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2012

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

A Language of Rebuilt Reality  
The Photography of Robert Cumming in the 1970s

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History

by

Sarah Bay Williams

June 2012

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Susan Laxton, Chairperson

Dr. Elizabeth Kotz

Professor Erika Suderburg, MFA

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2012

The Thesis of Sarah Bay Williams is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

## Acknowledgements

Dr. Susan Laxton, the chair of my thesis committee, is, and always will be, an inspiration to my scholarship. Dr. Laxton has, at her core (I am sure of it) a passion for art that reminds me why I am thrilled to have this subject as my chosen field. I remember seeing Dr. Liz Kotz in front of an audience, engaged in conversation with Robert Barry—I did not know at the time that I would be so fortunate to ask her to sit on my thesis committee, and that she would accept. My appreciation for the professors of the Department of Art was extremely instrumental to my decision to attend UCR, and I am deeply indebted to one of their ranks, Professor Erika Suderburg, for also sitting on my committee. Her enthusiasm and admiration for Mr. Cumming matched that of my own. To all of the faculty and staff of the Department of the History of Art, I am thankful; they have made the last two years the most stimulating of my life. Professor Forster-Hahn, thank you for being there when I started my writing—it was a wonderful and weird wakeup call. And, Alesha Serene Jeanette, you keep us all sane—thank you. Joey Lehman Morris—an artist on whom somebody will dedicate a thesis, I’m sure—introduced me to the photography of Robert Cumming, and for this I am eternally grateful. To those at the institutions that hold Mr. Cumming’s work and artist’s files: Britt Salvesen, Edward Robinson, and Eve Schillo at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (who were kind enough to allow me to organize *The Continuity of Robert Cumming* in the Department of Photography permanent collection gallery in the spring of 2012); Kate Bussard, Natasha Derrickson, and Liz Siegel at the Art Institute of Chicago; Anne Wilkes Tucker and Del Zogg of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Erin O’Toole and Barbara

Rominski of the San Francisco Museum of Art; Megan Feingold, Michelle Hawey, Tasha Luter, Elisabeth Thomas, and Jennifer Tobias at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Mary Wassum at the Smithsonian American Art/National Portrait Gallery Library, Washington, D.C.; Anna Brooke and Amy Watson at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Library, Washington, D.C.; Patrick Murphy at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Claartje van Dijk at the International Center of Photography, New York; Jeanette M. Clough at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles; Krista Ivy and Caitlin St. John at the University of California, Riverside, Libraries; Janet Borden of Janet Borden Gallery, New York; Sasha Goldman of Howard Yezerski Gallery, Boston; Philip Martin of Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles; and Tom Jancar of Jancar Gallery, who put me in touch with Mr. Cumming—thank you so very much. Two inspired friends and mentors kept me going from 5500 miles away: Jason Evans, thank you for continually raising the bar in beautiful ways, and Charlotte Cotton, thank you for transforming that bar into the unimaginable terrific (and for telling me to not bother with graduate school—I didn’t listen, but I get what you mean). And to dad—you are why I got into this distracting and otherworldly business of art; I grow for it every day, and for you.

Paul, thank you for more than you know. Thank you for being my love.

I am honored to have written this thesis on Robert Cumming and indebted to him for all of his tireless help along the way. My fascination for his work will never pale.

to JWJ Williams

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## Preface

### Introduction to a Cactus, or, Inside *Theatre for Two*

I learned about Robert Cumming in 2009 from an artist named Joey Lehman Morris. Morris, during a discussion of his own photographic work, mentioned Cumming as one of his influences.<sup>1</sup> I made note of the name, as I had never heard of him. He described Cumming's photographs from the 1970s as staged and incongruous tableaux. Later that day, scanning various images called up from a Google search, I found a black and white photograph credited to Cumming. (Figure x.1) It showed a cactus on a table in front of a roughly cut, propped up piece of cardboard. A glow welled out from the plant, as if the cardboard were cut out, revealing a source of light behind. To the right and above the cactus a scrim of back-lit white paper squared out a window on which a silhouette in the same shape as the cactus took on a very cartoon-rabbit- or Mickey-Mouse-like shape. Cumming had created eyes for the silhouette, as if it was peeking over the edge. Surrounding the real cactus, scattered across the table at the base of the propped-up cardboard, was a pile of detritus on one side and what looked like a ball of wire, a fat black marker, a three-sided ruler, an Exacto knife, and a role of masking tape on the other. All this sat on a bulky wooden table flanked by two flat-backed wooden chairs. It was an elaborate still life that made little sense; an absurdist *nature morte*.

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<sup>1</sup> Joey Lehman Morris creates photographs of landscapes both elegant and absurd, such as a truck parked in its own cage, an expanded table without its leaf on its side on a hill, and the desert at night.

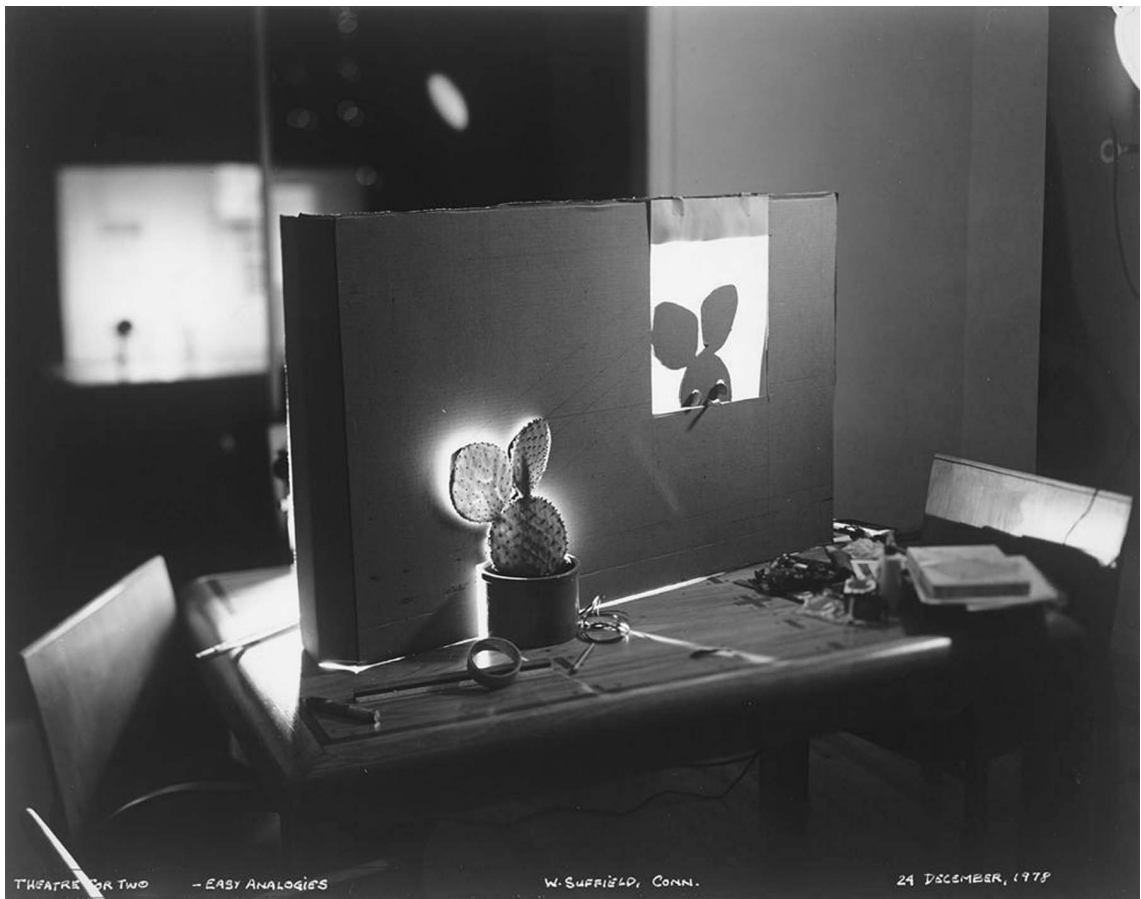


Figure x.1. *Theatre for two—easy analogies*, W. Suffield, Conn., 24 December, 1978, 1978, gelatin silver print; LACMA, gift of Sue and Albert Dorskind, AC1995.239.3

Along the bottom of the image, in white, read *Theatre for two—easy analogies, W. Suffield, Conn. December 24, 1978* (1978).

There was something fundamental that I understood in *Theatre for two*. My father is an artist and my mother was a writer. When I was a child, artwork by my father covered the walls of our house in Philadelphia. Over my parents' bed was my father's painting of a full-body nude of my mother—a large bouquet of flowers to her right recalled Manet's *Olympia* (1863) with long brown hair (a reference over which I would later puzzle). In the dining room, dark muddled-in-brown portraits of men in fedoras with blurred faces lined the walls—a Bacon-esque rogues' gallery. I understood early on that art was not to be feared when it didn't immediately make sense. I saw something familiar in the work of Robert Cumming. Something to be unpacked and explored.

Along with *Theatre for two*, among the first photographs that I viewed by Robert Cumming were *Mishap of minor consequence* (1973), depicting two views of a tipping chair and bucket suspended with wires in a yard at night, and *Quick shift of the head leaves glowing stool afterimage posited on the pedestal* (1978). (Figures x.2 and x.3) The latter is a split image, one side showing a metal stool in a shaft of light against a dirty plaster wall, and the other, a pedestal on which a white silhouette of a stool has been spray painted.

At the time of my introduction to Cumming, I was dismayed to discover that there was very little published on the artist; nor did I find any retrospective exhibitions in the recent past or near future. According to a recent cv,<sup>2</sup> Cumming's last major exhibition

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<sup>2</sup> Jancar Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, "Solo Exhibitions," *Robert Cumming cv*, 2011.





Figure x.2. *Mishap of minor consequence*, 1973, two gelatin silver prints; LACMA, gift of Leland Rice, AC1992.232.3.1-2



Figure x.3. *Quick shift of the head leaves glowing stool afterimage posited on the pedestal*, 1978, gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 in.; LACMA, gift of Sue and Albert Dorskind, AC1995.239.2

was in 1998 at the Museum of Modern Art, entitled *The Clutter of Happenstance*, curated by Darsie Alexander. A retrospective of twenty-five years of his work, *Robert Cumming: Cone of Vision*, traveled over the course of 1993–1994 to San Diego, Boston, Houston, and Honolulu, curated by Hugh M. Davies and Lynda Forsha. Cumming produced and self-published a series of five artist’s books in the 1970s, but the only monographs of his photographic work are a compact but very complete French publication from 1994, *Robert Cumming: L’Œuvre Photographique 1969–1980*, organized by Frédéric Paul, and a catalog to a 1979 retrospective at the Friends of Photography in Carmel, California, entitled *Cumming: Photographs*, organized by James Alinder.

I came to find that those who wrote essays on, and reviews of, Cumming’s work in the 1970s often focused on the whimsy of his incongruous fabrications. Alinder, in his essay for *Cumming: Photographs*, writes, “Robert Cumming is a magician who seems to be explaining the secret to his magic, but is one step ahead of us.”<sup>3</sup> In an essay on Cumming for *Artforum* in 1975, Patricia Foschi describes his constructed photographs as “nonheroic narratives, rich in visual intrigue and humor.”<sup>4</sup> Regarding the photograph *Bouncing Balls South and West* (1974), printed in Cumming’s artist book *A Discourse on Domestic Disorder* (1975), James Hugunin writes, “Cumming has tricked us, but not to the extent that we can’t guess that we are being fooled. We suspend our disbelief in much the same way that we allow a magician his tricks.”<sup>5</sup> And Hugunin is right—it took a close

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<sup>3</sup> James Alinder, “The Photographs of Robert Cumming,” in *Cumming: Photographs* (Carmel, Calif: Friends of Photography, 1979) 9.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Foschi, “Robert Cumming’s Eccentric Illusions,” *Artforum* 8, no. 10 (summer 1975) 38.

<sup>5</sup> James Hugunin, “Robert Cumming: ‘Trucage,’ Falsehoods,” *Afterimage*, no. 6.5 (December 1978) 9.

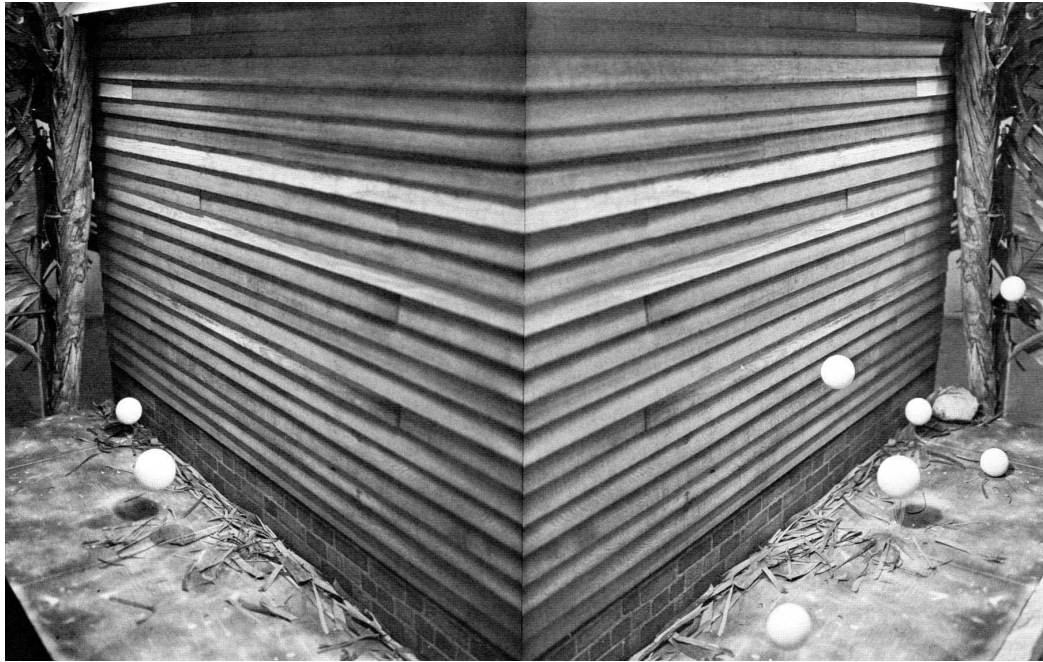


Figure x.4. *Of 8 balls dropped on the peak of the roof, 2 fell to the North, 6 to the East,* 1974, two gelatin silver prints; SFMOMA, gift of Foto Forum, 84.13.A-B

viewing of this work at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for me to recognize the wires that support each ball in midair. (Figure x.4)

It is difficult to find a bad review of Cumming's work in the 1970s. He has charmed most every viewer. This positive response is warranted, and it is neither wrong nor misguided to focus on his whimsy, illusionism, and humor. It is precisely this focus that will be here explored and peeled back layer for layer. These impractical and perception-based aspects of Cumming's photographs derive from his background in sculpture, are inspired by a fascination with certain absurdist spectacles of Hollywood, are reminiscent of still life and commercial product shots, and, yet, are also more often than not shepherded through the traditional technique of large-format gelatin silver contact prints. This technique is typical of the photograph in modernism—championed by detractors of photographic pictorialism in the early twentieth century, and perfected in Ansel Adams', Edward Weston's, and Imogene Cunningham's Group f/64 (mentioned in Chapter Two). Therefore, Cumming applies such ludic forms to what former curator of New York's Museum of Modern Art, John Szarkowski, has deemed:

The American tradition as defined by Alfred Stieglitz and enlarged by Edward Weston and Ansel Adams: a love for the eloquently perfect print, an intense sensitivity to the mystical content of the natural landscape, a belief in the existence of a universal formal language, and a minimal interest in man as a social animal.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978) 17.

The incongruity of Cumming's combination of perceptual play, absurdity, and humor through methods associated with modernist photography is worth investigating for its simultaneous adherence and subversion of one of photography's early channels to the status of fine art, and this will certainly be an important historical subtext of this thesis. But there is, as well, much more to discuss on the topic of Robert Cumming.

## Introduction

### Uncategorized: Reception

At the Museum of Modern Art's opening reception for the 1978 exhibition *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960*, Robert Cumming engaged then curator and director of the photography department, John Szarkowski, in conversation. Szarkowski had chosen to show a diptych by Cumming, *Academic Shading Exercise* (1975), which was also featured as a two-page spread in the catalog.<sup>1</sup> (Figure i.1) On the right of the spread, a free-standing blackboard prominently fills the frame with three school-room chairs assembled haphazardly in front and behind it. Sketched in white chalk, two spheres, a cone, and a rectangular box serve to illustrate the highlights (bare blackboard) and shadows (white chalk) cast from a single light source imagined shining from above and beyond the boundary of the blackboard. Opposite is the same image, but in negative, with highlights depicted in white, chalk-drawn shadowing very dark, and the surface of the bare blackboard, light gray. The original image is a gelatin silver print and this second image Cumming produced by printing through the photograph, using it as a paper negative.

In their conversation at the reception, Cumming explained to Szarkowski that he had worked for several years teaching drawing and that this experience had inspired *Academic Shading Exercise*. He remembers standing in front of the class, demonstrating classic techniques of shading on spheres and cones, scrubbing in the dark shadow with

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<sup>1</sup> *Academic Shading Exercise* was one of the few works in the *Mirrors and Windows* that was not yet held in MoMA's collection; it was acquired six years following as a gift of Shirley C. Burden.

