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Brighton Beach -- An Interaction

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BRIGHTON BEACH -- AN INTERACTION
by
Dory Ellen Thanhauser

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA PHOTOGRAPHY PROGRAM
SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS AND SCIENCES
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Rose Thanhauser Reivitz, my grandmother
Al and Yvonne Thanhauser, my parents.
"Once the mind is aware of the profound difference between seeing an object for its three-dimensionality only, and seeing its fourth-dimensionality as an event in time and space, only then does the mind search for and find symbols to express this added dimension."

Wynn Bullock
INTRODUCTION

To sum up in one word what this thesis is about is quite simple. It is about people. Long before I worked with photography, I was obsessed with gaining insight into what people are all about - what makes us tick. No matter what my initial interest was, the issue always came back to a fascination with the unfathomable, perplexing creatures we are.

I was introduced to photography while still in Journalism school. It seemed impersonal and, therefore, uninteresting. Then I discovered the photography of Diane Arbus. She seemed to express through her vision what lay unarticulated inside me. I saw for the first time, photography used to communicate feelings. And, at least in my mind, I became a photographer.

It would be nice to say that I outgrew that early impression, but I know my work remains profoundly influenced by her. Learning to recognize and express my own vision while acknowledging and being receptive to influences has been a real struggle for me - as well as an opportunity.

When I began my thesis in 1983, I was extremely frustrated. I had been making static, well-composed photographs of unusual people that seemed meaningless even
to me. Coming from a highly academic background, I had read Martha Rossler, A. D. Coleman, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Susan Sontag - to mention just a few of the intellectuals of whom I was conversant. I could discuss any contemporary photographic issue, and I had a strong intellectual grasp of the historical context I was part of. I had studied with Nathan Lyons, William Parker, and dozens of others. Needless to say, I was completely confused.

It seemed like all portraits were boring, sentimental and/or exploitative. And yet, I was really only interested in photographing people.

My thesis became: How can I make portraits that 1) went beyond being frozen specimens, 2) that I felt ethically entitled to make, 3) were visually meaningful.
DISCUSSION
DISCUSSION

On a trip to Brooklyn, New York to visit my grandmother we went to her club, the Brighton Beach Baths, where I had not been since early childhood. What I found there was absolutely amazing to me. Amidst a stretch of sand and beach chairs was a cluster of elderly people, mostly women, in brightly colored costumes, dancing and celebrating together. A small stage held a four-piece band. I was entranced. Through talking with my Grandmother and other club members I learned who the people were. They comprised the Senior Citizen membership of the Brighton Beach Baths. Most of them were Jewish widows - first or second generation Americans. Primarily, they lived alone - and all remembered World War II - having either personal or family experience with the Holocaust. These were women who were aware that they were growing old; bodies were deteriorating, stamina waned with every summer, friend's funerals were attended. But at the Baths, they put on their costumes, made up their faces, and surrounded themselves with people they had known for years. They seemed to exist in a strange tense - a combination of the past idealized and the present maximized. The band played at 3 o'clock every afternoon; the women chose their partners and again became the people they never
really were. To witness, and as a photographer, become a prop for this surreality was exhilarating.

I wanted photographs of these people to communicate their vitality, individuality, and most of all their enviable comfort with themselves.

The first photographs I made were very controlled — (see Appendix). They were in color, and I would pick out a subject, get her to stand in a place I thought was visually interesting, collaborate on a pose, and make the picture. These photographs were quite colorful, and depicted a subculture that many viewers had never seen. These pictures were exhibited in 1983 at a Rochester gallery, and the audience response was not what I had expected. People really were entertained by the pictures — could hardly believe that the subjects of my photographs had brought their gaudy, wrinkled, overweight bodies out in public. There was a lot of laughter. I received praise from other photographers for "getting them to act like that", and for getting them to trust me. One old Jewish man was upset by the photographs, and felt they were anti-Semitic.

This episode stirred up a lot of conflict for me. I knew that it was impossible to control an audience's response, and that I did not want to post an explicit text in an attempt to prove my honorable intentions. And yet the response I had gotten made me feel like I had violated a trust — and held my Grandmother's friends up for public
ridicule - to my own advantage. Maybe I had no "right" photographing these people.

It became apparent how difficult it is to communicate clearly with images. It is so easy for the viewer to distort them into supporting their own ideas. We all see what we want to see - I experienced how selective our perception really is. With written text though, the reader usually agrees or disagrees with what he or she has read, and cannot twist the meaning as easily as with an image.

