologist who argued that reality is a construction of the individual mind, which can never know what is "really" there. Grauerholz turned the argument towards the past: memory is also something we construct, and are always fiddling with behind our own backs. And we hide things—as she hid a narrative of suicide in a portfolio deposited at a French castle, and concealed a bounty of photographs in a frustrating archival casket controlled by white-gloved personnel at Montreal's Musée d'art contemporain. "What the photo depicts is not what it is all about." Even in slide projection, the photos are superb, romantic, agnostic, rich in content and shot through with a sense that something necessarily is missing.

The last of the hunters demonstrated what all serious hunters know: how to position a decoy. Diana Thorneycroft presented a list of pathologies attributed to her by psychologists who had studied her work. The symptoms: the patient enters a dark room, strips, surrounds herself with strange objects in ritualistic array, photographs the evidence for hours at a time, and claims to have little memory of the event. She also mutilates dolls, projects the faces of others on her own and vice versa, presents androgynous figures in conditions of bondage, etc. The diagnoses: two deluxe varieties of depersonalization or disorientation, and one of perversion. The outcome: uneasy laughter, because the fictional psychologists' case studies held together very plausibly as medical-critical discourse—which just shows how overrated intellectual consistency can be. If art expresses unease, and unease is a sign of dis-ease, then only the diseased make art, and a healthy world would have no art in it. Which is as false as anything can be.

The gatherers, with more ground to cover more lightly, seeded my memory with a few phrases (the Winnipeg Art Gallery's Shirley Madill commenting on the "little death" implied by some forms of photography, and on the tension between the moving image and the still), themes (Karen Love, from Vancouver's Presentation House Gallery, speaking of how photography can act as the static but not unmoved eye that watches the living pass in and out of life) and one irritating ingression (independent curator Chris Townsend's reductive analysis of Sarah Jones's airless domestic situations). And perhaps because it was Manitoba in March, there was also a blizzard: some 250 images brought from Russia by Evgeny Berrezner of the Museum of Photographic Collections in Moscow, which he projected like scenes from a quick march through the recent photographic vistas of a virtually unknown continent of art. A day worth remembering—however that may be possible. If only I had taken a photo. ◆

"Transition, Memory and Loss: A Symposium on Contemporary Photography" took place at the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba in Brandon, Manitoba on Saturday, March 14, 1998.

Robert Everett-Green writes for The Globe and Mail. *This is his first contribution to* Border Crossings.