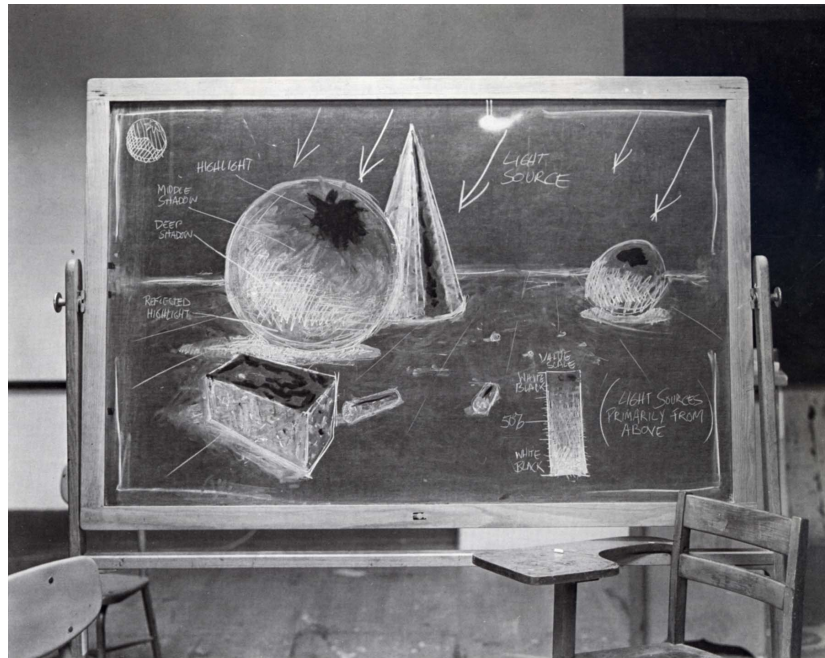
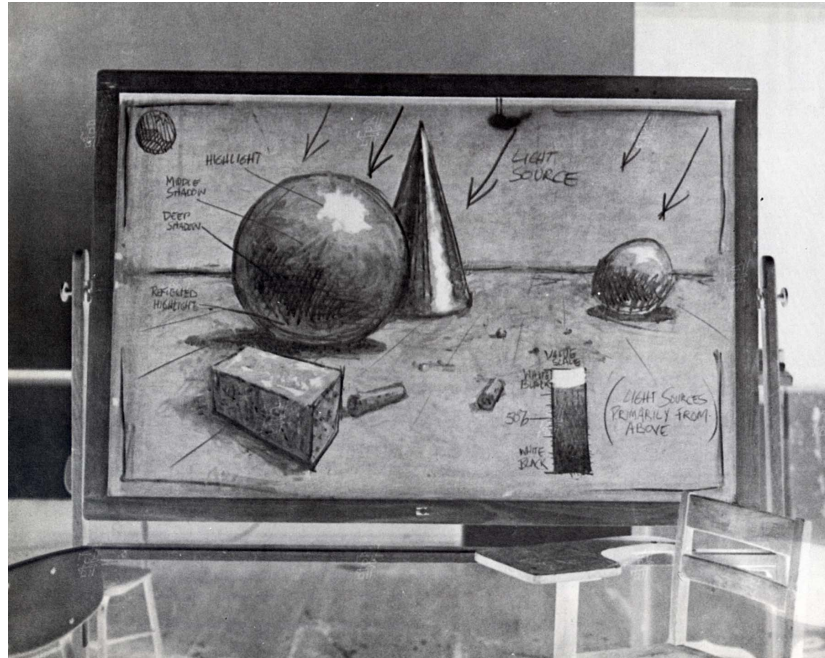


Figure i.1. *Academic shading exercise*, 1975, paper negative and traditional gelatin silver print; MoMA, gift of Shirley C. Burden, 4.1984.a-b



white chalk, when it hit him that he was telling his students, “Notice how this gets darker,” while what he was really doing was filling the shadows with bright white chalk on black.

It was at this point during the telling of his anecdote that Cumming noticed a strange look pass over Szarkowski’s face. As Cumming remembers it, “it became clear he thought the blackboard drawing was a found object. I told him, ‘No, I drew it for the photo,’ which is when he [showed a] ‘swallowed-an-ice-cube’ look, wondering if maybe he’d put me on the wrong half of his thematic divide.”<sup>2</sup>

*Mirrors and Windows*, of course, did involve a “thematic divide” of sorts. Szarkowski, convinced that “perhaps the three most important events in American photography during the fifties were the founding of *Aperture* magazine (1952), the organization of ‘The Family of Man’ exhibition (1955), and the publication of Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (1959),”<sup>3</sup> had drawn on the work of Minor White and Robert Frank to extrapolate a dual premise regarding photographic expression in the 1960s and ’70s, a premise that would encompass the ways in which White and Frank were both “uncompromisingly committed to a highly personal vision of the world.”<sup>4</sup>

To Szarkowski, “the difference between White and Frank relates to the difference between the goal of self-expression and the goal of exploration.” Wary of oversimplifying binaries, Szarkowski continues: “It can be argued that the alternative is

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Cumming, email with the author, January 11, 2012

<sup>3</sup> Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

illusory, that ultimately all [photographers] are concerned with self-expression. If so, the illusion of this alternative is no less important, and its character perhaps defines the difference between the romantic and the realist visions of artistic possibility.”<sup>5</sup>

Cumming understood Szarkowski’s premise as a romantic view, one that held art’s function as a reflection through which the artist’s soul is revealed—in other words, a mirror—while the artists in the more pragmatic category of realists—or windows—present frames (artworks) through which the viewer sees their view of the world.<sup>6</sup>

Szarkowski, thinking Cumming had explored his way to a found blackboard in a random school, had placed *Academic Shading Exercise* in “Part II” of the catalog, ostensibly as a “window,” along with those photographers he felt were following in the footsteps of Robert Frank. Although Cumming was a great admirer of Frank (as will be discussed in Chapter One), he remembers: “Something I said made [Szarkowski] turn a pale shade of green; like maybe he’d [put] me in the wrong camp. ‘Objective,’ ‘subjective’—if I had an art bar to hang out in, [it would] most likely be with the ‘objectives.’”<sup>7</sup>

Cumming began his career primarily as a sculptor. He received a Masters of Fine Art in painting from the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, in 1967 and spent the following years in Milwaukee teaching art. During the late 1960s Cumming made what he calls “utilitarian kinds” of sculptures that intentionally had no use at all, despite their

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Cumming, email with the author, December 27, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Though even this categorization could be arguable.



Figure i.2. *Sculptures, Milwaukee, Wis.*, 1968, gelatin silver print; SFMOMA, gift of Arnold and Temmie Gilbert, 84.1621

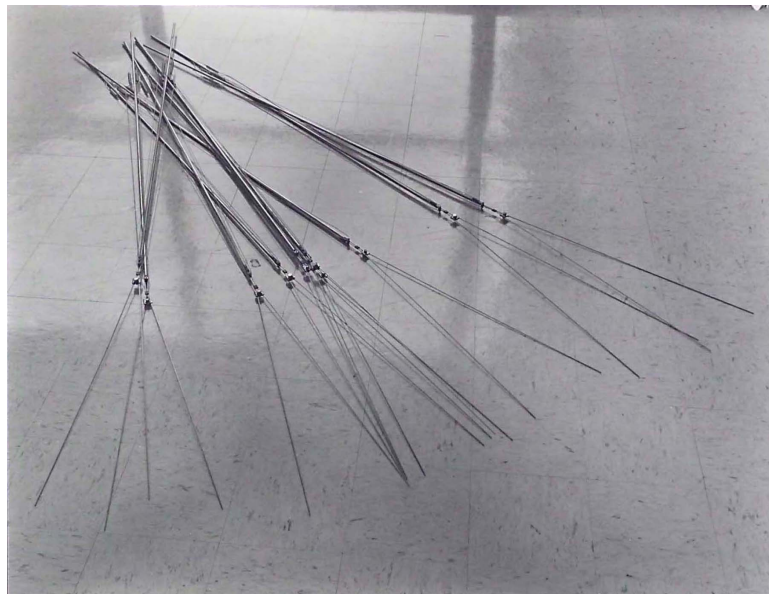


Figure i.3 *Sculptures, Milwaukee, Wis.*, 1968–1969, gelatin silver print; MFAH, gift of Arnold and Temmie Gilbert, 84.346

incorporation of hinges, hooks, cords, and piping.<sup>8</sup> (Figures i.2 and i.3) He also experimented with mail art, writing ten letters a day to strangers whom he found through junk mail and supermarket circulars, querying them on topics ranging from lawnmowers to eggs, and testing the limits of the postal system by shipping dry cleaning tissue, tree branches, and his own awkwardly-shaped sculptures across the country and the world.<sup>9</sup>

In the late 1960s, Cumming participated in group shows, exhibiting his sculpture at the Milwaukee Art Center, the Art Institute of Chicago (then known as the Chicago Art Institute), the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and the Detroit Institute of Art—all significant exhibitions in which Cumming was happy to take part. However, coverage of these shows beyond the pages of the *Milwaukee Journal* was scant.<sup>10</sup> The dearth of coverage in major art publications dismayed Cumming and signaled to him that the Midwest was nearly irrelevant when it came to the market for art. “None of the magazines paid any attention to anything that was happening west of the Hudson,” said Cumming, adding:

I came to realize that you could do all these super shows at the Walker, the Detroit museum ... with no recognition in any magazine. I realized I would

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Cumming, interview with the author, October 8, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> For more on Robert Cumming and mail art, see: Robert Cumming, “The Letters of Robert Cumming,” *File 2*, no. 3 (September 1973): 40–41; and Anna Banana, “Mail Art Canada,” in Michael Crane and Mary Stofflet, eds., *Correspondence Art: Source Book for the Network of International Postal Art Activity*, 1st ed., Contemporary Documents v. 2 (San Francisco: Contemporary Arts Press, 1984) 252. Also: Cumming, interview with the author, October 8, 2011; and: Frédéric Paul, “D’est En Ouest Et Du Nord Au Sud / Aller-retour [From East to West and North to South / A Return Journey],” in *Robert Cumming: L’Œuvre Photographique 1969-80 [Robert Cumming: Photographic Works, 1969-80]*, translated by Simon Pleasance (Limoges, France: F.R.A.C. Limousin, 1994) 27.

<sup>10</sup> Castelli Graphics, New York, NY, “Group Exhibitions,” “Exhibition Reviews,” *Robert Cumming cv*, 1987, reproduced from: Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Library, “Robert Cumming Artist Files,” Washington, D.C.; Castelli Graphics began representing Cumming in the early 1980s.

never get a significant gallery to represent me. So it was a choice to move [to Southern California] or New York. I had never been anywhere but New England and the Midwest, so I came [to Southern California] in 1970 with a teaching job at Cal State Fullerton.<sup>11</sup>

Within a few years, and until he relocated back to the East Coast in 1978, Cumming found himself juggling multiple teaching assignments for studio art classes at universities in Los Angeles and Orange Counties, sometimes overlapping jobs.<sup>12</sup> By 1973, dual assignments across the counties had Cumming battling unrelenting daytime traffic and eventually prompted him to spend hours in movie memorabilia shops, awaiting a clear highway, and poring through boxes of stills from Hollywood's golden age. What caught Cumming's attention were the continuity stills—8 x 10-contact prints, shot with a large-format camera—that were used by film studios for reference to maintain uniformity of props on a certain set across scenes. (Figure i.4) To Cumming, these images depicted inscrutable scenarios that were difficult to justify. He commented:

They're really bizarre. They depict very common scenes—the kitchen, or the inside of a church—but instead of using a real church, the studio has fabricated the illusion of a church; it's jerry-built, and might only be two dimensional. It doesn't have an outside, or if it has an outside it doesn't have an inside, and environments switch back and forth from inside to outdoors. Then there's this crazy scale; they can get away with building

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<sup>11</sup> Cumming, interview with the author, October 8, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Cumming, email to the author, May 14, 2011.



Figure i.4. Unidentified photographers (Los Angeles), *Continuity Stills*, c. 1930–1940, four gelatin silver prints; collection of Robert Cumming.

things much smaller because there are a lot of details that the cameras just don't pick up.<sup>13</sup>

He studied the illusions. Crewmembers, cables, and slates ruptured forth from what would, under normal circumstances, be taken for on-screen filmic "reality." Cumming saw that these continuity stills depicted a privileged view never revealed to cinema audiences, and this sparked a new way of thinking about his own artistic practice.<sup>14</sup>

Cumming had studied photography as an MFA student under Art Sinsabaugh, a photography purist and modernist who shot Midwestern landscapes on 12 x 20-inch negatives through a banquet camera. Yet Cumming was more interested in the rough collage of Rauschenberg, and rebelled against Sinsabaugh and his influences, Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. The continuity stills that Cumming found and purchased for twenty-five cents apiece—humble objects in contrast to Adams and Weston—were manhandled, hole-punched, crinkled, and written upon with numbers and notes. Cumming found their tattered object-hood endearing, and began collecting them as a form of inspiration—as "internal documents or raw notes."<sup>15</sup>

Cumming had regularly photographed his sculptures to send to juried competitions. He began using an 8 x 10 view camera in the late 1960s for the immense

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<sup>13</sup> Cumming in Leo Rubinfién, "Through Western Eyes," *Art in America* 66, no. 5 (October 1978): 80.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Hagen, "Robert Cumming's Subject Object," *Artforum* 21, no. 10 (June 1983): 37.

<sup>15</sup> Cumming in Richard Armstrong, "An Interview with Richard Armstrong" in Frédéric Paul, *Robert Cumming: l'Œuvre Photographique, 1969-80* [*Robert Cumming: Photographic Works 1969-80*] (Limoges, France: F.R.A.C. Limousin, 1994) 153.

clarity and detail available through such large negatives.<sup>16</sup> Inspired by the continuity stills, Cumming began to see the photographic documentation of his sculptures differently. He began to think of the photographs as art objects themselves.<sup>17</sup> Following this revelation, and for the better part of a decade, he built his own tableaux, working through perceptual play (as with, for example, *Academic Shading Exercise*) in absurd and humorous ways. He was, as one curator described him in the mid-1970s, “a conceptual artist sandwiched in between the support media of sculptural means and photographic ends.”<sup>18</sup>

At first glance, Cumming’s traditional technique may belie the content of his work. Some of his setups allude to commercial product shots, still lifes, or found objects. However, on closer view, perceptual play rattles the frame of his modernist photographic method. Cumming has manufactured contingencies into his work, playing on the instrument of the camera as a problematic recording tool. In the decade before Cumming began photographing in earnest, Hubert Damisch described the paradox of photography in his essay, “Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image”:

This image is characterized by the way in which it presents itself as the result of an objective process. Imprinted by rays of light on a plate or sensitive film, these figures (or better perhaps, these signs?) must appear as the very *trace* of an object or a scene from the real world ... A

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<sup>16</sup> Cumming in Alinder, “An Interview With Robert Cumming,” 48.

<sup>17</sup> Cumming in “Intuitive Inventions,” lecture by Robert Cumming, with Ned Rifkin. 1988 (88-10): 0127, File Identifier; HMSG0169A-B, Tape Identifier

<sup>18</sup> Jane Livingston, “Introduction,” in The Corcoran Gallery of Art, *The Nation’s Capital in Photographs, 1976: Robert Cumming*, (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1976) 6.



photograph is this paradoxical image, without thickness or substance (and, in a way, entirely unreal), that we read without disclaiming the notion that it retains something of the reality from which it was somehow released through its physiochemical make-up.”<sup>19</sup>

Damisch’s essay was not published in English until the late 1970s, and Robert Cumming developed many of his ideas on how to approach his work in response to 1960s minimalism and emerging conceptual art rather than from theoretical texts. However, a consideration of Damisch’s essay is useful for understanding Cumming’s work. Damisch warned against the passive consumption of photographs. When the viewer interprets the contingencies inherent to the image and derives meaning from those contingencies, the image approaches art, he writes; personal phenomenological experience takes precedence over conforming to uncritical consumption.<sup>20</sup> This is key to the experience of Cumming’s work as well.

Cumming worked at the margins of easy categorization, eventually stating his dissatisfaction with trends:

I find the whole current art scene—postmodernism and the new realism—a bit inverted. Whereas minimalism was art feeding off itself, this is art feeding off itself feeding off itself! It’s a reaction *to* art feeding off itself, but it continues to feed off itself, and it doesn’t step *out*. And I find it just tremendously inbred and stagnant.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Hubert Damisch, “Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image,” *October* 5 (summer 1978): 70–71.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>21</sup> Cumming in Ted Hedgpath, “Interview: Robert Cumming,” *SF Camerawork* 10, no. 3 (autumn 1983): 9. Emphasis intact.

In the early 1970s, Cumming reported that he “used a lot of backgrounds in photographs, while most conceptualists used blank backgrounds. I frequently placed situations in landscapes or with elaborate backgrounds and thought they were very pictorial all along, but the response to them was very strange.”<sup>22</sup> This strange response was, in fact, from the audience of Cumming’s first photography show, entitled *Minor White, Robert Heinecken, Robert Cumming: Photograph as Metaphor, Photograph as Object, Photograph as Document of Concept*, at California State, Long Beach, in 1973. (Figure i.5, included in the exhibition.) As Cumming would recall:

The audience was apparently trying to divine from [my photographs] some of the existential mystery they found in the *Minor White* photographs. What I was doing, basically, was telling little stories, one and two part theatre pieces for objects.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus, neither does Cumming entirely cast the reflection of *Minor White*’s self-expressive “mirror,” years before Szarkowski saw his work to be akin to Robert Frank’s explorative “window.”

The modernist paradigm of the intact pure print, devoid of illusion, devoid of language (that Cumming would come to rely upon in his titles), the credibility of the photograph that was still prominent to the medium in the 1970s, these are the traditions that Cumming worked within and against, submitting his photographs to a series of constructive considerations through three subtly different modes of instability—

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<sup>22</sup> Cumming in Alinder, “An Interview With Robert Cumming,” 51–52.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.



Figure i.5. *Chair Trick, Orange County.*, c. 1973, gelatin silver print; MFAH, The Manfred Heiting Collection, 2002.3016

perceptual play, absurdity, and humor. His work investigates the relation between object and idea unconventionally within a conventional formal mode of photographic aesthetics.

The chapters of this thesis will focus on these three constructive modes of instability. Chapter One, “There is No Explanation for This: Perceptual Play” examines Cumming’s photographs as images that challenge the viewer to take a second look, contrasting his explicit inspiration, derived from Hollywood, to Walter Benjamin’s theory of the “equipment-free” illusionism built in to our perception of motion picture films. Because Cumming’s work is not “equipment-free,” it is more difficult to consume, demanding participation on the part of the viewer.

Chapter Two, “A Close Look: Absurdity,” analyzes Cumming’s works to find that Cumming’s photographs pose questions rather than offer answers. Guided by the principles of Damisch’s essay, “Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image,” this chapter studies how contingency in the photograph contributes to the object’s status as art.

Chapter Three explores humor in Cumming’s work. To laugh is action, to solicit this laughter is a risk, and when it works, there is a connection between the one who laughs and that which is found to be funny. Humor is sociable; it’s a shared secret. This chapter looks at Cumming’s humorous work while considering a selection of critical essays on laughter and comedy. Ultimately, this chapter proposes that humor in art can intellectualize what is aesthetic while undermining traditional structural systems.