It seemed I had several choices - the first being to ignore public interpretation, secure with my own good intent. The second was to provide a very explicit written or oral context - regardless of how it compromised my pictures. The third choice was to stop photographing these people. And, the fourth choice was to go back to the Club the next season and make new images that could express more clearly what I wanted to communicate. The choice taken was to make new images and include a brief written statement. My goal was to get beyond the unusual appearance of my subjects and to address what I felt was underneath that, and to do this visually. This meant delving into the relationship between how things appear and what they mean - which is still very abstract for me and very difficult to articulate. And yet in this essential understanding lies, for me, the allure of being a photographer, and what would ultimately make my photographs work. On one hand, I had learned that
photographs can only be about the appearance. The appearance
of what is contained in the camera frame at a given 1/60 of a
second. Wanting more seemed arrogant at best. I could hear
Garry Winogrand saying "the minute a photograph pretends to
be about the subject it becomes a lie." At the same time,
I needed my pictures to do more than describe the appearance
of some eccentric old women.

Maybe this thesis is really about how I survived an
intellectual mine field, made pictures I feel good about
and remained relatively sane! I had exposed myself to so
many powerful influences, so many brilliant convincing people
who had found their own answers, and I had all their voices
in my head. Learning to come to my own truths, and allowing
them to remain fluid, may have been the biggest struggle -
and the biggest reward.

At this time, I was in such a dilemma. I became
dissatisfied with still imagery, and considered slide tapes,
video, performance art - new cameras - anything to bring life,
motion and feeling into my work.

There were nine months that I spent in Rochester
waiting to go back to Brooklyn the next summer. I photo-
graphed in Rochester almost everyday, and kept a journal.
Journal entries during that year:

Maybe pictures are just pictures, and other things are
other things. Maybe pictures and their relationship to each
other make their own context.
Nathan Lyon's prescription concerning my compulsion to define my stance: Don't work to illustrate a preconception. Rather, engage in an investigative process. Be open and don't worry.

Is it perhaps only valid to show "your own"? Is that really all we can know? Also, the convention in the documentary genre that the subject is unaware of the camera. Would it be more honest to show also the interaction between the subject and camera/photographer?

Reasons why people don't talk about work:
1) Shy/insecure - think they have nothing to say.
2) Lazy - let someone else do it.
3) Don't give a damn.
4) Assume they know what it is about.

This is a funny time - my "old" pictures look so static and repetitive and boring. The "new" seem formal, and "other." Are they still simple and direct? I hope so. My shooting style has changed to a less static, less formulaic approach. This is not necessarily good or better. Depending on what I'm trying to do. The new stuff is more gestural - less about the camera. What is it I am getting at?

(end of journal entries)

I made a decision to move to Brooklyn for a few months and get a job in the neighborhood of the Club. I made a contact, and was promised access to the Club a few hours
a day, and Kodak gave me some free film. When I got to Brooklyn I found out that I could not have access to the Club. I explained to the woman that, based on her promise, I had sublet my apartment in Rochester and committed myself to a waitressing job. I convinced her to give me three sunny afternoons at the end of the summer. This was nothing compared to the three months I had anticipated. I decided to photograph other places every day until then to get ready for my three days. It was like the book I had read by Eugen Herrigel, "Zen and the Art of Archery." I worked breakfast and dinner at an Israeli restaurant that served mostly elderly Jewish people, so I could get to know them better. I lived in the kitchen of my Grandmother's one bedroom apartment. I rode buses and subways, and ate Kasha Knishes. And every afternoon between shifts I went to the boardwalk and photographed. I never printed the pictures. I wrote a lot and felt a lot.

Journal entries from Brighton Beach:

This boardwalk is so wonderful I can hardly stand it! The way the air feels, the wind, the people. A sense of history, continuity and richness. Finding this place is a reassurance everything will be all right. The ocean! Right here! Comes, and goes.

It's really freaky being around all old people. They are so desperate in certain ways. (Young people are desperate in other ways, I know). They all say,
"Stay young! Stay young!" What does "youth" mean?

There's something about Grandma that really chokes me - the valiant way she continues to respect herself and other people. Yet at the same time, her helplessness and her fright. Her little refrigerator seems to say it all - it contains a couple jars of dirtyish water, a corner of a week-old Kasha Knish from Waldbaums, an empty jar of orange marmalade, a box of light raisins wrapped twice in plastic and taped, half dozen packages of bread with one or two stale slices in each, a couple of bruised McIntosh apples, and a container of watery no-salt cottage cheese. I remember her inviting me to make myself a midnight snack as we stood before that foul-smelling appliance. Her eyes twinkled and her dentures clacked as she slyly confided that there was "everything" and I should help myself.

