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ARTFORUM

'80s THEN

JAMES WELLING talks to JAN TUMLIR

JAN TUMLIR: You locate the '80s between 1977 and 1984. Seventy-seven is year zero for punk rock, and for you the music scene was a large part of the collaborative and interdisciplinary network that made up the East Village at the time. It is interesting because a certain clichéd idea of the '80s has developed in recent years that tends to overlook all this openness and experiment.

JAMES WELLING: I remember making periodic visits from LA to New York to see a lot of my CalArts friends who had already moved there. In 1978, I saw Paul McMahon's band play; they were called Daily Life and included Glenn Branca and Barbara Ess. Through Paul, I heard that Dan Graham was associated with a band called the Theoretical Girls, which just seemed hilarious. Dan, of all people, a band manager!

JT: But hasn't he always had this interest in pop? I remember reading an essay of his on Malcolm McLaren.

JW: I met Dan Graham at Paul McMahon's alternative space in Boston. This is when I was still a student at CalArts. Dan was really into Steve Reich at that point, and I remember he dragged me to a concert of Reich's out in Ojai. So Dan goes from Reich to McLaren to the Theoretical Girls to inviting Branca to perform in one of his mirror pieces at the Kunsthalle Bern in '83. There is all this interplay between the downtown music scene and the art world.

JT: Didn't you make the cover for a Sonic Youth album?

JW: *Bad Moon Rising.* I met Kim Gordon in LA in '78,

before she moved to New York. And then later, we both worked at Annina Nosei Gallery. Kim was also collaborating with Vikky Alexander, whom I was married to at the time. They had this consulting office together, similar to Richard Prince and Peter Nadin's. They would do projects with artists, helping them with presentational strategies.

JT: These seem like attempts to move art into the space of general commerce, but they are not yet formulated as an explicit critique. And this is another cliché of the '80s, that it was all about critical theory.

JW: A number of art writers in the late-'70s became interested in art that was critical, or in art as critique—Craig Owens, Douglas Crimp, Hal Foster, Rosalyn Deutsche. Abigail Solomon-Godeau wrote an article about Barbara Kruger, Vikky Alexander, and me, and I remember being startled to see my work positioned as a critique of mainstream photography. Although I was working along similar lines somewhat more intuitively, it was strange to see my images described this way and positioned so clearly against photography. I didn't see it in such absolute terms. I felt it had other meanings as well.

JT: Still, some people believe that it was critical theory, not art, that was the primary product of the '80s. To what extent do you think that the art was covered, or covered over, by theory?

JW: Let's not forget that the art world didn't invent critical theory. It was already widespread throughout academia by the late '70s at least. My own introduction to theory was Jack Burnham's *The Structure of Art*, which used structuralist theory to read through a lot of Conceptual work. It came out in 1971, and that's when I latched on to structuralism and started reading Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Barthes.

JT: To what extent were those texts being disseminated already by your teachers at CalArts—Dan Graham, Michael Asher, and John Baldessari?

JW: Baldessari was probably into Barthes early on; Dan Graham not so much. My memory of Dan is that he came to French theory later. Dan was very interested in Minimalism and Positivism then. Actually, when I was a student, Wittgenstein was much more important. Graham Weinbren, a film maker, taught a Wittgenstein class at CalArts around 1973.

JT: In the catalogue for "A Forest of Signs," Anne Rorimer lays out this line of succession from Pop to Minimalism to Conceptualism to institutional critique to so-called '80s art, which, according to her, comprises aspects of all of the above. She cites that famous Douglas Huebler quote as being especially influential on your generation: "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more." She goes on to make the point that photography becomes the principal means of '80s artmaking because it is an essentially appropriative medium. Did you see your work functioning in accordance with these claims or, again, reacting against them somehow?

JW: I was reacting against the dryness of Conceptual art. I didn't see the photograph as just a document. I remember having an epiphany when I saw Paul Strand's *Mexico Portfolio* in the CalArts library. Strand represented the complete opposite of the Conceptual work I was looking at. His was the classic art photograph, which, at the time, was completely dead in the water. Rorimer and Conceptualism were trying to undo the work I gravitated toward—Strand, Stieglitz, and European modernism.

JT: So what did you see yourself

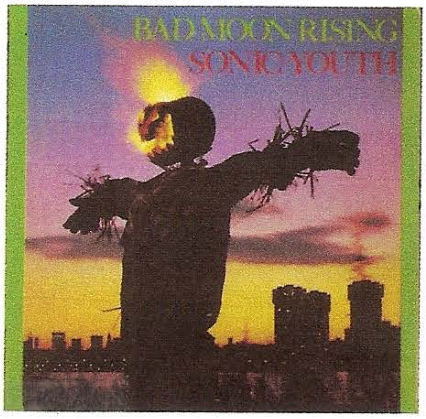
filling that conceptual "dryness" with? Is it about quality or a certain kind of emotional content?