In the 1970s, emerging as they did from his background in sculpture, Cumming’s photographs dealt primarily in objects. In a 1976 video interview, he explains:

I like objects, and objects [that look] flat footed. Maybe that transfers as dumbness, which then becomes humorous, because the photographs are so low key and lacking in loaded subject matter. They're really basic. I tend to frame the photographs ... centered right in the middle. Looking at the view camera, you've got the cross hairs going up and down, and then across sideways, and aligning the object directly in the center is kind of a funny notion to me. It's really basic, which lends to that flat-footed look that they have.<sup>24</sup>

What emerges from the liminal area between “dumbness” and the “humorous” is a state of making sense from a place of no sense, or no thought, from objects imbued with sense by virtue of association. Cumming’s photographs thrive in a “language of rebuilt reality,”<sup>25</sup> which the attentive viewer cannot help but translate. How that translation takes shape depends on the level to which Cumming reveals the paradox of photography, his methods for thwarting easy consumption of the image, and frustrating the paradigms expected from the photography of his time.

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<sup>24</sup> Cumming in Robert Cumming and Alex Sweetman, *Video Data Bank Presents Robert Cumming*, Video (Chicago, 1976)

<sup>25</sup> “A language of rebuilt reality,” as part of the title of this thesis, derives from a quote by Cumming regarding the continuity stills he collected in the 1970s: “[the continuity stills] were these sets constructed on sound stages of canoes in marshes, train interiors, etc.; they were completely fabricated; life size dioramas. The 1930s and ’40s was a period of high artificiality in Hollywood and many of even the most common settings would be laboriously built instead of filmed on location. I had been collecting and looking at hundreds of them, of studying their language of rebuilt reality.” From Cumming in Armstrong, “An Interview with Richard Armstrong,” 153.

## Chapter One

### There is No Explanation for This: Perceptual Play

The majority of Cumming's photographic work was made in the 1970s while he lived in Southern California. He left in 1978, with a teaching assignment back in Connecticut, and a renewed interest in other mediums. In an interview conducted in the 1990s, a decade in which Cumming was devoting much of his time to painting, drawing, and sculpture, he recalled one interest that had originally drawn him to photography:

One of the first things I was interested in was the disparity between real objects and how they looked in photographs. I had been very active in producing sculpture [in the late 1960s], and to disseminate your sculpture you have to take photographs to send around. [See, for example Figures i.2 and i.3] The difference between the actual object and the way it looked in pictures had always impressed me. The things—most of which I made—were totally different from the photographic representation of them. For instance, your perception of objects is in time; seen in parallax, creating an impression of a third dimension; photography is two-dimensional and removes a lot of these clues. Also your perception of objects in time; as you walk around them you see them in three dimensions and get to compare back side and front side, compare with neighboring objects, and somehow work up an impression of the fuller dimension of an object. Photographs are devoid of that: they're totally flat, they remove a lot of the elements of perception.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps this is why, upon moving to Southern California, Cumming was immediately attuned to gaps he found in what seemed to be an inconsistent thread of

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<sup>26</sup> Cumming in Armstrong, "An Interview with Richard Armstrong," 152.

reality that pushed through the culture of Los Angeles. In an interview with James Alinder, Cumming comments that he decided to move to the West Coast partly for the area's illusion-based inscrutabilities, a trace of which he had seen in a selection of photographs from Robert Frank's *The Americans*:

Three of the Frank photographs dealt with Hollywood, two of a movie premiere and one of a television studio. I thought they were just absolutely unreal. One is ... of a television studio in Burbank. A woman is sitting on a stand in the studio. You can see her image on the screen, I think it is to the right of the picture, primarily from her shoulders to the top of her head. To the left hand side you can see the reality, with the woman sitting on a pretty rickety chair on top of this rolling plywood platform with miles of ugly black cable and this cheapo little decorative prop hanging down on fishing line. The reality and the television reality were so far apart. I think that was something I had to come to grips with after moving to California.<sup>27</sup> (Figures 1.1–1.3)

Cumming is describing the real rubbing right up against the proposed-to-be-real. Once in the Los Angeles area, he began shooting 35-mm slides on the street, in the hills, and of all that he saw—visual notes for future reference. He comments, “The turn toward illusion probably came as the result of the thousands of slides taken in Southern California of illusion architecture, painting, and movie sets, not to mention the ‘surfacy’ mood of everything that seemed to transpire in the area without question.”<sup>28</sup> He was

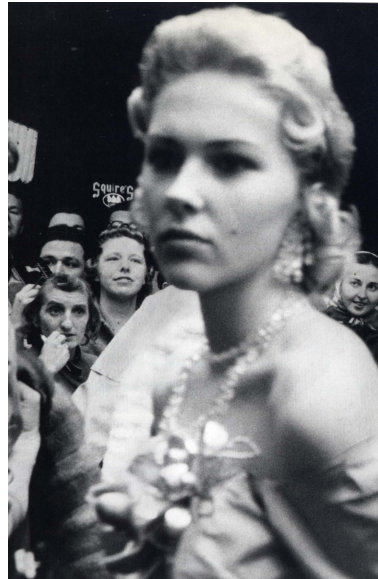
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<sup>27</sup> Cumming in Alinder, “An Interview with Robert Cumming,” 50.

<sup>28</sup> Cumming in Foschi, “Robert Cumming’s Eccentric Illusions,” 38.



Figure 1.1. Robert Frank, *Television Studio, Burbank, California, 1955–56*, reproduced in Robert Frank, *The Americans*, 1st Scalo ed. (New York : Washington, D.C: Scalo : Distributed by D.A.P. ; In association with the National Gallery of Art, 1993) 129. Loaned by the University of California, Riverside, Libraries.



Figures 1.2 and 1.3. Robert Frank, *Movie Premiere—Hollywood*, reproduced in Robert Frank, *The Americans*, 1st Scalo ed. (New York : Washington, D.C: Scalo : Distributed by D.A.P. ; In association with the National Gallery of Art, 1993) left: 27, right: 114. Loaned by the University of California, Riverside, Libraries.



gathering ideas and thought of these slides as sketches and proofs of a sort, as he was working toward a new area of focus for his photographs.<sup>29</sup> It was around 1973 that he began collecting and studying the continuity stills.<sup>30</sup> He was preparing to work this sense of uniting the real and proposed-to-be-real into his own work through manufactured contingencies. As Patricia Foschi notes, “in the process of imitating the commonplace, Cumming parodies Hollywood techniques and the logic of visual perception ... Cumming’s work includes the possibility of two readings. In one, the illusions are primarily apprehended; in the other, actual details are apprehended.”<sup>31</sup> Cumming focused his energies on developing “a subtle perversity in replicating life situations and objects in such a similar fashion that were it not for a few incongruities there would be no difference in the art and life form whatsoever—insidious and humorous mimicry.”<sup>32</sup>

Walter Benjamin’s observations on the illusion world of film in “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” serve as a counter-support to Cumming’s manufactured contingencies within his photographs. A film shoot is chaotic and messy, writes Benjamin. “The shooting of a film, especially a sound film, offers a hitherto unimaginable spectacle.”<sup>33</sup> During film production, everything outside of the

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<sup>29</sup> Cumming in Rubinfiel, “Through Western Eyes,” 80.

<sup>30</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis.

<sup>31</sup> Foschi, “Robert Cumming’s Eccentric Illusions,” 39.

<sup>32</sup> Cumming in Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, edited by Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, translated by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008) 35.

frame—the presence of crew and equipment, as well as shooting scenes out of sequence—contributes to the nonsense of the pre-edited film. After the film is assembled, “the equipment-free aspect of reality has here become the height of artifice.”<sup>34</sup> The illusion is initiated by the cameraman, who shoots specifically to avoid crew and equipment, and is subsequently carried forward by the editor, who reorganizes and selects shots to arrange in an order that makes sense. This ordering of clean parts is what Benjamin describes as the “equipment-free” illusion of reality in the finished film.

Cumming presents the converse of this in his photographs of the 1970s: an *equipment-bound* version of reality in which he poses objects to be caught in an illusion, then supplies the tools to break apart that illusion as well. In other words, Cumming incorporates “equipment,” or signs of equipment, into the frame as part of the photograph to help the viewer rearrange their perceptions, take a second look, and reappraise what it is that she sees.

For instance, in the diptych *Black + white/white + black rope trick* (1973) Cumming includes, within the frame, the stands used to support the lamps that light the scene, which are extended out of view. (Figure 1.4) Cinematographers, generally, avoid such afflatus; they light a scene to look “real,” as if light and shadow were a natural part of their composition, caused by the sun, or a lamp by the couch, switched on by a character in the film.<sup>35</sup> Whether high-key or noir, multiple shadows from film-set lights

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> A lamp onscreen in a film is designated a *practical* light in the argot of production crew.

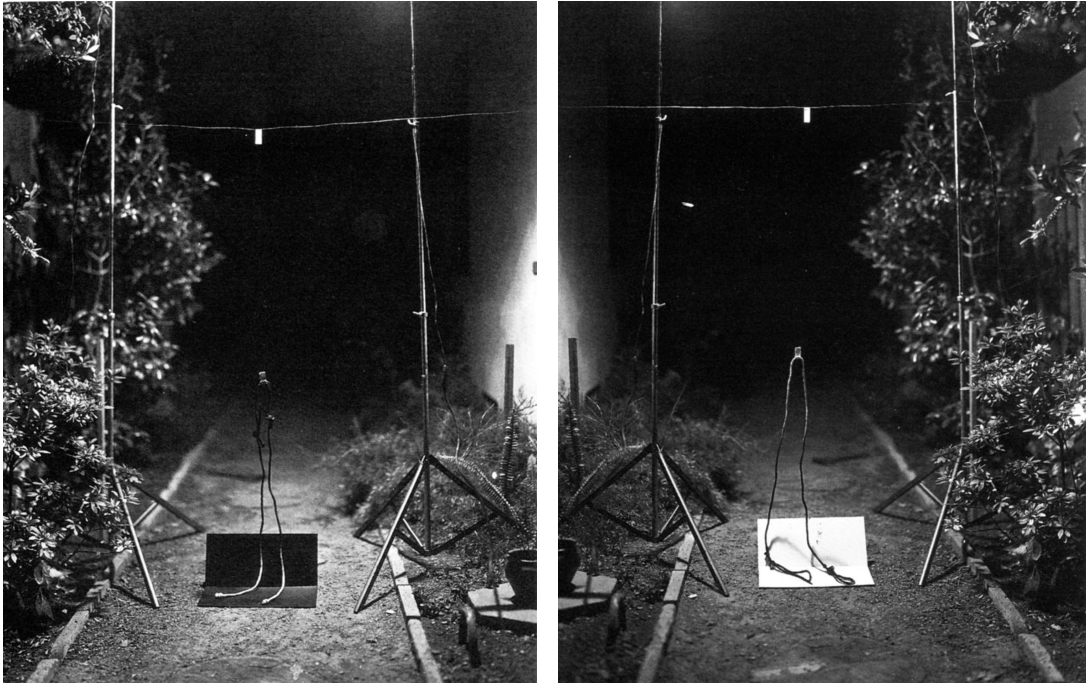


Figure 1.4. *Black + white/white + black rope trick*, 1973, two gelatin silver prints; MFAH, gift of Arnold and Temmie Gilbert, 84.805.A.,B

are the evidence of equipment that the cinematographer on a set is taught to eliminate.<sup>36</sup>

In Cumming's photographs, shadows and other equipment details become an intended part of the image. In *Rope trick*, electrical cords trail down the side of each stand as the stands themselves become objects within the frame. The lamps serve to illuminate the main focus of the two photographs, prominently centered: a hovering rope on a gravel path, outdoors, at night. On either side of the path there are shrubs, bushes, and small trees. The negative of one image has been flipped. The shrubs on the left are then, again, depicted on the right. The rope, in the center of the path, is bent over and dangling, it seems, in mid-air, with its two ends resting on a square of paper bent in half and propped up at a ninety-degree angle. In one image the paper is black and, in the other, white. The color of the rope shifts in front of each corresponding piece of paper. On the left, the rope looks white in front of the black paper. On the right, the rope looks black in front of the white paper. On close inspection, the viewer will see fine wires that attach the hovering rope with very visible pieces of white tape to a line strung across the upper half of each frame. Cumming focused his 8 x 10 view camera exactly on the plane of these wires with a very shallow depth of field, indicating their placement. The dirt path just a foot or so in front and behind the rope falls off into a blur.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> This is so according to this author's experience, who studied cinematography as an undergraduate. Consider the high-key interiors of classic Hollywood films such as George Cukor's *The Philadelphia Story* photographed by cinematographer Joseph Ruttenberg, from 1940, or even the Piranesi-esque architectural emphasis created by cinematographer Vittorio Storaro in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist*, from 1970.

<sup>37</sup> "There were three absolutely tiny wires that were maybe the thickness of hairs holding this up," reported Cumming in an interview with the author, October 8, 2011.

What is not immediately apparent is that the black to white effect of ropes against the black and white paper is manufactured. The “ropes” that Cumming used for the image are one piece of white clothesline partially spray-painted. For the first image, Cumming spray-painted the ends of the clothesline black. For the second image, he cut the clothesline in half and hung the two pieces upside-down so that the white ends fall to the ground in front of the black paper. What looks at first like an optical illusion of relativity is, in reality, the work of paint and scissors. Cumming has included the source of his lighting within the frame in displaying the lamp stands, rendering the image equipment-bound. He also exaggerates and confuses the effects of this in-frame light source.

Cumming describes his fabricated photographs as “logical-looking and feasible fragments of the world-at-large that embody underlying discrepancies.”<sup>38</sup> The “underlying discrepancies” are intentionally conspicuous clues that serve to provoke a second look at his photographs. He explains:

My use of the view camera had to do with the fact that I like obsessive detail, which you get in an 8x10 contact print. You can see every splinter if you want to look closely—every nail head. You can see the wires holding the bouncing frozen balls in time [as depicted in Figure x.4]. There are always clues in the pieces; a means by which one can unravel the fabrication.<sup>39</sup>

The wires and flipped rope of *Rope trick*, when one is engaged in looking at these images, are details that shift one’s perception and relationship with the objects.

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<sup>38</sup> Cumming in S.W. Samore, “Catalog Questionnaire,” in C.E. Loeffler, ed., *West Coast Conceptual Photographers* (San Francisco: La Mabelle, Inc., 1976) 12.

<sup>39</sup> Cumming in Armstrong, “An Interview with Richard Armstrong,” 154.



Figure 1.5. *Decorator test*, 1974, two gelatin silver prints; SFMOMA, gift of Arnold and Temmie Gilbert, 83.306.A-B

Cumming describes another diptych, *Decorator test*, (1974) in which he intentionally undermines the authenticity of the objects in a work that parodies the test images made prior to commercial photography shoots. (Figure 1.5) He constructed a small-scale set, rife with chaotic patterns next to a set of stairs, and explains in an interview that “in *Decorator test*, one of the little molding strips running around the baseboard ends about an inch before the left end of the photograph. On the stairway, the top stair is only about an inch deep and there is no landing at the top”<sup>40</sup> These are details that one would not notice immediately, but that shift the understanding of the image once apprehended.

As the viewer relates to objects in Cumming’s images, seeing them for their flaws and intentional gaps, she experiences the satisfaction of discovery. As Cumming describes: “You might have [a photograph] on the wall for as much as a month, and then start to realize that such [and such] is an impossibility, or that there is something where it shouldn’t be, and then the entire illusion will begin to unravel.”<sup>41</sup>

Much of the content of Cumming’s photographs derives from real moments in which he himself experienced a shift in perception. For example, Cumming relates the following story about one of his long commutes between intra-county teaching assignments:

I was going down the freeway one day behind a woman in a car who was driving rather slowly. As I watched her she was looking out the side

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 150.

window instead of looking ahead ... I had this terribly sick feeling in my stomach because at that speed you do need to glance ahead once in a while. So I had this momentary flash, this upset feeling, and I suddenly realized it was her hair on the left side of her head in a certain configuration that looked like a profile.<sup>42</sup>

This led to an idea, and, subsequently, a photo-sculptural work, entitled *Several profiles* (1978). Cumming continues:

It was one of those split-second perceptual misreads that I noted as being quite extraordinary. When I came home I jotted it down and I did a couple of photographs based on that idea. My re-enactment involved cutting out profiles for people to wear on the sides of their heads.<sup>43</sup> (Figure 1.6)

Cumming often sketched at the end of the day to develop ideas for future photographic tableaux.<sup>44</sup> (Figure 1.7) The sketch of this incident, two silhouettes with the caption *Profile Hairdo—or Worn Cut-Out; Face-Front, or Rear View*, inspired the final photograph and sculptural work, in which Cumming posed two people at either end of a table in front of a window so that their facial features are barely visible. They are looking at the camera, and, as he describes, Cumming has attached cardboard cutout profiles bisecting their respective facing ears, making it appear that they are facing each other,

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<sup>42</sup> Cumming in Alinder, “An Interview with Robert Cumming,” 52.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Cumming engaged an inordinate amount of time planning, sketching out, and building tableaux in preparation for his photographs. Oftentimes the amount of work that went into construction was, even in Cumming’s opinion, imbalanced to the content depicted. He likened it to the “illogical application of time and energy” devoted to the creation of dioramas in natural history museums. “I’ve always liked the dioramas,” says Cumming, “Some are of relatively insignificant moments, like a trout jumping out of a pond to eat a mosquito,” in: Ibid., 54. Many of Cumming’s sketches are reproduced in Robert Cumming, *The Sketch Boards for Fabricated Photos: 1973-1979* (Boston Mass.: Howard Yezerksi Gallery, 2001).