It's very obvious I'm doing exactly what I should be doing - but I still have to fight worrying about "my work." Intellectually I realize that Brooklyn and the restaurant are as "real" as R.I.T. and Visual Studies, but emotionally I wonder sometimes.

Went back to the Brighton Beach Bath Club for the first time today, and photographed. It was so easy!

(end of quotes).

The pictures that were made on those three days were totally different than the ones from before. They captured a feeling of the environment and described the women's
attitude towards themselves and each other. I'm not really sure why, or if I care why – just that I grew and my work grew.
There were many technical choices that were made in order to enable my photographs to communicate accurately.

The choice of color rather than black and white film was crucial. One reason is that the appearance of the color added to the feeling of energy and vitality.

Secondly, I felt that using color told more about the people - the colors showed choices they had made and indicated how they felt about themselves.

I used color to create visual inter-relationships between the people, and each other, and their environment.

Scale of the photographs was another choice. When displayed, these pictures are 20x24 inches. After experimenting with all different sizes, the larger seemed to make the prints more confronting, interactive with the viewer - less like little artifacts that could be held in a hand.

I found that Kodak Ektacolor 78 printing paper produced more saturated, vibrant color prints than the more commonly used Kodak Ektacolor 76 paper. The 78 paper has a higher grade of contrast, and when negatives are enlarged as much as mine were, they tended to fade out with the lower contrast 76 paper. Since I felt that bright, vibrant prints were important to my message, I used Ektacolor 78 paper.
Use of fill-flash was another choice. Since I was photographing under very harsh sunlit conditions, there were often distracting, dominant shadows on people's faces. Use of a fill card was absurd, and it was often inappropriate to position my subjects. Using fill flash the shadows were either softened or eliminated. Also, flash gave the control of being able to visually separate subject from background. This was helpful since my camera had an aperture fixed at f/16.

The biggest choice, and the most challenged choice that was made, was the use of a Kodak Brownie Flashfun camera - a 1950's promotional camera with a plastic lens and body. This camera was essential for getting the kind of photographs I wanted.

Because of the non-threatening nature of this camera I was provided with access to the people and environment that would have been difficult or impossible with sophisticated, expensive equipment. Most of the people I was photographing had used this type of camera themselves and felt very natural in front of it. Also, I was much less conspicuous, and the camera's immediacy, simplicity, and lack of monetary value enabled me to take it in the pool, shower, and on the beach.

The poor resolution of the plastic lens was another reason for choosing this camera. Whereas an optically precise lens would have shown in crisp detail every hair,
wrinkle and age spot, this camera filtered out this type of information which I felt was irrelevant and would have distracted the viewer from seeing what I felt was really important. Eliminating these visual details allowed the spirit of the subjects and their ease with themselves to show through.

These above choices lead to an issue I was repeatedly questioned about. That issue is: "are these photographs documentary?" The answer, long in coming to me, is "No." Because of my ethnic background and personal feelings about the subject, combined with the technical choices that were made, and my editing process, these pictures do not accurately, objectively, literally document Brighton Beach Baths. Rather they express my feelings and perceptions about what I responded to.
APPENDIXES
BOARD MEMBERS:

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THESIS PROPOSAL

Dory Ellen Thanauser
Master of Fine Arts Program
Rochester Institute of Technology
February, 1983
THESIS PROPOSAL

PURPOSE
This thesis will be a photographic exploration of the psychological fantasy world of a group of elderly people. The inter- and intra-actions of the subjects will be emphasized. Rather than being only site-specific, the photographs will also serve as a macro-view of ourselves.

BACKGROUND
The photographs that I will be presenting for my thesis will be images made at the Brighton Beach Baths, a beach club in Brooklyn, New York. The subjects of the photographs are the senior citizen membership there. These are people who are aware that they are approaching death: their bodies are deteriorating, their friends are dying, they are typically widows living alone, existing on social security, or very modest inheritances. Pragmatically speaking, this is a difficult time for them. But, at the Baths, they put on their costumes, make up their faces and surround themselves with people they have known for years, who are very much like themselves. People who are haunted by the past, and scared of the future, and are living in an interesting tense — a combination of the past idealized and the present maximized.
The band starts up at three o'clock every afternoon; the people choose their dancing partners and once again they are free to become the people they never really were. The presence of a photographer, another prop, adds another dimension to this play within a play; an outsider to witness, validate and record this reality.