JW: It was also about coming back to making an object. This is what Jack Goldstein discovered when he took up painting. Making an object. For me, it was about making a photograph by myself in my darkroom. I never really subscribed to that argument about the loss of the aura of the art object. I was much more interested in re-energizing the photograph away from the conceptual document or the Gary Winogrand tradition of street photography. Going back to classical modernism was a way to challenge all those assumptions about the transparency of the photograph.

I'D COME HOME FROM WORK AND SPEND THE EVENING MAKING PHOTOGRAPHS OF ALUMINUM FOIL AND DRAPERY. IT WAS AN EXHILARATING, AMAZING THREE MONTHS AS I LEAPED INTO ABSTRACTION.

JT: That essay by Anne Rorimer pretty much insists on transparency, which is really the only way the photograph can be reconciled with the found object at the other end of the lens. She focuses on the medium's capacity to negate the subjective and the gestural, but these are precisely the things you are talking about.

JW: Definitely. Subjectivity, style, and gesture, that's what David Salle and I were constantly talking about in the mid- to late '70s. Opacity and arbitrariness as opposed to transparency. There wasn't only one way to make an object; we could work using different styles. Making the work, taking seriously its sensuous possibilities, became extremely important. I chose photography because, much more than any other art form, all these stylistic and historical issues were built into it. As I educated myself about its history, the possibilities multiplied. I picked up this wonderful word, "ventriloquism," and when I discovered photography, I realized that it was the perfect ventriloquist's medium. I could throw my voice into different sorts of pictures: I could speak in many different formal languages.



JT: It sounds like you became interested in these historical styles and conventions of photography but came to them from the perspective of an outsider.

JW: I think that we all felt like outsiders in a way, trying to find a new set of guidelines after the '70s ended. I never studied photography formally. I spent a total of two days in the darkroom during my five years of art school. So I had to teach myself. After I saw the "New Topographics" show at the Otis Art Gallery, I began using a view camera. I struggled through a few projects completely on my own. When I moved to New York in 1978, I was working on a series of photographs of nineteenth-century handwriting and moody landscapes. These were my ventriloquist pictures; I felt I was citing an archaic style. I met Sherrie Levine, and she was very supportive. I knew her work from the "Pictures" show; around this time, she was just beginning to appropriate images. Sherrie was

extremely passionate about appropriation, and her energy and support were very important for me.

At the start of 1980, I spent three months holed up in my tiny loft on Grand Street thinking about my work. I was employed at a restaurant at the time, and I'd come home from work and spend the evening making photographs of aluminum foil and drapery. About that time, I decided that the diary photographs weren't radical enough. They were too diagrammatic, too historical, and I wanted to make something that had never been seen before. It was an exhilarating, amazing three months as I leaped into abstraction.

JT: What you fill the photograph back up with, though, is always something germane to the medium. It is almost a modernist tendency: to somehow allow the medium to dictate its content.

JW: I think it's less about the medium dictating its content than the history of the medium reasserting itself over its future. I didn't realize at the time that when I "blew up photography" with my aluminum-foil pictures, the fragments fell back into a quasi-modernist configuration. In retrospect, I see that there's no escape from the history of photography. In 1980, some said I was rethinking Stieglitz's "Equivalents," making it leaner and tougher. I was trying to escape the transparency of photography, but I was basically running away from the history of Renaissance perspective. Now that I'm teaching, I see this much more clearly. The model of modernist art photography has been pushed to the side by the Brady-Atget-Sanders-Evans axis, which today becomes the Becher-Struth-Gursky-Ruff school, and which is all about the document, the transparent window, the Conceptual art photograph repackaged. It's the new New Objectivity, with its concern for optics, lenses and, again, Renaissance perspective.

JT: There is a consensus these days that the '80s and postmodernism were less antimodernist than a kind of culmination and ultimate fulfillment of modernist principles. Your work can be made to both support this argument and deny it, because you combine a reductivist, rationalist impulse with something much more open-ended, or even emotional.

JW: I think it's something like redoing modernism, but with a sense of history. For me, a big part of the inspiration for doing the aluminum-foil and drapery photographs came from experiencing Glenn Branca's music. Spectacular, ear-shattering crescendos. Have you heard him live? Anyway, he was doing these early pieces with massed groups of guitars, and his music confirmed a lot of my ideas about where I was headed with abstraction and these absolutely spectacular images I wanted to make. In their hallucinogenic accumulation of detail, those photographs really were a response to his music. It was a bone-rattling experience. Not that it was idea-less, but you needed your whole body to hear it.

JT: You're describing a kind of sublime.

JW: A frightening, wonderful experience. Or, as Glenn titled one section of his *Symphony no. 2*: "In the late-twentieth century the impossible becomes possible." □