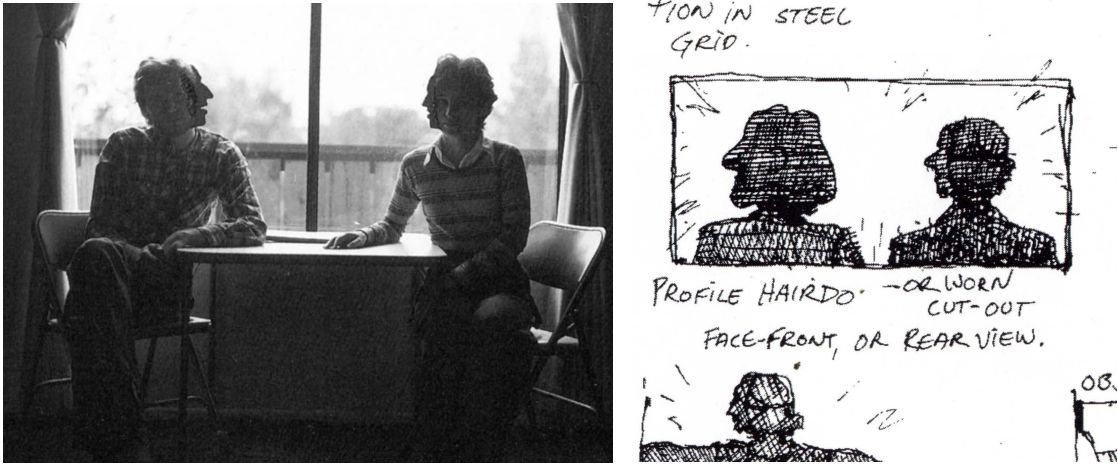


Figure 1.6. and 1.7. Left: *Several profiles*, 1978, detail; right: *Profile Hairdo—or Worn Cut-Out; Face-Front, or Rear View, Page #15*, 1977, detail, reproduced in *The Sketch Boards for Fabricated Photos: 1973-1979* (Boston: Howard Yezerski Gallery, 2001); book collection of the author.



Figure 1.8. *Several profiles*, 1978, gelatin silver print, photogram, paper sculpture, black paint, framed in Plexi box; MFAB, Sophie M. Friedman Fund, 1996.340

engaged in conversation. In the sculptural edition of this work, Cumming aligned profile cutouts to either edge of the photographic paper during his printing process to add a photogram element to the work. In one version of the final work, he mounted the print to mat board and cut additional profiles on either side that extend forward three-dimensionally as an additional set of silhouettes. (Figure 1.8)

Both of the cardboard silhouettes in *Several profiles* are open-mouthed as if speaking—but the human faces are silently looking away from each other toward the camera. They are “talking” over each other, while lost in thought about other things, or themselves. Or perhaps the neutral eye of the lens has drawn their attention away from what they should be doing—engaging in communication—to the camera capturing their countenance. *Several profiles*, in turn, becomes a discourse on communication based on the instability of perception.

While teaching sculpture at the University of California, Irvine, Cumming was inspired to create a work based on a common perceptual event. *Quick shift of the head leaves glowing stool afterimage posited on the pedestal*, (1978) in split frame, mimics the phenomenon of the “negative afterimage,” or, what happens when one stares at an object for fifteen or so seconds and then looks away to a blank surface: the photoreceptors of the eye become over stimulated, or “fatigued,” in their capacity to perceive the dominant color of that object, causing a negative or complementary image to fill its place as one looks away.<sup>45</sup> (see Figure x.3)

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<sup>45</sup> Eric H. Chudler, Ph.D., “Afterimages,” website, accessed, May 21, 2012, <http://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/after.html>

Cumming remembers sitting in the sculpture area on the campus of Irvine and “staring at nothing in particular in the brilliant sunlight.” He writes that he moved his head “a bit to the right and *voilà (mirabile dictu!)*, the stool outline afterimage flashed in the shadow area—flashed a couple times in fact—so I did a photo piece based on the little episode.”<sup>46</sup> Cumming photographed a metal stool in a shaft of bright sun next to a pedestal on which he had spray painted the silhouette of a stool in white paint. To heighten the effect of before and after, Cumming scratched a line down the center of the image and dodged the entire left half of the frame while printing, making that half appear a shade lighter than the right. After a few tests, he found that the white spray paint outline on the pedestal was not bright enough to suggest an afterimage of the stool, so he dodged the shape of the stool onto the photographed pedestal using a small, stool-shaped form.

This latter manipulation of precise dodging is visually explained in subsequent photographs, one of which is entitled *Contact printing the stool's afterimage* (1978), a complex scenario in which, as Cumming writes, “floating in mid-picture ([from] very visible strings), is my 8 x 10-contact-print frame, the negative [framed] in it, and, in front of that, the specially made stool-shaped dodger (paper cut-out with wire handle) made for *Quick shift*.” (Figure 1.9) The hanging contraption is flanked by spot lights perched on stands, with a painted backdrop behind (“à la Hollywood,” as Cumming writes).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Cumming, e-mail to the author, May 24, 2012.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. In 1978, when this photograph was made, Cumming also embarked on painting enormous photorealistic canvases. The “backdrop” of this photograph is one of those 6 x 8-foot oil paintings, a close up of a mat-cutting machine that Cumming had built while he had access to the machine shop at another university at which he taught, California Institute of the Arts. Also, a second photograph of this contraption and backdrop depicts a closer image of the contact-print frame, entitled *Contact printer with dodger for the stool's afterimage, Orange, California* (AIC, 1979.451).



Figure 1.9. *Contact printing the stool's afterimage, Orange, California, 1978, gelatin silver print; AIC, restricted gift of the Society for Contemporary Art, 1979.450*

Cumming's photographs of the 1970s confuse perception and undermine scenarios initially determined to be real. They also invite the viewer to make their own identification with objects pictured therein once contingencies settle within the viewer's understanding. In Cumming's manufactured contingencies, the viewer first sees objects recognizable—conceptually, they have purchase—but these objects in their arrangement do not settle into that purchase easily. *I am to believe what is in this image*, the mind says, *but it is not easy to believe*. Cumming borrows the structures of cinematic illusion and manufactured contingencies from the Hollywood movie set and arrests them midview. On second, third, or other viewing, what is not “true” to the image, Cumming means to be revealed. And once these “perceptual glitches”<sup>48</sup> are made apparent, one may begin to investigate their absurdity.

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<sup>48</sup> Cumming in Hagen, “Robert Cumming’s Subject Object,” 36. Full quote: “In Cumming’s universe the forces of order and the forces of chaos are locked in a struggle. Not only is it impossible to tell whether either is winning, it’s hard even to tell the two apart. Cumming’s method is to focus attention in what he calls ‘perceptual glitches,’ test cases at the extremes of meaning.” Quotes by Cumming in the essay are taken from Hagen’s interviews conducted with Cumming over the course of 1982–1983.

## Chapter Two

### A Close Look: Absurdity

In his essay in *Robert Cumming: l'Œuvre Photographique, 1969-80*, Frédéric Paul writes, “most of [Cumming’s] photographs result from a misappropriation of functional objects”—objects that are appropriated “with all the rigor of the absurd,” and a “frenzied vision,” reminiscent of the early twentieth-century illustrator of eccentric machines, Heath Robinson.<sup>49</sup> In a 1976 interview Cumming says:

I guess my feeling towards [altering the function of objects], is that art isn’t supposed to be useful. For instance, the reason hammers aren’t considered art—they’re considered a tool—is because they’re for a specific use. So I like the use of real, common, objects that appear to be functional things, but if I can alter them, slightly, and make them into art, I think it sets up a tension between the function and the decorative nature of art.<sup>50</sup>

Cumming depicts objects as stripped of meaning or endowed with dual meaning. They emerge *without reason or propriety*; they are *incongruous, unreasonable, and illogical*<sup>51</sup>—they are, in short, the definition of absurd.

In summer of 1975, Cumming was invited by The Corcoran Gallery of Art to photograph the city of Washington, D.C., for a month as part of the project, *The Nation’s Capital in Photographs, 1976*. “I’ve never done so much in a single month,” writes

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<sup>49</sup> Frédéric Paul, “D’est en ouest et du nord au sud / aller-retour” [From East to West and North to South / A Return Journey], 18, 28.

<sup>50</sup> Cumming in Cumming and Sweetman, *Video Data Bank Presents Robert Cumming*.

<sup>51</sup> “absurd, adj. and n.” OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press. 27 May 2012 <<http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/792>>.

Cumming in his edition of the catalog for the project, “in fact, about four times my normal production.”<sup>52</sup> He was uprooted from his normal work area, the “incredibly small sphere in and around my house/studio” in Orange, California, within which Cumming had increasingly focused his work in the mid-1970s. “Props had to be built in an unfamiliar, distant city that made foraging for supplies and the wherewithal to construct them, a labor.”<sup>53</sup> Curator Jane Livingston writes of his “eccentric system of layering meanings, references, and pictures into sometimes obscure and yet paradoxically explicit images.”<sup>54</sup> Although several of the works he produced for this project could have been shot anywhere—a box made of brick-patterned paper that devolves into the cutout shape of Baltimore, Maryland, or a long exposure of a wooden boat with a rubber-band motor and a flashlight attachment streaking haphazardly, “at sail,” across a swimming pool—Cumming was visually drawn to what distinguished Washington from the Los Angeles area. (Figures 2.1 and 2.2) “In D.C. columns are real marble and granite; in Los Angeles, they’re liable to be paint-on-stucco, plaster of Paris, or resin,” he writes.<sup>55</sup> Despite the grandeur of Washington’s ubiquitous stone structures, however, Cumming managed to find absurdity lurking beneath—literally. After creating a traditionally composed photograph shot from the side of the stately steps and bronze lions of the Corcoran

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<sup>52</sup> Cumming, “Letter to Jane and Frances; Orange, Calif., September, 1975,” in *The Corcoran Gallery of Art, The Nation’s Capital in Photographs, 1976: Robert Cumming*, (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1976) 6.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Livingston, “Introduction,” 5.

<sup>55</sup> Cumming, “Letter to Jane and Frances; Orange, Calif., September, 1975,” 6.



Figure 2.1. *Washington and Baltimore are only about 35 miles distant*, 1975, two gelatin silver prints; MFAH, gift of Arnold and Temmie Gilbert, 83.317.A,.B

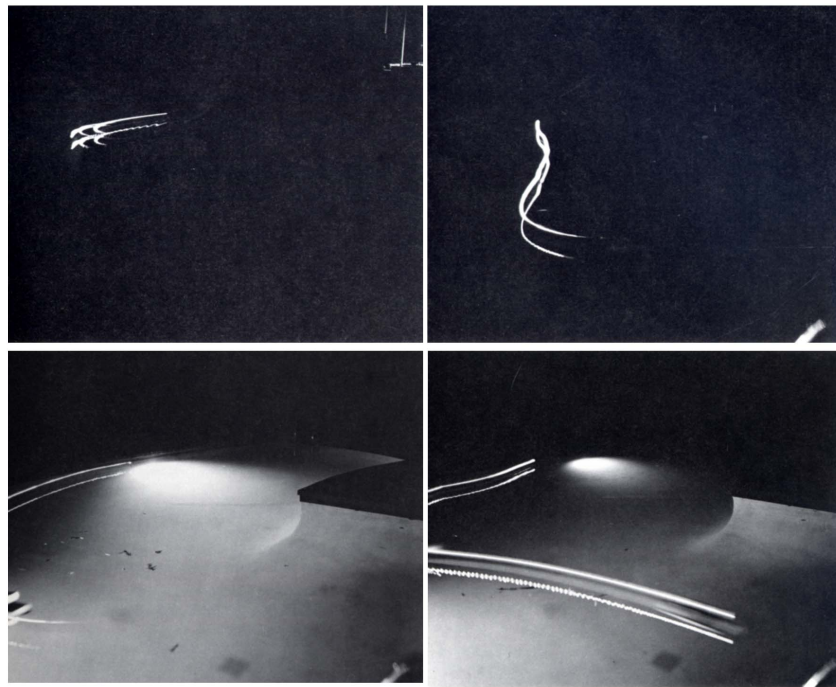


Figure 2.2. *Light paths on a night pool*, 1975, gelatin silver print; SFMOMA, gift of Arnold and Temmie Gilbert, 84.1755.B



Gallery, Cumming built a sculpture in wood, eponymously entitled, *The portion of the Corcoran steps sunk beneath the sidewalk* (1975). (Figures 2.3 and 2.4) He noticed that, due to a slant in the sidewalk, segments of the first three of the Corcoran's steps appeared to progressively fade into the ground.

For the diptych *Distracted in mid-stride; spiked-heeled man kneels to read* (John) (1975), photographed for *The Nation's Capital* project, Cumming bought a second-hand pair of loafers and replaced their heels with the cones of two dibbles with white-painted tips.<sup>56</sup> In one image, a man wearing these *spiked heels* walks in dappled light through grass alongside a marble wall.<sup>57</sup> Cumming frames him from the waist down. His hands hang loose in front of his body. He “walks,” one might imagine, awkwardly, one lobe at a time. In the second image, shot from an angle behind the man, he has bent down on his knees into the shadow, and is focused on a stray piece of paper plucked from the grass. His spiked heels point out behind him. (Figure 2.5)

Complementing this work is *Walking shoes turned momentarily in profile* (Denise in heels) (1975). (Figure 2.6) Here, Cumming reconstructed one heel on a pair of patent leather pumps to extend it to about nine inches, rendering the shoe useless—a parody of the “fetish shoe,” or heels with inordinately high heels that are more for looks than convenience. He depicts a woman wearing the shoes, one foot supporting the absurdly-propped other, atop four marble steps, shot from below, at heel-height.<sup>58</sup> In the

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<sup>56</sup> Charles Hagen, “Robert Cumming’s Subject Object,” 36. A dibble is a gardening instrument designed for piercing holes in the earth to accommodate seeds, bulbs, or plants.

<sup>57</sup> The man in this diptych is fellow *Nation's Capital in Photographs* artist John Gossage.

<sup>58</sup> The woman is Denise Sines, and John Gossage’s partner.



Figure 2.3. *The portion of the Corcoran steps sunk beneath the sidewalk*, 1975, reproduced in the catalogue *The Nation's Capital in Photograph*, 1976: Robert Cumming (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1976) 6; book collection of the author.

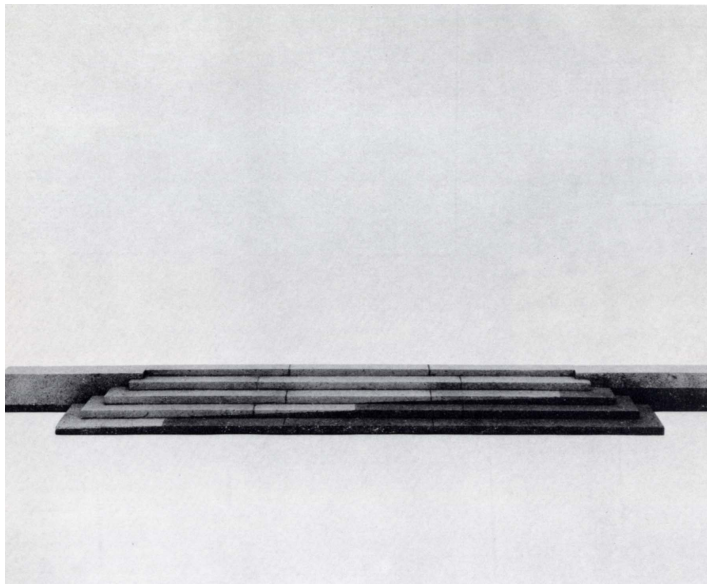


Figure 2.4. *The portion of the Corcoran steps sunk beneath the sidewalk (wood sculpture)*, 1975, reproduced in the catalogue *The Nation's Capital in Photograph*, 1976: Robert Cumming (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1976) 6; book collection of the author.



Figure 2.5. *Distracted mid-stride; spiked-heeled man kneels to read*, 1975, two gelatin silver prints; AIC, gift of Arnold and Temmie Gilbert, 1984.1568

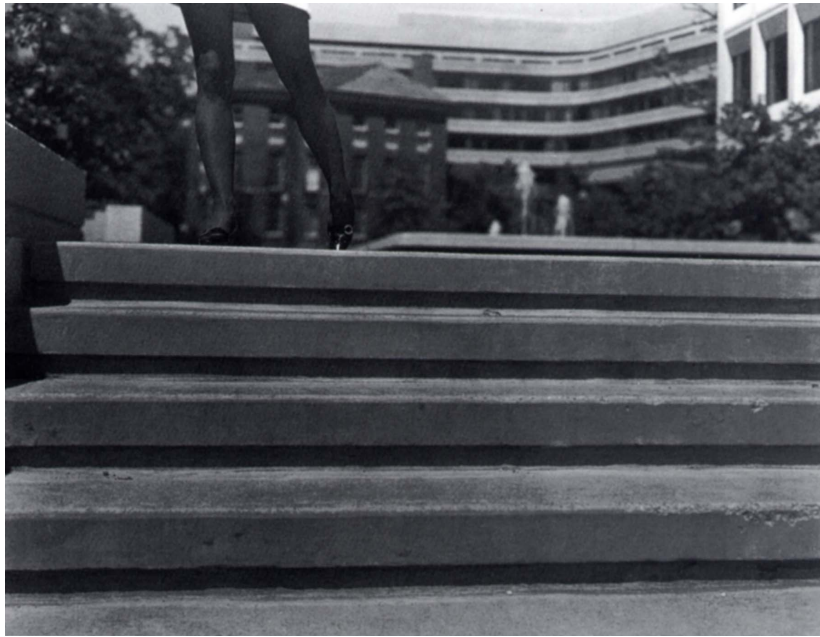


Figure 2.6. *Walking shoes turned momentarily in profile*, 1975, two gelatin silver prints; AIC, gift of Arnold and Temmie Gilbert, 1984.1569

background are buildings, trees, and a fountain blurred from a distance. The corporate-casual work pump on her right foot is contrasted to the impractical shoe-turned-sculptural object on her left. Her skirt is short; she wears black panty hose. These images suggest a woman's efforts in dressing attractively for the workplace as she maintains a professional and serious appearance. The extremity of her one useless heel, viewed from the low angle, is in explicit domineering contrast to the plodding stance, loose jeans, and rolled-up sleeves worn by the *spiked-heel man*. His conical heels with white points consign him to an oddity, a man who can only walk in the grass—though she is an oddity, too. He is a man lost in thought, distracted by a cast-off message we will never read—she is all business. These two diptychs present a connection between shoe and sculpture—a stumble—and the viewer must gyroscope their understanding to comprehend.