I have been committed to making portraits since I began photographing. Previous to the work outlined in this proposal, I experienced a real dissatisfaction with the static nature of most of the portraits I was seeing and making. I called them "butterflies"; they seemed like specimens, selected by the photographer, placed against an appropriated backdrop, and pinned or frozen there. I became very confused about what these portraits were really addressing, or communicating. A few of the people I was investigating at this time were: Martha Rosler, Susan Sontag, Sid Grossman, Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon and Charles Traub. My question became: How can I make portraits that go beyond "butterflies", beyond the way a person looks? And, what will these images, (if I can make them) address? And perhaps the result of this exploration will be a deeper understanding of "butterflies", and a renewed interest in making them.
PROCEDURE

This thesis will be involved with three areas: the mileu of Brighton Beach Baths, portraiture, and picture-making. The exhibition will consist of color photographs made between 1982 and 1984 with a Kodak Hawkeye Flashfun camera that has a plastic lens.

Regarding mileu, which has already been described, Dorothy Parker once said, (in reference to Jews) "They are just like other people, only more so." This describes the Brighton Beach crowd perfectly. They show us ourselves -- our needs, our personas, and our destinies.

The second concern of my thesis is portraiture. I want to explore the role of the subject, and get past the subject being a passive victim of the photographer and the camera. I am interested in intra-action within the frame between the subject and their physical and social environment, as well as interaction occurring between the subject and the photographer/camera. My concern is not only how the subject is seen by the photographer/camera, but how the subject sees, describes, and presents themself. I am striving for the universal portrait behind the portrait.

Picture-making and my personal aesthetic is the third section of my thesis. This deals with my way of working, as well as understanding the traditions that my pictures are evolving from. I rely completely on the elements of intuition, and chance, and hope for a type of synergy to
occur. Happy accidents are welcomed, such as a shutter sticking and blurring the image, red light fog marks, an occasional flash burn out, random focusing and color aberration. These are invited by the type of camera I use and the unstructured way I photograph. This camera also affords an unobtrusiveness and a total spontaneity that is essential to my work.

I am photographing in the tradition of photographers who have attempted to integrate a personal aesthetic with a human concern. In the written part of this thesis, I want to investigate what has been done in this genre, and what is currently being done, and where I see my work in relation. Some photographers I intend to deal with are: Sid Grossman, Diane Arbus, Charles Traub, Lisette Model, Dorothea Lange, Susan Felter and Nicholas Nixon, and Anne Noggle. Also I want to investigate how these issues in portraiture have been resolved in painting.

I see my work coming from and being part of a collective conscience and reflecting the spirit of our times. In this age of technology, when the rational and intellectual functions are dominant, in all areas of our existence, including art, my work is about valuing feelings -- our emotional and intuitive functions. It is about something that is warm, immediate, and alive; not cool, remote or analytical.
PHOTOGRAPHIC INFLUENCES

Diane Arbus
Anne Noggle
Susan Felter
Charles Traub
Nicholas Nixon
Dorothea Lange
Leslie Krims
Danny Lyons
Bruce Davidson
Lisette Model
August Sander
"Monsters of a Gilded Age"
Sid Grossman
Doug Harper
Mary Ellen Mark
Carl Glassman
Roy Greer
Martha Rossler
Murray Riss
Linda Connors
Frank Foster
William Eggleston
Mark Cohen
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Photographs by
DORY ELLEN THANHAUSER

June 6—August 4, 1985

THE MIDTOWN Y PHOTOGRAPHY GALLERY
344 East 14 Street, New York City

Gallery hours: Sunday-Thursday 12-8 p.m.
           Friday 12-4 p.m.
           Saturday-Closed

Opening reception: Thursday, June 6th 5-8 p.m.
Photographs by
DORY ELLEN THANHAUSER

June 6—August 4, 1985

THE MIDTOWN Y PHOTOGRAPHY GALLERY
344 East 14 Street, New York City 674-7200

Gallery hours:
Sunday-Thursday 12-8 p.m.
Friday 12-4 p.m.
Saturday-Closed

Opening reception:
Thursday, June 6th 5-8 p.m.
You are invited to
an Exhibition
of Photographs
by
DORY ELLEN THANHAUSER
October 20th — October 28th

Opening Reception
October 20th 7:30 p.m.

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SLIDES