Cumming's work of the 1970s tugs and picks at the binding of a narrative underlining conceptual art as reactionary to modernism.<sup>59</sup> The loose thread, too alluring not to pull, is the medium of photography itself—a tool suitable to Cumming's deep appreciation for detail (made possible with his 8 x 10 view camera) and (in the 1970s) a recent inductee to the institutionalization of the museum. Fading away were the sentiments that had barred photography from the elevated status of photography-as-art—sentiments that Victor Burgin personifies in his essay, "The Absence of Presence: Conceptualism and Postmodernisms," mimicking the voice of photo-naysayers: "we can find no *trace* of an author [in the photograph]. No humanity, only *technology*—optical,

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<sup>59</sup> See, for example Victor Burgin: "The conceptualism of the late 1960s was a revolt against modernism," in "The Absence of Presence: Conceptualism and Postmodernisms," in *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Post-Modernity* (London: Macmillan Education, 1989) 29.

chemical, electronic—and there is no more fiercely defended tenet of the humanist faith than that of the inherently alien and alienating nature of modern technology.”<sup>60</sup> Burgin understands that three tenets held fast in the heyday of modernist art: the protection of art from an increasingly technologized world, the artist as one who expresses of “that which is finest in humanity” through purely visual means, and that any “questions asked of [art] may only be properly put, and answered, in its own terms.”<sup>61</sup>

According to Douglas Crimp, however, those who originally denigrated photography for its technological inherencies disengaged this critique in a panic—a forced acceptance in the face of a crisis—a sense that the authentic art object itself was “withering.”<sup>62</sup> Walter Benjamin, in his treatises on technological reproduction and photography,<sup>63</sup> Crimp implies, was right:

From the multiplication of silkscreened photographic images in the works of Rauschenberg and Warhol to the industrially manufactured, repetitively structured works of minimal sculptors, everything in radical artistic

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 34. Emphasis in original.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>62</sup> I refer here to Walter Benjamin: “what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter’s aura,” in “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” 22.

<sup>63</sup> Crimp refers to “The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), and “A Short History of Photography,” translated by Stanley Mitchell, *Screen* 13, no.1, (Spring 1972). For this thesis, I will refer to “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduction: Second Version,” for the former, fully noted in Chapter One, and, for the latter, to “Little History of Photography,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, edited by Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008) 274–298.

practice seemed to conspire in that liquidation of traditional cultural values [of which] Benjamin spoke.<sup>64</sup>

Museums followed suit. “Enter the connoisseur,” writes Crimp, to definitively locate the “presence of the artist in the [photographic] work [that] must be detectable; that is how the museum knows it has something authentic.”<sup>65</sup>

Crimp notes that this method of authentication, however, when it came to photographs, was blind to the aura Benjamin had found in a select few early specimens, citing Benjamin’s now famous observation, “the tiny spark of contingency, the here and now, with which reality has, so to speak, seared through the image-character of the photograph.”<sup>66</sup> Connoisseurs of the photograph praise the pure print and the mark of the photographer, oblivious to Benjamin’s gritty and ethereal sense of the subject burning through. The conceptual photographers of whom Crimp writes—for instance, the appropriated works of Edward Weston by Sherrie Levine and the stereotypical/ambiguous narratives of Cindy Sherman—mocked the call of the connoisseur, challenging originality and authorship.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Douglas Crimp, “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,” in *On the Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1993) 114.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>66</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” 276; quoted in Crimp, “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,” 113.

<sup>67</sup> In contrast to Crimp’s call of the connoisseur (or, perhaps, in *addition*), Jeff Wall writes that photography became “Art with a big A,” because of this, in other words, when photoconceptualism embraced photography’s own “auto-critique”: “Photography could only emerge socially as art only at the moment when its aesthetic presuppositions seemed to be undergoing a withering radical critique [by the avant-gardism of the Student Movement and the New Left], ... aimed at foreclosing any further aestheticization or ‘artification’ of the medium. Photoconceptualism led the way toward the complete acceptance of photography as art—autonomous, bourgeois, collectible art—by virtue of insisting that this medium might be privileged to be the negation of that whole idea,” in Jeff Wall, “‘Marks of Indifference’: Aspects of

Cumming approached this schism from another angle. Instead of originality and authorship, he tinkered with the portrayal of objects and accentuates the absurdities inherent to representation as he explores the boundaries of decoration and utility. His method was nearly anachronistic, in the manner of Ansel Adams', Imogene Cunningham's, and Edward Weston's (among others')—that is, the members of Group f/64, a cohort that sought unparalleled representational “truth” through the camera, favoring the large negative, contact printed, just as Cumming did. Cumming, however, was quite fascinated by his discovery that, when it comes to photography, this “truth” is always and inevitably tossed into disarray. “His mastery of photography has enabled him to carry out a critique of it with an authority lacking in the work of other conceptual artists who turned to the medium for its supposedly objective recording abilities,” writes Charles Hagen in a 1983 essay on Cumming for *Artforum*.<sup>68</sup> And with his fascination, and an absurd sensibility, Cumming went about unraveling the mysterious limits of the useless.

In fact, according to Hubert Damisch, the photograph itself is a useless object. Damisch writes “Photography creates nothing of ‘use’ (aside from its marginal and primarily scientific applications); it rather lays down the premises of an unbridled destruction of utility.”<sup>69</sup> To Damisch, photography offers a “predigested” experience of the fleeting moment—though it is precisely this paradoxical illusion of veracity and

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Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art,” in *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*, edited by Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996) 252.

<sup>68</sup> Hagen, “Robert Cumming’s Subject Object,” 39.

<sup>69</sup> Damisch, “Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image,” 72.



corresponding uselessness that elevates photography to the category of art.<sup>70</sup> Damisch writes that, “photography aspires to art each time, in practice, it calls into question its essence and its historical roles, each time it uncovers the contingent character of these things, soliciting the producer rather than the consumer of images.”<sup>71</sup> It is when the viewer recognizes oddities and ambiguities in a photograph that Damisch claims something extraordinary, on the level of art, occurs. Cumming’s manufactured absurdities allow for this kind of critical experience of vision. Oddities abound, frustrating easy consumption.

Cumming’s photographs sometimes entailed weeks of work to craft what he felt was the lopsided anti-equation that was his preparation, building, execution, and printing of elaborately planned scenarios.<sup>72</sup> He writes:

One of the things that is absurd about my photographs is the proportion of work involved, in other words, why would anyone reconstruct this entire reality for such small gain? ... There is kind of an imbalance between the initial idea and the eventual execution.<sup>73</sup>

Cumming sketched many of his ideas on the leftover 8 x 10-inch rectangles cut from the mounting boards he used to frame photographs.<sup>74</sup> Working with a fine-point Rapidograph pen, he would begin in the upper left corner of the board and cover the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> See Chapter One, footnote 44, of this thesis.

<sup>73</sup> Cumming in Alinder, “An Interview with Robert Cumming,” 54.

<sup>74</sup> Cumming, *The Sketch Boards for Fabricated Photos: 1973-1979*, 1.

space with postage-stamp-size schematics accompanied by notes, captions, and instructions.<sup>75</sup> (Figure 2.7) One of these tiny drawings on *Sketchboard page #5* from 1974, depicts a cross section of a flat of earth in the center of which appears to be a small pond with a trawler floating in the middle. (Figure 2.8) Subsequent to this sketch, Cumming produced *Toy boat afloat on a small pond, upon setting sail, sinks reflection* (1974). (Figure 2.9)

As implied by the title, *Toy boat* shows a before and after scenario. In the first image, there is a small white boat, constructed with a few pieces of boat-shaped wood glued together and painted white, afloat on a gutter-like strip of water surrounded by concrete and industrial piping. The boat's reflection appears mirrored on the surface of the water. In the second image the boat is reflection-less. Instead, an identical little white boat, upside down in the clear water, lies sunken at the bottom of this pond. Apparently, what seemed a reflection in the first image was, in reality, the second boat attached to the bottom of the floating boat, just under the surface of the water.

What one is supposed to see in this little narrative is that the "reflection" of the first boat has somehow severed from its mate, falling to the bottom of the "pond," like a cast shadow walking away from its figure. It is an impossible scenario; the split of the mirrored image from its referent does not trick the viewer. However, if the viewer had not seen the second image, she may have been fooled by the first. The severed "reflection" of the second image reveals the illusion. On closer inspection, the viewer sees that Cumming inserted an upright dowel underwater to hold the "reflection" in place,

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

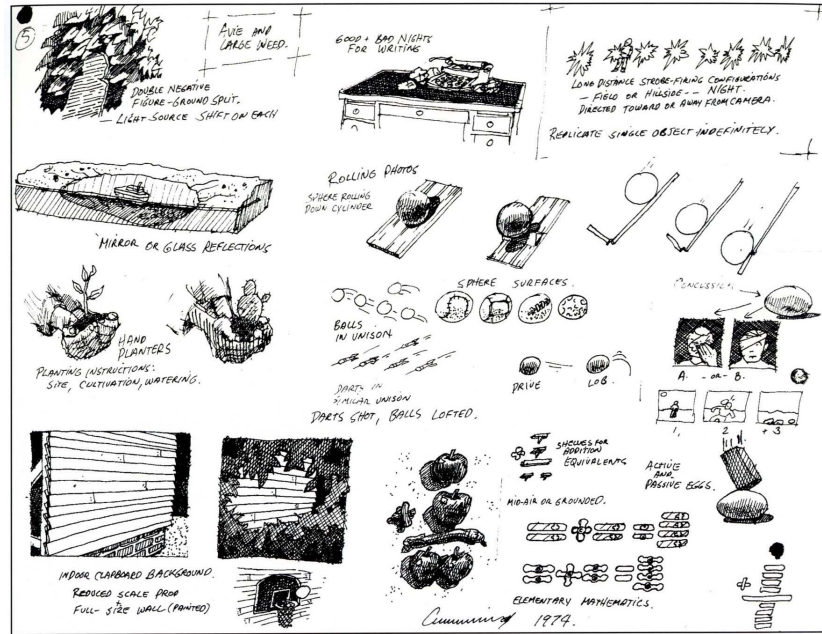


Figure 2.7. Page #5, 1974, reproduced in *The Sketch Boards for Fabricated Photos: 1973-1979* (Boston: Howard Yezerski Gallery, 2001) np; book collection of the author.

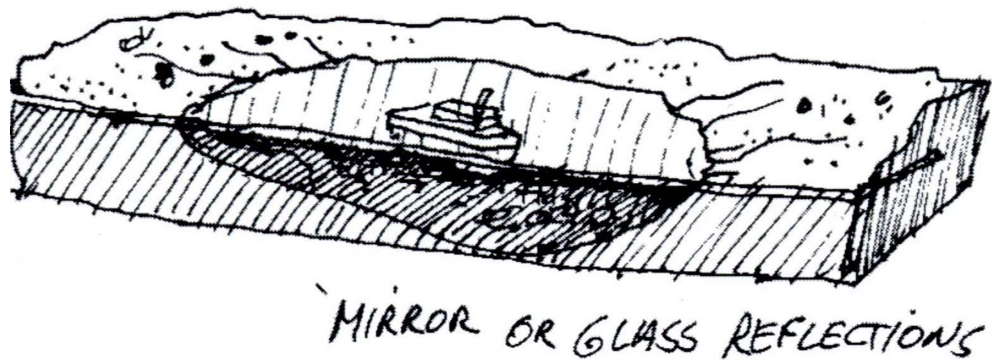


Figure 2.8. *Mirror or glass reflections*, Page #5, 1974, detail, reproduced in *The Sketch Boards for Fabricated Photos: 1973-1979* (Boston: Howard Yezerski Gallery, 2001) np; book collection of the author.



Figure 2.9. *Toy boat afloat in a small pond; upon setting sail, sinks reflection*, 1974, two gelatin silver prints; MoMA, gift of Celeste G. Bartos, 2.1984.a-b

tucked under the first boat. Cumming removed the dowel in the second image and left it in plain view on the pavement in the lower right corner of the frame, slightly out of focus. This dowel becomes significant once the illusion has been revealed.

The story of this diptych expands outwards from its title: a small toy trawler set sail in a small oblong pond and, as it did so, its reflection sank to the bottom of the pond. It is an incongruous and illogical story—in other words, absurd. Of course the reflection did not sever from its companion, for that is quite against the law of physics. Here the viewer stops, looks again, and reassembles what visual information she has at hand to reassess what she has just seen. Cumming has included everything the viewer needs to fully understand the story: the boat, the water, and—another boat, and a dowel.

Often, as above, Cumming's photographs bear titles that tell their story, such as, *Distracted in mid-stride; spiked-heeled man kneels to read (John)*, *Walking shoes turned momentarily in profile (Denise in Heels)*, and *Toy boat afloat on a small pond; upon setting sail, sinks reflection*. They serve as captions. Cumming sets up a complicated discursive relationship to these titles as well as between images in his diptychs; he begins to answer the question "*what is it?*" but then sends the viewer off with clues to a mystery.

Roland Barthes in "Rhetoric of the Image," delineates between this kind of caption and those that serve to "anchor" the viewer to explication. All images are "polysemous," Barthes writes, "they imply, underlying their signifiers, a 'floating chain' of signifieds, the reader is able to choose some and ignore others."<sup>76</sup> Captions focus

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<sup>76</sup> Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 39.

attention, “anchoring” meaning within the image. He writes, “the denominative function corresponds exactly to an *anchorage* of all the possible (denoted) meanings of the object by recourse to a nomenclature.”<sup>77</sup> Barthes acknowledges, however, that there is another kind of caption, that of “relay,” of which Cumming’s titles are reminiscent. “Here text ... and image stand in a complementary relationship,” writes Barthes, “the words, in the same way as the images, are fragments of a more general syntagm and the unity of the message is realized at a higher level, that of the story, the anecdote, the diegesis.”<sup>78</sup>

Cumming exploits the “relay” of caption and confuses the discursive relationship between caption and photograph most explicitly in his artist’s books produced throughout the 1970s. Inspired by Ed Ruscha’s books of the 1960s,<sup>79</sup> Cumming’s first book of photographs is entitled *Picture Fictions* and was self-published in 1971. Following this,<sup>80</sup> he produced a series of three books that combined photographs, drawings, and text.

Cumming explains:

I see the three books as a trilogy. One is about, almost, an erotic fantasy [*A Training in the Arts* (1972)], the other one is boring suburban banality [*A Discourse on Domestic Disorder* (1975)], and the third one is a little bit heavier [*Interruptions in Landscape and Logic* (1977)]—which was

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>79</sup> Cumming, interview with the author, October 18, 2011.

<sup>80</sup> —and after a book entitled *The Weight of Franchise Meat*, one that Cumming writes is “one of those things I’ve always regretted putting into print. I burned all but one copy in hopes that no one would ever see it”; from an e-mail to the author, May 15, 2011.

unfinished at the time of this video interview]. Although it's about war, I think it's primarily about the breakdown of logic.<sup>81</sup>

All of the books employ captions to relay information out from the images. In *A Training in the Arts*, for instance, a Harlequin novel-esque tale about two wealthy brothers of an eccentric family and their educations, Cumming intentionally subverts the caption directive by severing the circuit between text, photograph, and caption. He plucks captions from the text that seem appropriate to the photograph, but the photographs are ill-suited to the text as a whole. For instance, a photograph on page twenty depicts four nude figures pressing their fingers into the left rear cheek of another nude figure who bends down and away from the camera. (Figure 2.10) The caption reads: "They were arranged (rather planted) in the soft white base like so many tiny cylinders defining the circular perimeter; cogs or spokes in a little wheel with a pliable hub."<sup>82</sup> This caption is pulled from text on the previous page; it is a florid description of twenty-five candles on a birthday cake. Placed under the photograph of nudes, however, these words could be describing fingers planted in soft flesh or the spoke-like circularity of their arms arranged around the rear end of the bent-over figure. For Cumming, that the caption be right and wrong as well as right *or* wrong, depending on how you read it, is relevant—just as the image itself will seldom represent exactly that which it signifies in reality.

In the second book of the trilogy, *A Discourse on Domestic Disorder*, he incorporates photographs that either refer to, or were inspired by, what he describes as the

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<sup>81</sup> Cumming in *Video Data Bank Presents Robert Cumming*.

<sup>82</sup> Cumming, *A Training in the Arts* (Canada: The Coach House Press, 1972), text: 19; photograph with same text as caption: 20.



Figure 2.10. Reproduced in *A Training in the Arts* (Orange, CA: Robert Cumming; Canada: The Coach House Press 1972, 1977) 20; caption: “They were arranged (rather planted) in the soft white base like so many tiny cylinders defining the circular perimeter; cogs or spokes in a little wheel with a pliable hub.” Text for caption appears on page 19; book collection of the author.



“typical disasters” that every child encounters while growing up in a domestic environment.<sup>83</sup> One such incident is related in the text: “My mom had just finished washing and waxing the kitchen floor and she left the bucket of dirty water on a chair. My brother and I were fooling around and he fell into the chair, and the whole thing spilled back onto the floor.”<sup>84</sup> The preceding two-page spread is a diptych depicting two angles of a wooden chair balanced on the corner of one leg, hovering diagonally off-kilter. (See Figure x.2) An empty bucket floats in the air as if launched from the seat. It is night, outdoors on the grass, and tall and squat stakes lodged in the ground secure a series of wires that hold the entire scene in stasis. As is usual for Cumming’s tableaux, the lamps and their stands that light the scene are clearly visible within the frame.

The caption for this diptych reads *Two views of a major spill*,<sup>85</sup> which is the title to which artist Judy Fiskin refers in her description of the work for a short survey in *Art Issues* entitled “Trompe l’Œil for Our Time.” Here, she calls the work “trompe l’œil manqué.” She writes; “we might think of this as a crime-scene photograph, the offense being the production of a convincing but phony reality. Whether the crime has already happened or is about to occur, we will never know. Cumming always withholds the crucial evidence.”<sup>86</sup> Fiskin’s commentary is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s writing, sixty years prior, in the “Work of Art” essay on the “crime scenes” of Atget’s

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<sup>83</sup> Cumming, interview with the author, October 8, 2012.

<sup>84</sup> Cumming, *A Discourse on Domestic Disorder* (Canada: The Coach House Press, 1975) 10.

<sup>85</sup> The diptych is entitled *Mishap of little consequence* in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and *Mishap of minor consequence* in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

<sup>86</sup> Judy Fiskin, “Trompe l’Œil for Our Time.” *Art Issues*, no. 40 (December 1995) 29.

photographs of empty Parisian streets. Atget's images, as opposed to Cumming's manufactured setups, are documentary works, yet both Fiskin and Benjamin are responding to the unique power of the inanimate to effect apperception in unreasonable ways. Benjamin writes:

In photography, exhibition value begins to drive back cult value on all fronts. But cult value does not give way without resistance. It falls back to a last entrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait is central to early photography ... But as the human being withdraws from the photographic image, exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to cult value. To have given this development its local habitation constitutes the unique significance of Atget, who, around 1900, took photographs of deserted Paris streets. It has justly been said that he photographed them like scenes of crimes. A crime scene, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographic records begin to be evidence in the historical trial [*Prozess*]. This constitutes their hidden political significance. They demand a specific kind of reception. Free-floating contemplation is no longer appropriate to them. They unsettle the viewer; he feels challenged to find a particular way to approach them.”<sup>87</sup>

Fiskin and Benjamin are both referring to the “specific kind of reception,” in which “free-floating contemplation is no longer appropriate.” Fiskin, in writing that Cumming “always withholds the crucial evidence,” is pointing to how Cumming has replaced evidence with implication through objects. The images labeled *Two views of a major spill* indeed depict a bucket flying off of a chair in the midst of tipping over, but, of

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<sup>87</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” 27. Translation in original.

course, there is no motion implied in the image.<sup>88</sup> The scenario is set up outside, contrary to the text, and, though the text in the book mentions “bucket,” “chair,” and “spill,” the other key subjects, the brother who knocked into the chair and the dirty water that spilled, are missing in these photographs—just as the subject is missing in Atget’s “scenes of crimes” on the Paris streets.

The illogical and incongruous image, such those of as *Toy boat afloat*, or *Mishap*, is reinforced by the level of serious intent found somewhere in their making. “Often, things I do, which I think of as serious, people find amusing,” says Cumming in an interview with James Alinder:

I don’t like art that tells jokes. I hope my own work deals with wit and irony instead of simple joke-making ... When I deal with humor in my photographs I think I am partly laughing at the quirks of my own mind. I tend to over-describe things and to make everything overly logical.<sup>89</sup>

Cumming’s “overly logical” veers off into the illogical. Alinder asks: “Is it overly logical to attach a flashlight to a piece of wood, add a rubber-band powered motor and run it around a swimming pool?” (Figure 2.11, and see Figure 2.2) Cumming replies, “Now that’s absurd.”<sup>90</sup>

The absurd often leads to funny, as many of Cumming’s works have been labeled, and the absurd also circumvents what Cumming perceives to be the banality of the

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<sup>88</sup> As was the case with much of Cumming’s large-format photographs, long exposures would obviate any motion at all.

<sup>89</sup> Cumming, in Alinder, “An Interview with Robert Cumming,” 53.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

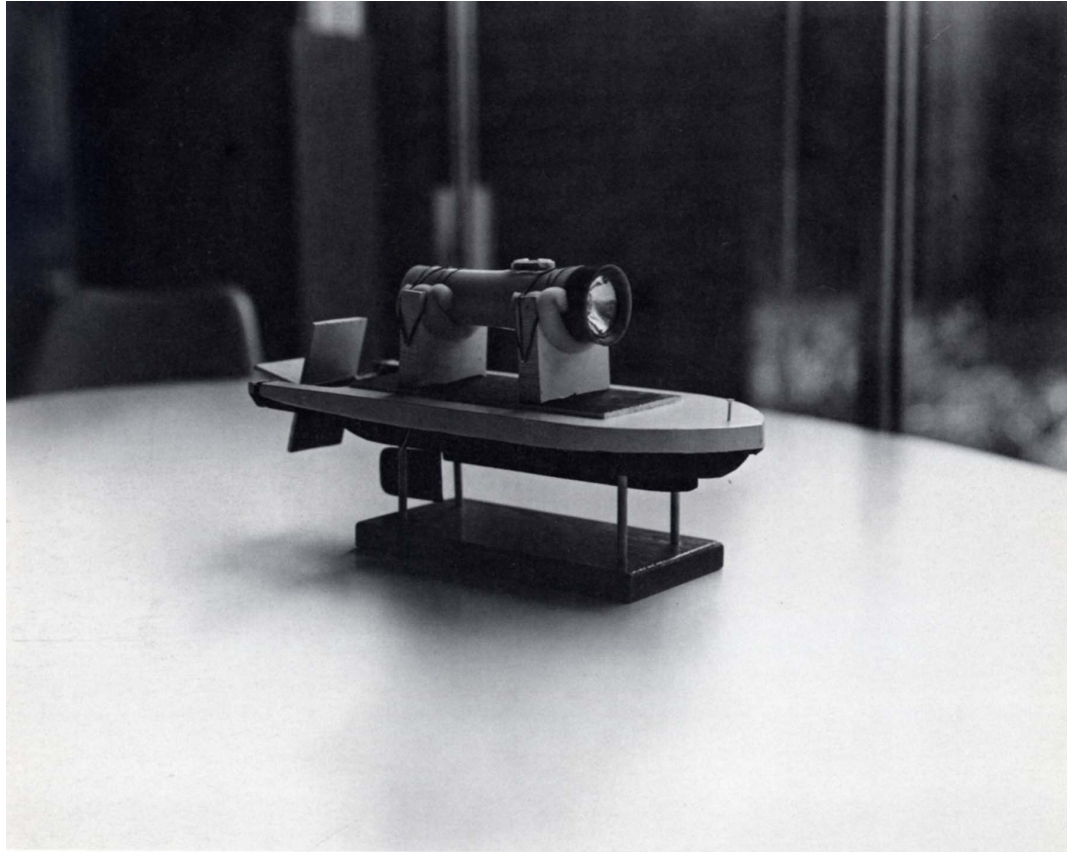


Figure 2.11. *Flashlight boat*, 1975, gelatin silver print; SFMOMA, gift of Arnold and Temmie Gilbert, 84.1755.A

straight joke, intellectualizing its making. Simple jokes would be too easy, and too straightforward, for Cumming. As he says, “I think a lot underneath the humor is about perceptions, different kinds of perceptions, and that’s mainly what I’m after. I don’t even think about the humor anymore, it’s just something that happens without me even thinking about it.”<sup>91</sup> And meanwhile, between the humor and the absurdity of Cumming’s elaborate arrangements, the objects exist as mere objects, exalted through the camera.

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<sup>91</sup> Cumming in Cumming and Sweetman, *Video Data Bank Presents Robert Cumming*.

### Chapter Three

#### The Difficulties of Nonsense: Humor

Humor underlines a connection between one that laughs and that which is funny. Henri Bergson writes in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, “How, indeed, should it come about that this particular logical relation, as soon as it is perceived, contracts, expands, and shakes our limbs, whilst all other relations leave the body unaffected?”<sup>92</sup> Laughter, as an involuntary reaction, signals that one is paying attention; it means that one is in on the joke. Bergson also writes, “laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary.”<sup>93</sup>

When Cumming began imagining and constructing elaborate tableaux and odd scenarios and photographing them singly and as diptychs and triptychs, his work was received with genuine amusement. In *Art in America*, Edit deAk writes in response to a show of Cumming’s photographs at the Gibson Gallery in 1975, “his serial photo pieces are in themselves rather mundane themes to click a camera at—a room, balls, fireplaces—but they are filled with what might be called abstract sight gags.” William Wilson, in the *Los Angeles Times*, of an upcoming week-long installation at the former Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art in 1976, writes, “Robert Cumming is, for this observer, the funniest photo-to-concept artist around.” Ronald J. Onorato, in an *Artforum* review of Cumming’s work at the University of Kingston, Rhode Island in 1978 writes that “some of his situations are ... visual ‘one-liners,’ obvious visual puns that pale

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<sup>92</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, translated by by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1911) 7.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

quickly ... however, the work suggests his role is more than that of a visual punster.” And Grace Glueck, in a *New York Times* review upon seeing Cumming’s photographs at MoMA in 1998, writes, “Mr. Cumming’s laid-back, anything goes approach struck for a while at the very roots of serious photography.”

Yet humor, ultimately, carries with it a more significant connection than implied by mere “one-liners,” “a laid-back ... approach,” and “gags.” Cumming did not like easy jokes.<sup>94</sup> His wit draws the viewer into the comedy, imbuing objects with intention just as he subverts that intention by revealing the machinations of his setups. To understand this humor ignites the intellect in a connection with the image—one of communication.

The first line of Simon Critchley’s book *On Humor* reads: “Jokes tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world”<sup>95</sup>— a somewhat violent opening line. Words included in Critchley’s subsequent first paragraph include: “disjunction,” “defeats,” “upside-down,” “broken,” “turned inside out,” and “tatters.” This is hardly an auspicious semantic set. Laughter designates change, and it is sometimes called forth violently. Prolonged, uncontrollable laughter—should we be so lucky—can cause a sweet ache, moving one to put their hand on their belly in acknowledgement. Laughter signals a shift from whatever immediately preceded that laugh. This surprise, shock, and rupture inherent to comedy is what allies it closely to the tragic. Walter Benjamin, with marked sartorial flair, writes in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, “Comedy—or more precisely: the pure joke—is the essential inner side of mourning which from time to time,

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<sup>94</sup> As discussed in Chapter Two.

<sup>95</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, Thinking in Action (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), 1.

like the lining of a dress at the hem or the lapel, makes its presence felt.”<sup>96</sup> The tragic disassociates; it triggers the flight drive of “fight or flight.” Comedy, despite an initial rupture, escorts the viewer back around, when it is successful, connecting them, steeling them for the “fight,” having something to root for in a tragedy.

And tragedy in comedy—this is a natural as well. These moments of shift, the lapse within the torn hole of our “usual predictions,” the “disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke,” the “defeat” of our expectations, the “upside-down” and “inside out” qualities of the comic, the “broken” chains of causality, and “rationality left in tatters”—again, all from Critchley’s book *On Humour*<sup>97</sup>—are the tragic within the comic and are embedded in the preconscious experience of the funny. That momentary instability, prior to a conscious recognition of humor, ushers with it significance in laughter.

Consider, in contrast, Larry Clark’s series of black and white photographs created between 1968-1971, *Tulsa*. Clark, working just prior to Cumming’s photographic practice, dealt a somber mood in this portfolio that depicts unfortunates, drug addicts, and lost souls. In one image, *Accidental Gunshot Wound* (1971) a long haired and bearded man writhes in a bed, his corduroy pants drawn down to just above his knees to reveal a small dark and bloody hole in his thigh. (Figure 3.1) Another long haired figure sits on

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<sup>96</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, translated by John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998) 125–126.

<sup>97</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, 1.





Figure 3.1. Larry Clark, *Untitled*, 1970, printed 1980, gelatin silver print, from the portfolio *Tulsa*, 1970, printed 1980; LACMA, gift of Barry Lowen, M.81.302.35; referred to in text with alternate title: *Accidental Gunshot Wound*.

the edge of the bed facing away from the man, his face obscured in the shadow of his hair as he holds the fleshy part of one palm to his chin in an expression of grief or nausea. A small handgun lies ostensibly spent, flat on a chair next to the bed, pointed off frame and away from both figures. This is a photograph of an accident, but, formally, there is nothing accidental about the image. The shock of this image sets the mind reeling about what just happened—how it happened, why it happened—but all the viewer knows is what she can glean from the rest of Clark's series. Asking *what*, *how*, and *why* takes the frozen moment of the photograph and moves backwards and inward. There is little possibility for creating new meaning. These subjects are enacting something universal, as if on a stage.<sup>98</sup> This is what makes it a compelling image. It is as easy to walk away from this image as it is to get lost in them. The serious, by nature, has the appearance of an impenetrable state. Clark's photographs from *Tulsa* carry a great weight. The viewer adds to this weight with their pity, and then moves on. She moves through the shock to find some essence, an essence that has already been manufactured within her many layers of consciousness as some kind of universal meaning. But this essence is not something new. The image works because the viewer is able to find a continuous vein of familiar recognition, likely followed by compassion. This looking is a form of image consumption that works in a very different way than that of looking at something humorous.

Cumming's diptych *Iron/grass; iron/guns* (1971), on the other hand, depicts two faux-candid portraits of an unpretentious domestic object, an iron, along with three

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<sup>98</sup> A reference to Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One in: On Comedy*, Short Circuits (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008).

shotguns. (Figure 3.2) It is an image in which Cumming has combined objects that have no business together. Through anthropomorphism and visual association, this image bites at the heels of certain domestic and social structures that are ripe for rethinking. A lone iron is perched in the grass, its vintage cloth-covered electrical cord snakes off like a black- and white-speckled serpent behind it. Its iron-face has just been lifted from the grass, leaving an iron-shaped flat of turf in front of it. In the second frame, the iron is indoors—on an ironing board. Between the iron and the ironing board are three rifles laying snugly together, muzzles meeting at the round-pointed end of the board.

The incongruity of the arrangement arrests signification, and then both infuses and defuses the signs resulting from that process of signifying. The iron, a symbol of domesticity and the feminine in the 1970s, has been given a dangerous edge, connoting a silver cobra rearing up from its prey—the patch of turf burnt to a crisp. Opposite, the rifles have been emasculated on the face of an ironing board, a padded piece of furniture whose potential offense might likely be a pinch on your finger as you fold it back into the closet. The duality of these associations challenges the assumption that one can only see one thing at one time—cord or snake, board or rack. Dissolving singularity rouses attention and fosters connection with the image, settling up the experience with humor. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud codifies a theory that laughter is a discharge of energy resulting in a pleasurable response. Energy is relieved that would otherwise work towards repressing psychical activity. “The pleasure [tendentious humor] generates, whether it is the pleasure of play or the lifting of inhibition, we can in all cases



Figure 3.2. *Iron/grass; iron/guns*, 1971, two gelatin silver prints; reproduced in Frédéric Paul, *Robert Cumming: L'Œuvre Photographique, 1969-80* [*Robert Cumming: Photographic Works 1969-80*] (Limoges, France: F.R.A.C. Limousin, 1994) 56; book collection of the author.

derive from the savings in psychical expenditure.”<sup>99</sup> Additionally, “abstract or innocuous” humor, as opposed to “tendentious” or potentially hurtful humor, works as an envelope or “clothing” [*Einkleidung*] in which more substantial thoughts are kept.<sup>100</sup> “*He not only didn’t believe in ghosts, he wasn’t even afraid of them,*” offers Freud as an example of an intellectual and innocuous witticism, and, quoting Lessing: “Not all are free, who mock their chains.”<sup>101</sup> Freud continues:

As [the examples above demonstrate], an innocuous, i.e., un-tendentious, witticism can also be very rich in content [*gehaltvoll*], and say something worthwhile. However, the content [*Gehalt*] of a joke is separate from the joke, and is the content of the thought, which is expressed as a joke by a particular contrivance. Indeed, just as clockmakers are accustomed to fit a particularly fine mechanism with a precious case, it may also be so with jokes that the finest feats of joke-making are used to clothe thoughts that are the richest in content.<sup>102</sup>

This “content,” when separated from the joke itself, is valuable to the receiver, and, in understanding that value, the receiver has a more significant connection with the joke as a whole.

Cumming’s friend, onetime roommate, and undergraduate and MFA cohort, William Wegman, developed a large portion of his photographic practice around his

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<sup>99</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, translated by Joyce Crick (New York: Penguin Books, 2003) 132.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 87. Translation in original.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis in the translation; *Nathan Der WeiseI*, by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, first printed 1791 (IV.iv.2757–8.). Emphasis in original.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* Translation in original.

ubiquitous “Wegman dogs,” Man Ray and Fay Ray. Whereas Wegman played on the animals’ perceptually flawless performance in scenarios directed by him, Cumming rarely relied on anything perceptually flawless in his photography of the 1970s.<sup>103</sup> Within his constructions and fabricated scenarios, and by intentionally leaving clues to their construction, Cumming encourages the viewer to discover the machinations of his manufactured contingencies within his photographs.

Wegman’s work is certainly funny—perhaps more explicitly geared to get laughs than Cumming’s. In Wegman’s video *Spelling Lesson* (1973-74), for instance, he sits with Man Ray at a table, while explaining and tapping at a notebook in front of him that Man Ray has spelled the words “park” and “out” correctly, but that he misspelled “beach”—as in the sandy place to which one goes to chase tennis balls—as “B-E-E-C-H.” (Figure 3.3) The dog Man Ray, sitting in a chair adjacent to Wegman, looks at Wegman attentively and occasionally cocks his head, just as a human might do if he was having trouble understanding. The humor comes easily, as Man Ray’s “performance” is flawless—as is Wegman’s. The dog has fallen prey to human folly; the infliction of the

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<sup>103</sup> As mentioned in Chapter One, upon arriving in California, Cumming began to amass a collection of slides of random images he took of Orange County and Los Angeles streets, architecture, and landscapes—things that struck him as visually stimulating with no intervention of his own—though he never intended to exhibit these images (from a conversation with the author, May 3, 2012). Also, in 1977 he was offered the opportunity to wander the back lot of Universal Studios to photograph whatever he liked where he found settings that echoed his own constructions—to be discussed in the Conclusion of this thesis. He has also been working on a collection of photographs of found-nautical architecture since 1968. These more documentary-based projects are secondary to the bulk of fabricated work that Cumming executed from 1970–1978.



Figure 3.3. William Wegman, still from *Spelling Lesson*, 1973–1974, video;  
<http://www.wegmanworld.com/gallery/works.html> > video / 1970 - 1977.

English language onto the innocence of a dog makes us smile. The question becomes, *does Man Ray really know what that man is saying?* The dog's performance makes it seem that he does—we may never know for sure. But he is a dog.

Whereas Cumming consistently uses humor to expose and celebrate humorously the ability to create illusion with photography, Wegman oftentimes hides his methods, intentionally foregrounding the illusion itself, rather than exposing the gang wires, pulleys, and scaffolding behind. Cumming has said that Wegman once asked him why he gave away all of his tricks within his images<sup>104</sup>—Cumming would go so far as to occasionally exhibit the sculptural props he used in his photographs in a gallery show. One such prop was a 16 x 16-inch piece of wood included in *A Discourse on Domestic Disorder*, captioned *An enlargement* next to a much smaller piece of wood captioned *The ruination of Easter Vacation; nail in a 2" by 2"* Cumming exhibited this work as *Potential hazard — demonstration nail in a 2" x 2"* (1975) with the large block of wood, proving that it was not really an enlargement. (Figure 3.4) The oversized nail is a broom handle Cumming carved, appended with a flat head, and painted.

Wegman insisted this was a big mistake. He said Cumming should *hide* all his props in a warehouse somewhere—totally obfuscate the tricks he was using in his practice—and then when he died, all of the ingenious things he had used to trick the eye would be revealed. “But I was more interested in revealing the difference between an object and a photograph,” Cumming says, all the “funny little differences.” He wanted people to know when they saw his works—at least eventually as they looked closer—

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<sup>104</sup> Cumming, interview with the author, October 8, 2011.



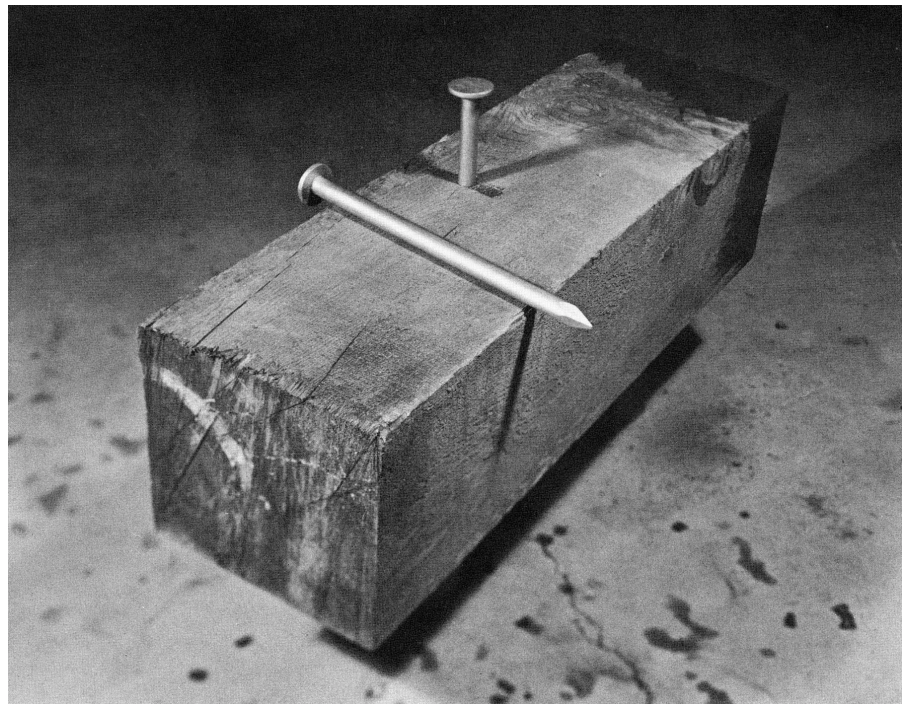
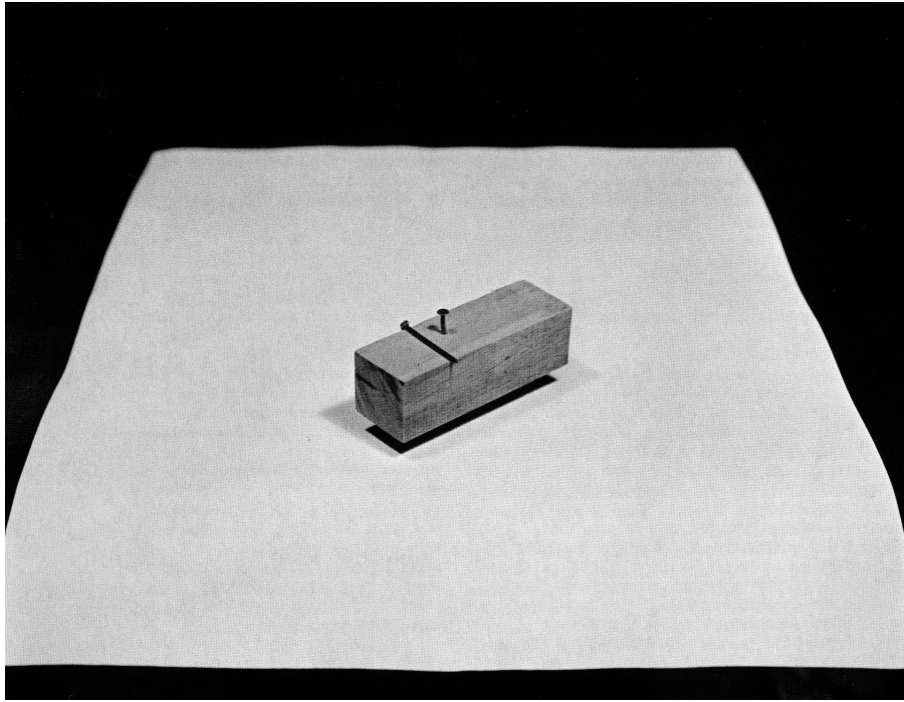


Figure 3.4. *Potential hazard—demonstration nail in a 2" x 2"*, 1975, two gelatin silver prints; AIC, gift of Arnold and Temmie Gilbert, 1984.1567

“that it was this bogus set up.”<sup>105</sup> Cumming engages this kind of discursive relationship with the viewer. His practice is more communication than lecture. “I was really interested in perception and [the photographs] were like perceptual exercises.”<sup>106</sup> And to this end, his perceptual exercises are often as humorous as Wegman’s explicit humorous performance.

The diptych *Coffee cup, tea cup, and me-cup/coffee cups, tea cups, and she-cups* (1972), depicts a Formica kitchen table, cluttered on one side with 1970s breakfast staples: a jar of Maxim freeze-dried instant coffee, a box of Lipton tea, a sugar bowl, and kitchen tools. (Figure 3.5) On the other side of the table sits a coffee cup with a spoon in it, a tea cup on a saucer with a tea tag hanging over its lip, and two arms reaching into the frame from the upper right resting on a white towel and cupped together to hold a small pool of water. There are small paper labels next to each item, carefully inscribed in an outlined font: “Coffee Cup,” “Tea Cup,” “and a Me Cup.” Next to the tea cup and saucer is a spoon. In the convexity of the spoon there is a right-side up reflection of the figure attached to those arms. (Figure 3.6) Off-frame, wearing a white t-shirt, blurry, but perceptibly meeting the camera’s gaze, Cumming has cupped himself in the bowl of the spoon, just as his cupped hands make a bowl—the “me” in *me-cup*.

In the second image of *Coffee cups*, the entire table is now cluttered. Next to the staples are crowded three coffee cups filled with coffee, labeled “Coffee Cups,” spoons intact and at the ready, four tea cups with tea in them, labeled “Tea Cups,” and a white

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.



Figure 3.5. *Coffee cup, tea cup, and me-cup/coffee cups, tea cups, and she-cups*, 1972, two gelatin silver prints; MFAH, gift of Arnold and Temmie Gilbert, 84.804.A, .B



Figure 3.6. *Coffee cup, tea cup, and me-cup. Coffee cups, tea cups, and she-cups, 1972, detail.*

brassier, convex cups propped up by their own padding, back straps connected and positioned to encircle the label “She Cups.”

The diptych is a visual pun, “just a play on words,” according to Cumming.<sup>107</sup> For Jonathan Culler, a verbal pun offers a world incomprehensible and chaotic in its order, but in an order nonetheless.<sup>108</sup> Culler writes:

[Puns become] the disquieting spectacle of a functioning of language where boundaries—between sounds, between sound and letter, between meanings—count for less than one might imagine and where supposedly discrete meanings threaten to sink into fluid subterranean signifieds too undefinable to call concepts.<sup>109</sup>

Culler, like Jean-Luc Nancy in his essay on wit (or *Witz*), “*Menstruum Universale*,” maintains that the slippage of meaning in a pun is proof of the arbitrariness of the sign, and therefore freeing, by favoring context-bound interpretation at the expense of locked-down meaning.<sup>110</sup>

The visual pun *Coffee cup, tea cup* depicts items that initially seem to have recognizable and stable meanings, but that are combined to imply a sudden instability. This instability, despite the silliness of the humor, intellectualizes the aesthetic by prompting the viewer to mentally reorder and realign their associations. The instability

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<sup>107</sup> Cumming, e-mail with the author, April 20, 2012.

<sup>108</sup> Jonathan Culler, “The Call of the Phoneme: Introduction,” in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, edited by Jonathan Culler (Oxford; New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988) 8.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>110</sup> See *Ibid.*, and Jean-Luc Nancy, “*Menstruum Universale*,” in *The Birth to Presence*, translated by Paula Model, Meridian (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 248–265.

undermines certain social structures—the proper presentation of tea and coffee, and the conventional privacy of lingerie—and provokes the viewer to reassess the objects. To experience *Coffee cup, tea cup* as funny is to work one’s way through an otherwise placid set of signifiers that have become unhinged when placed together. Cumming adds incongruity and a speck of confusion to an otherwise normal scenario and encourages the viewer to apprehend the multivalence of meaning. Cups equal cups, equal cups, *as well as* cupped hands, *and* bra cups.

In her philosophy of comedy, *The Odd One In*, Alenka Zupančič writes that, in comedy, “the subject is (or becomes) the universal, the essential, the absolute,” whereas, “in the epic, the subject narrates the universal, the essential, the absolute” and, “in tragedy, the subject enacts or stages the universal, the essential, the absolute.”<sup>111</sup> This “universal,” “essential,” and “absolute,” to Zupančič, is Hegel’s unattainable spiritual Other, a product of humankind’s own compulsion for understanding in a world that is frequently confusing. Ironically, claims Zupančič, humankind knows that they have invented this universal Other, yet will not give up on believing in its existence.<sup>112</sup> This, writes Zupančič, is the embedded failure of the Enlightenment—the discovery that the *universal* was humankind’s creation while remaining powerless in the face of belief systems that maintain that the *universal* still exists.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Zupančič, *The Odd One in: On Comedy*, 27-28.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

This universal is the macro-version of the millions of micro-explanations that humans create to maintain understanding when confronted with specific phenomena beyond their control—when one encounters chance, coincidence, or synchronicity. Robert Cumming creates these contingencies through incongruities and punning images. And for a fleeting moment, these images obliterate what is expected; these images are both what they are, and a unique association, intellectually understood by the viewer. These contingencies are real, they are personal, and they are universal. That one may smile, or laugh, when confronted with this chance association, means that the connection has been made.

## Conclusion

### A Language of Rebuilt Reality

During the last session of a night class on photography taught by Robert Cumming, an older student who had blatantly neglected to do any work asked if he could have a word with his instructor. He wanted to know about a studio visit—not to his own, but to Cumming’s. The student was Albert Dorskind, a vice president of Universal Studios, and a passionate photography collector.

Cumming agreed, and invited him to his home and studio in Orange, California, at Dorskind’s convenience. After the visit, Dorskind, pleased with Cumming’s work, invited him to visit *his* studio—Universal Studios—and to bring his 8 x 10 camera. Cumming took him up on the offer and, for half of 1977, periodically wandered the back lot of the studio among stage sets and production bungalows, photographing as much as he cared to, dodging union photographers (he was there *sub rosa*, until the project was finished), and scaring up stray cats from beneath hollow scenery.<sup>114</sup> The project was the most involved documentary-based commission that Cumming undertook in the 1970s. He shot more than a hundred negatives and chose twenty-five for a portfolio entitled *Studio Still Lives* (1978). Cumming wrote in a letter to Dorskind:

I think [the twenty-five images intended for the portfolio are] the best possible selection. It shows the sound stages from afar as an environment, ‘dollies-in’ closer to the individual sets, then further [in], to a half-dozen smaller objects, two formal portraits and a pseudo-portrait (the disaster

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<sup>114</sup> Cumming in “An Interview with Richard Armstrong,” 155; and Cumming, “Essay,” to portfolio *Studio Still Lives*, *Robert Cumming, Universal Studios*, (Los Angeles: Universal Studios, 1977).



figures). It's a selection that has to do with my own core sensibilities across several media—from writing, publishing, painting & sculpture<sup>115</sup> (Figures 4.1–4.4)

While working on Universal Studios project, Cumming realized how eerily apposite this experience was to his early affinity for collecting continuity stills from early Hollywood films.<sup>116</sup> (See Figure i.4) Though he does not explicitly mirror the two experiences against each other in the portfolio essay for *Studio Still Lifes*, the connection is clear:

The photographs in *Studio Still Lifes* are involutions; documents of the hardware employed in the ultimate illusion. Like lessons in perceptual acuity, the objects and sets are seen in their real as opposed to their screen contexts. The energy and capital expended by the studios on even the most trivial detail is sometimes astounding. The 'still' photograph [such as those in the *Studio Still Lifes* portfolio] rivets them for inspection. It fastens on the split-second rather than speeding over it... the fragments one can never focus on in their true filmic context. After all, how is one to learn from illusion, unless one is 'on' to the fabrication, the means by which our perceptions have been misled?<sup>117</sup>

Cumming, himself, had “learned.” While roaming the back lot of Universal, Cumming began to question the artificiality and illusion of his previous fabricated

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<sup>115</sup> Cumming, “Copy of Letter to Albert Dorskind,” typed/signed letter, August 25, 1977, from: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Wallis Annenberg Photography Department, “Robert Cumming Artist Files,” Los Angeles.

<sup>116</sup> As discussed in the introduction to this thesis.

<sup>117</sup> Cumming, “Essay,” *Studio Still Lifes*; Cf. Introduction, footnote 26, on California.

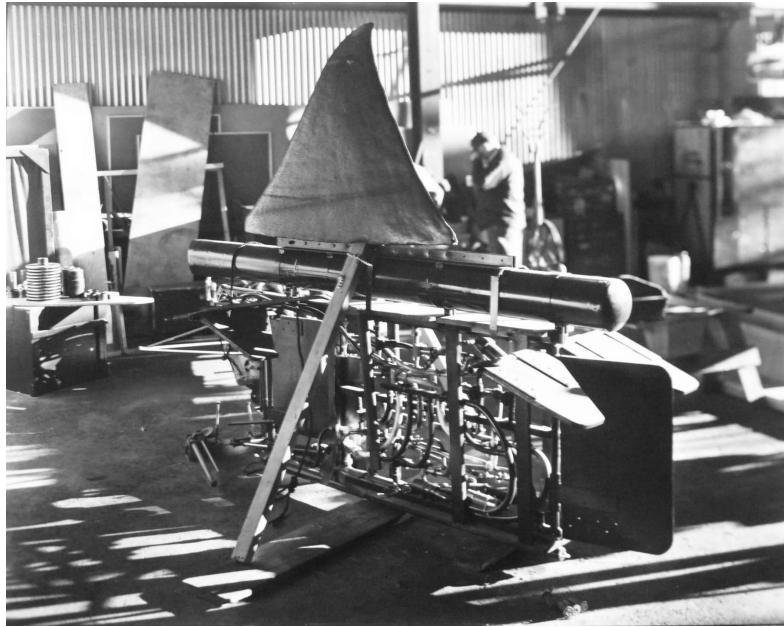


Figure 4.1. *Shark fin atop underwater pneumatic tube sled—feature film “Jaws 2”, March 28, 1977, 1977, gelatin silver print; LACMA, Gift of Sue and Albert Dorskind, M.78.21.21*

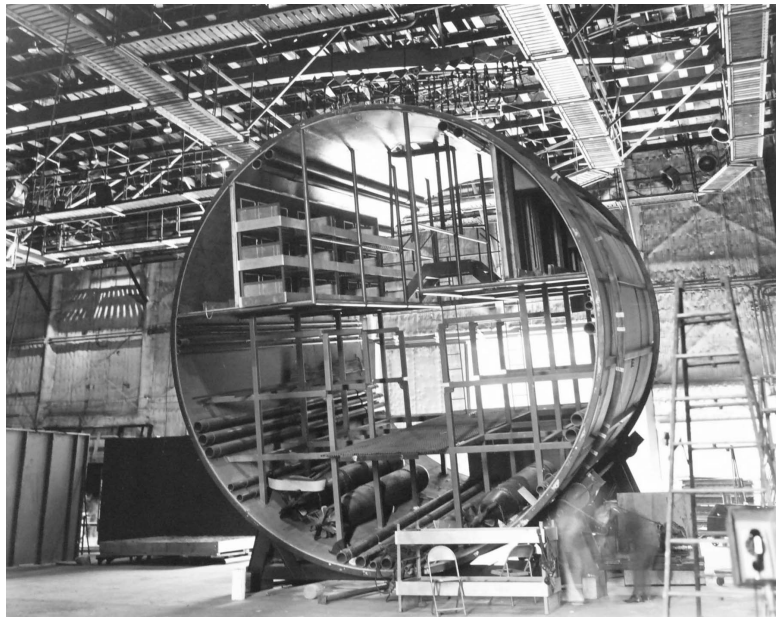


Figure 4.2. *Submarine cross-section; feature film, “Grey Lady Down”—stage #12, March 14, 1977, 1977, gelatin silver print; LACMA, Gift of Sue and Albert Dorskind, M.78.21.22*



Figure 4.3. “Baretta” series make-up table. – stage #42, April 18, 1977, 1977, gelatin silver print; LACMA, Gift of Sue and Albert Dorskind, M.78.21.13



Figure 4.4. Edith Head and her miniature sewing machine collection—Miss Head’s bungalow, May 5, 1977, 1977, gelatin silver print; LACMA, Gift of Sue and Albert Dorskind, M.78.21.3

constructions. His enthusiasm for all that had inspired him in Southern California—the pervasive sense of fantasy, exuberance, and hedonism—had paled over the preceding years and he began applying for teaching assignments back east. To Cumming, the *Studio Still Lifes* project tied things up. In a way, he had finished where he started—fascinated by the movies.<sup>118</sup>

By 1978, the year after *Studio Still Lifes* was completed, Cumming had increasingly turned to drawing and painting.<sup>119</sup> He writes:

In 1978 I was trying out a few strategies on how to get out of photography; one was making a prop [as was common for the fabricated photographs], then photographing as usual, but then projecting [the photograph] on canvas to [paint] a huge color version (at this point in the medium, not many of us could do color work, especially on this scale) *à la* photo realism.<sup>120</sup>

Once relocated back on the East Coast in Connecticut, teaching at the Hartford Art School, Cumming, in his own practice, focused on charcoal drawing, encaustic painting, printmaking, and writing. He also spent six months in Japan in 1981 on a residency fellowship through the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission. There he worked on printmaking and dark drawings executed by etching white chalk and pencil onto black paper. Charcoal and acrylic polymer, then large watercolors, increasingly became his mediums. He picked up the camera only on rare occasions.

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<sup>118</sup> Cumming in “An Interview with Richard Armstrong,” 154.

<sup>119</sup> As evidenced in the background of *Contact printing the stool’s afterimage*—see Figure. 1.9.

<sup>120</sup> Cumming, email to the author, May 24, 2012.

When Cumming did turn to photography after the 1970s, he often used a 4 x 5 model and shot in color, seeking absurd scenarios in the real world, rather than in his studio.<sup>121</sup> (Figures 4.5 and 4.6) Photography commissions trickled in throughout the 1980s. For instance, Cumming was invited, along with ten other artists, to shoot the 1984 Olympics for a project and publication entitled *10 Photographers: Olympic Images*,<sup>122</sup> and, in 1987, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology asked Cumming, Lee Friedlander, and Jan Groover to concoct their views of the technological revolution through photographs of the MIT laboratories for an exhibit and accompanying catalog, *Three on Technology: New Photographs*.<sup>123</sup>

Spanning the decade between the mid-1970s and '80s, over twenty-five commercial, university, and arts-organization galleries mounted a solo show of Cumming's work. During those same years, he participated in hundreds of group exhibitions. In 1986, the Whitney Museum of American Art mounted a twenty-year retrospective of his work, *Mechanical Illusions by Robert Cumming*, covering a wide range of Cumming's photographs, drawings, paintings, prints, and books. In 1988, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden exhibited *Robert Cumming: Intuitive Inventions*, which focused on Cumming's drawings, paintings, and sculptures. In a

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<sup>121</sup> To this end Cumming began work on an unrealized portfolio entitled *The Secret Life of Objects*. See Hagen, "Robert Cumming's Subject Object," 39.

<sup>122</sup> See Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles, California), and Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee, *10 Photographers: Olympic Images* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee, 1984).

<sup>123</sup> Belinda Rathbone, "Robert Cumming: An Update," *Print Collector's Newsletter* 19, no. 5 (December 1988) 171; See List Visual Arts Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *Three on Technology: New Photographs by Robert Cumming, Lee Friedlander, and Jan Groover* (Cambridge, MA: List Visual Arts Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1988).



Figure 4.5. *Bucket shattered in subzero temperatures—West Suffield Connecticut, 1981*, reproduced in “File-398: Robert Cumming,” *Camera Mainichi* (November 1984): 90; International Center of Photography Library holdings, “Robert Cumming artist files.”



Figure 4.6. *Suction basketball hoop—Tucson, Arizona, 1981*, reproduced in “File-398: Robert Cumming,” *Camera Mainichi* (November 1984): 88; International Center of Photography Library holdings, “Robert Cumming artist files.”

lecture at the Hirshhorn concurrent to this show, Cumming commented that, over the decades, the style and medium of his art might change, but his ingrained worldview was consistent throughout his work.<sup>124</sup> This worldview never tired of subverting perception and using absurdity in humorous ways. As Belinda Rathbone reports in *The Print Collector's Newsletter* in 1988, "His steady gallery affiliation with Castelli Graphics since 1980, along with increasing numbers of photography commissions and invitations to print workshops such as Vinalhaven Press and Derrière L'Etoile, has made a new kind of work possible."<sup>125</sup> In the 1980s, Cumming found a new kind of recognition for his interests in many mediums.

Though it was just a few years prior—in 2009—that I was dismayed Cumming had not been exhibited for some time, it turned out that, over the course of 2011 and '12, while I was conducting my research for this thesis, he took part in several exhibitions in California.<sup>126</sup> Most of these shows were affiliated with the Getty Foundation and the Getty Research Institute's Pacific Standard Time, a ten-year initiative to harvest significant art produced in Southern California from 1945 to 1981. The initiative found its form in sixty-nine exhibitions mounted by museums, organizations, and galleries.

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<sup>124</sup> Cumming in "Intuitive Inventions," audio.

<sup>125</sup> Rathbone, "Robert Cumming: An Update," 170.

<sup>126</sup> Including: *Studio Still Lives*, Jancar Gallery (LA); *Matt Connors, Robert Cumming, and Florian Morlat*, Cherry and Martin (LA); *Seismic Shift*, California Museum of Photography (Riverside); *State of Mind: New California Art circa 1970*, Orange County Museum of Art (Newport Beach); *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974–1981*, The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA (LA); *The Continuity of Robert Cumming*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LA); *In Focus: Los Angeles, 1945-1980*, Getty Center (LA); *Backyard Oasis: The Swimming Pool in Southern California Photography, 1945–1982*, Palm Springs Art Museum (Palm Springs).

While visiting Los Angeles during this time, Cumming told me something that was puzzling and amusing.<sup>127</sup> He reported that he used to spend his summers in upstate New York around the turn of the millennium and that his next-door neighbors (as much as “next door” gets in that part of the world) were the art historian and critic Michael Fried and his family, who regularly spent the academic summer in the area. Fried was friendly with Cumming and his current partner at the time, and they would arrange dinners or a swim at the local swimming hole five or six times a season.<sup>128</sup>

When Cumming first met Fried, the historian had recently committed to a new project, a book that would be anticipated by colleagues, acolytes, and detractors alike as word spread of its inception. It was to be a big, lustrously illustrated book about photography with the promising title *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008). This was unusual for Fried, somewhat afield from his previous scholarship. Fried had etched a concise lineage from eighteenth-century painting at the end of the *ancien régime* through (perhaps doggedly and confusedly) the mid-nineteenth century of Edouard Manet, reorganized in high modernist painting, and finally eclipsed, with much static and leakage, by 1960s minimalism.<sup>129</sup> The significance of his contributions to art

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<sup>127</sup> I asked if Cumming would retell the story through email, to which he agreed, May 24, 2012.

<sup>128</sup> Cumming, email to the author, May 24, 2012.

<sup>129</sup> At the time of Fried’s writing of “Art and Objecthood,” the eclipse was not complete in his mind: “[literalist art] aspires, perhaps not exactly, or not immediately, to displace [modernist painting and sculpture], ... to establish itself as an independent art on footing with either,” in Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum* 5 (June 1967) 12; in *Why Photography Matters*, he writes, “[issues from the evolution of painting in eighteenth to nineteenth-century France] that might have seemed ... invalidated by the eclipse of high modernism and the triumph of postmodernism both artistically and theoretically in the 1970s and ’80s have returned,” in Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 2.



history and criticism—his focus that oscillates around the opposing themes of absorption and theatricality—served to build anticipation for what Fried would have to say about this other art medium, one that also had roots in nineteenth-century France.<sup>130</sup>

Fried's renown is uncontested. His threnody to modernist painting, "Art and Objecthood," from 1967, laments the "theatricality" of minimalism—or what he prefers to call "literalist" art. The "presence" and "anthropomorphism" inherent to the works of Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and others, Fried finds to confine the "enterprise" of minimalism to the realm of mere objecthood. To Fried, only work that defeats theatricality can be elevated from simple object to the status of art.

His continuing report on this theory, rolled out over the subsequent decades in his trilogy on French painting, *Absorption and Theatricality* (1980), *Courbet's Realism* (1990), and *Manet's Modernism* (1996), relies first on a counsel based on the musings and criticisms of Denis Diderot, who implored that the eighteenth-century painter's task be to paint scenarios in which all that transpired was autonomous to the painting itself; figures must *be*—not just appear to be—completely absorbed in the actions, feelings, and thoughts therein. Fried writes in *Absorption and Theatricality*:

Diderot's conception of painting rested ultimately upon the supreme fiction that the beholder did not exist, that he was not really there, standing before the canvas; and that the dramatic representation of action and passion, and the causal and instantaneous mode of unity that came with it,

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<sup>130</sup> Credit due to Walter Benjamin, who, perhaps sarcastically, refers to the medium as the "black art from France," in "Little History of Photography," 275.

provided the best available medium for establishing that fiction in the painting itself.<sup>131</sup>

Fried had rarely turned an eye toward photography prior to the project of *Why Photography Matters*.<sup>132</sup> That Fried might apply his theories of absorption and theatricality to the photographic medium both intrigued supporters and steered detractors.<sup>133</sup> During those summers in upstate New York, between meetings with editors, research trips, dinners, and swimming, Fried paid Cumming a studio visit. Cumming knew about the book-in-progress on photography; they had talked about it in passing. Cumming also knew that there were three artists on which Fried was focusing and he sensed that the dimensions of Fried's "already tight equation" was quite set.<sup>134</sup> They never discussed Cumming's photography in depth. "Of course he'd come across my work in the course of his research, and we talked about it in passing," writes Cumming, adding, "I'm not sure I'd fit [into the thesis of *Why Photography Matters*] either."<sup>135</sup> And to both

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<sup>131</sup> Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1988) 103.

<sup>132</sup> In a review of *Why Photography Matters*, Wolfgang Brückle notes that Fried foreshadows the book in "an elaborate footnote in his *Courbet's Realism*, which pointed to the affinity between Roland Barthes's famous 'punctum' and Fried's own 'antitheatricality' paradigm," in Wolfgang Brückle, "Absorption Revisited," *Art History* 33, no. 4 (2010): 731; Brückle cites: Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 282–83.

<sup>133</sup> Or, at least, so it was that Fried imagined. In his Introduction to *Why Photography Matters*, Fried refers to his "'infamous' essay 'Art and Objecthood,'" and writes "that the chapters that follow constantly refer to my own writings; I declare this up front, to preempt the facile criticism that I am excessively preoccupied with my own ideas," in Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 2.

<sup>134</sup> Likely, at the time, these three artists were: Jeff Wall, Thomas Struth, and Thomas Demand, but possibly included: Jean-Marc Bustamante, Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky, Rineke Dijkstra, James Welling, among others; See *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*.

<sup>135</sup> Cumming, email to the author, May 24, 2012.

Cumming's and Fried's credit, what Cumming was interested in then—and what Fried saw in his studio—was what he was working on at that time: large oil paintings of nudes on paper, not photography.

Yet, it is a puzzle to wonder if Cumming would fit into—or around, or within—Fried's themes of theatricality and absorption. To begin, Fried sees that 1960s minimalism activated a redefinition of art that he found unsavory because of theatricality. Issues important to art pre-minimalism reemerged in the late 1970s. Fried follows the lead of Jean-Francoise Chevalier, who noted in 1989 that the “tableau form” of photography that emerged in the late 1970s and '80s, when photographers such as Jeff Wall and Jean-Marc Bustamante began printing their photographs very large, undeniably signaled that these works were meant to hang on a wall. Fried departs from Chevalier from here, to aver that what is most successful about the images of Wall, Bustamante, Thomas Struth, and others, is that they defeat theatricality, precisely because of the inherent *theatricality* of the photograph, a medium that cannot escape its “to-be-seeness.”<sup>136</sup> Wall, for instance, despite the theater of his set ups and his preference for a precise mode of display—the backlit transparency—has transcended the theatrical, according to Fried, by depicting subjects lost in thought, absorbed in their work, and confined to their frames.

Fried begins his introduction by reopening a discussion he began in “Art and Objecthood” on the cinema, a form he finds to be immune to theatricality by virtue of the

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<sup>136</sup> Additionally, if photography was not inherently theatrical, if it was instead *untheatrical*, then the unique possibility of transcending theater would not be at hand in the medium. See Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 214, and discussion below.

absorption encountered in watching a story unfold on the screen. He writes there is “one art that, by its very nature, escapes theater entirely—the movies ... Cinema escapes theater—automatically, as it were—it provides a welcome and absorbing refuge to sensibilities at war with theater and theatricality.”<sup>137</sup> He delivers deft analyses of Hiroshi Sugimoto’s *Movie Theaters*, (Figure 4.7) Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills*, (Figure 4.8) and Jeff Wall’s *Movie Audience*, (Figure 4.9), describing them as the forays of artists on the verge of a realization—the potential untheatricality of this theatrically-based medium. He writes of Sugimoto, Sherman, and Wall:

[They are] responding in different ways to the problematic status of movies in this regard by making photographs which, although mobilizing one or another convention of movies (or the thought of movies), also provide a certain essentially photographic distance from the filmic experience, a distance by virtue of which the automaticity of the avoidance of theatricality I have just evoked is forestalled or undone. By this I mean that the issue of theatricality is allowed to come into focus, as almost never in narrative film as such, and even to be engaged with as a problem—though not, I suggest, unambiguously defeated or overcome.<sup>138</sup>

It is possible that preceding—or alongside—this analysis of Sugimoto, Sherman, and Wall, Fried might have included a discussion of Cumming’s early photographs inspired by his collection of continuity stills of 1930s and ’40s Hollywood, and that this discussion would have benefitted *Why Photography Matters*. In addition, regarding

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<sup>137</sup> Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 21, which is cited in *Why Photography Matters*, 13; it should be noted that it is within this discussion on motion picture films, and nowhere else in “Art and Objecthood,” that Fried employs the term “absorption.”

<sup>138</sup> Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 13.



Figure 4.7. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *U.A. Walker, New York*, 1978, gelatin silver print; reproduced in Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 6; Hiroshi Sugimoto, Sugimoto Studio, New York; book collection of the author.



Figure 4.8. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still, #53*, 1980, gelatin silver print; reproduced in Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 8; MoMA, Grace M. Mayer Fund; book collection of the author.



Figure 4.9. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still, #9*, 1978, gelatin silver print; reproduced in Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 8; MoMA, Grace M. Mayer Fund; book collection of the author.



Figure 4.10. Jeff Wall, *Movie Audience*, 1979, three transparencies in lightboxes; reproduced in Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 10; Courtesy of Jeff Wall and Marian Goodman Gallery; book collection of the author.

Fried's emphasis on Wall's adoption of the immense color print, "[Wall's photographs] contain a wealth of minute detail that is crucial to their content but that would effectively be lost if the images were significantly reduced in size—which is what happens when they are illustrated in books or catalogues."<sup>139</sup> This is true of Cumming's more "modest" 8 x 10-inch black and white contact prints, and it is precisely the reason that Cumming chose that format. As discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, Cumming's use of the 8 x 10 contact print anachronistically harks back in time to the specific requirements of Group f/64, a modernist aesthetic that demanded reliance on straight photography; Wall's enlargements spoke to a future of photography on par with the issues of high modernism, according to Fried. Considering these topics, perhaps in another universe there could have been some overlap regarding Cumming's work and Fried's thesis in the pages of *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*.

Granted, it may have been the qualities of still-life arrangement found in Cumming's 1970s fabricated constructions that obviated Fried's attention. For, in *Absorption and Theatricality*, Fried writes (in accordance with Diderot):

Inanimate subject matter [of the still life] made the artistic and presentational aspects *of the painting itself* all the more obtrusive by imposing almost desperate demands on technique and by calling attention to the fact that the objects depicted by the painter were chosen by him, arranged by him, illuminated by him, and in general exhibited by him to the beholder.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 15. Emphasis in original.

<sup>140</sup> Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, 102. Emphasis in the original.



Unfortunately, these “aspects” are eerily redolent of the “artistic and presentational aspects” that Fried holds key to the obliteration of theatricality made possible by photography. Were the “chosen,” “arranged,” “illuminated,” and “exhibited” aspects of a photographer’s task not inherent to the medium of photography, Fried writes, there would be nothing to surmount. In his chapter on Barthes’ *punctum*, he writes:

If photography is understood to be fundamentally theatrical, which is what it means to claim that it is founded in and by the Pose, does it offer the possibility, at least on the plane of theory, of being rendered antitheatrical, as opposed to its being merely non- or untheatrical.<sup>141</sup>

But Fried is certainly permitted to qualify his later writings.

In the end, it may be to Cumming’s credit that Fried did not include him in his thesis. While thoroughly maintaining a precise skill for looking and for analyzing a work of art, and while there is no doubt that Fried “contributes signally to our literature on contemporary photographic art, and anyone interested in the subject will find the book indispensable,”<sup>142</sup> *Why Photography Matters* is received as suffering through Fried’s application of theatricality and absorption onto the field of photography. Robin Kelsey writes that, on the contrary, Fried has proven that “the potential extremity of this elasticity—theatricality and absorption can essentially define a spectrum on which any work of art can be placed—has always threatened to dull its application to particular pictures,” and that “given that [Fried] abides by his long-standing practice of disregarding

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<sup>141</sup> Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 214.

<sup>142</sup> Robin Kelsey, “Eye of the Beholder,” *Artforum* 47, no. 5 (January 2009): 54.

larger social and historical developments ... his argument suffers a kind of historical weightlessness.”<sup>143</sup>

Rather, Cumming seems to get by on his own. The recent procession of exhibitions that have included Cumming’s work indicate some recognition of the significance of his photographic oeuvre. Since the beginning of his practice, he has been difficult to categorize—sculpture or photography, too steeped in the fine print for conceptual art, too reliant on the blunders of perception for high modernism—and through all this, Cumming’s work resonates in the minds of those like Joey Lehman Morris (the young photographer who introduced Cumming’s work to me) as well as many other artists.<sup>144</sup> However, Cumming may yet evade the categorization of solely “artists’ artist” as well. Beyond Pacific Standard Time and the few remaining commercial galleries that are able to capitalize on a resurgence of interest for Cumming’s work, he is more than suitable for a major survey of his 1970s photography. I believe it should happen soon.

Robert Cumming now lives and works in Massachusetts. He is focusing on drawing and painting fictional scenes, often figural, in landscapes.

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<sup>143</sup> Kelsey, “Eye of the Beholder,” 54. See as well: Wolfgang Brückle, “Absorption Revisited,” *Art History* 33, no. 4 (2010); Jonathan T.D. Neil, “Why Photography Matters as Never Before,” *Art Review*, no. 30 (March 2009); and Martin Young, “Why Does Photography Matter?,” *Afterimage* 36, no. 5 (April 2009).

<sup>144</sup> I found especially strong support and enthusiasm for this thesis from professors of studio art John Divola, Erika Suderburg, Amir Zaki, and Brandon Lattu (all of the University of California, Riverside, Department of Art).

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