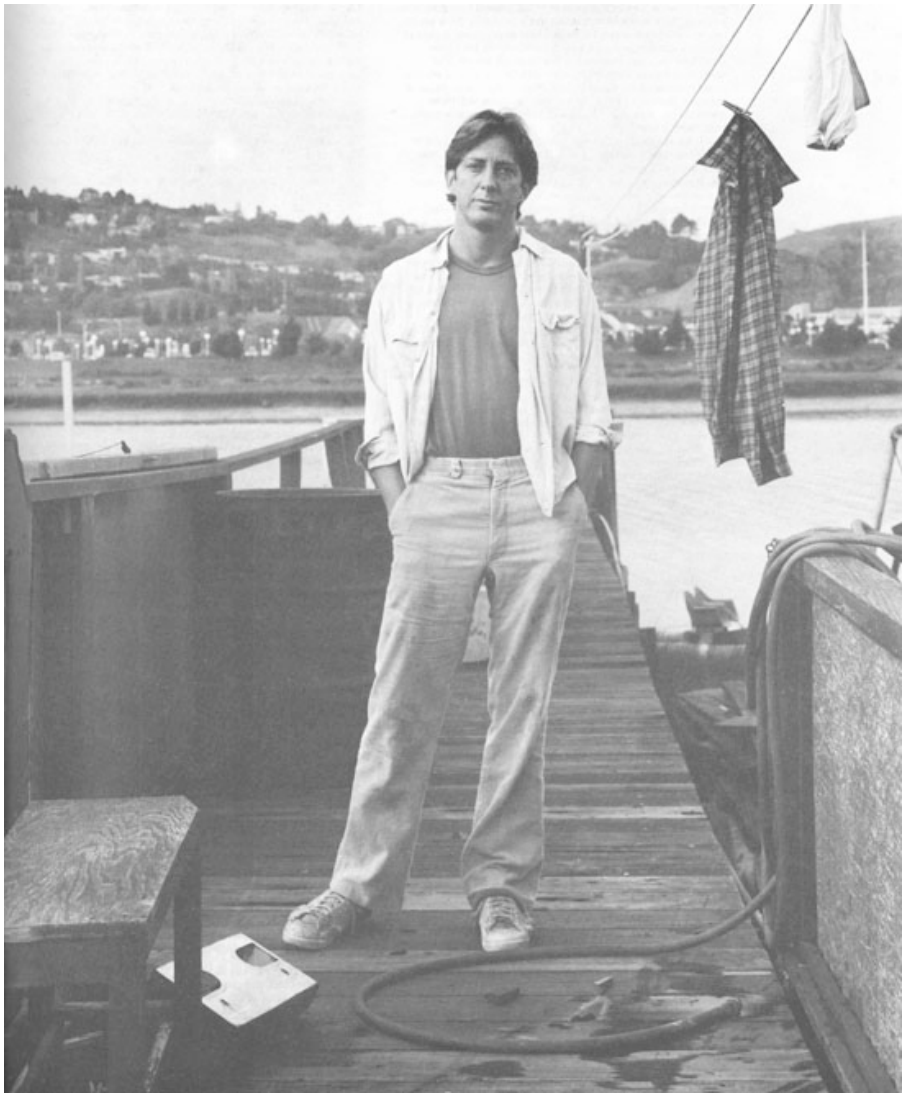
THE ARTIST'S VOICE SINCE 1981
BOMBSITE

Larry Sultan

by Catherine Liu

BOMB 31/Spring 1990, ART



Larry Sultan© Ross Andecman, 1990.

Larry Sultan documents the American Dream. He makes stills out of his family's 8 mm home movies. These oneiric, grainy images of his childhood move from traces of personal history into the realm of 20th century mythology. These images are moving in their specificity: they evoke the collective fantasy of an elusive suburban utopia. The artist also makes starkly intimate photographs of his parents in the present. The details that come into sharp focus in these

portraits are crystallizations of that blurry past. However, the films were someone else's representations. In the contemporary images, Sultan takes control of the apparatus and the viewer is witness to a gaze shaped by memory and desire. Sultan is currently at work on a book which he has described as a kind of photo-novel.

CATHERINE LIU I was incredibly moved when I saw your photographs—the stills from your father's 8 mm films—they could have been stills from my family's films. You grew up on the West Coast, and I grew up on the East Coast, some twenty years later, in a Chinese family. Yet your family's and my family's images looked the same. I had this moment of vertigo, I realized that all of us who grew up in suburbia, all come from the same place, which is nowhere.

LARRY SULTAN Yes, we had a franchised childhood.

CL I felt embarrassment looking at your photographs. There was an aspect of betrayal.

LS Let me just say how I got involved with this. The home movie stills were my point of departure. At that time in my life, I was obsessed with memory. I would watch my family's movies, as a probe, kind of a petites madeleines.

CL As if some secret would be revealed.

LS We all have our ritual snapshots. These are very precious things that constitute a personal archive.

CL A change has taken place in the past hundred years because of the snapshot.

LS Oh yes. To be able to see yourself is very dislocating. To see myself as I was. Photography allows you to carry a trace of the past with you. While my photographs are specific and I have that very personal relationship to them, the images also possess the quality of cultural myth: footage of a bear chasing somebody through Yosemite, jumping through a hula-hoop, holding a child at a waterfall, measuring each other next to a '55 Buick. We all performed rituals. These images constitute an icon of a family.

Larry Sultan, *Untitled*, 1989, Ektacolor Plus, 20×24". All photographs from the series *Pictures from Home*, stills from home movies, courtesy of Janet Borden Gallery.

CL You talked about your family moving from the East to the West, in search of a better life. These are images of utopia.

LS Families did involve themselves in these mythic quests. And my family's myth was a part of the cultural phenomena of the '40s: to go West. To get out of a five-story walk-up flat in Brooklyn, to go to the land of opportunity. My father went out there without a job, without any sense of what could happen. It was just this desperate hope for change.

CL They thought California was the land of milk and honey. They'd get there and the oranges would be dropping off the trees.

LS In fact, my father, in the project, talks of buying a one-way train ticket and leaving his family in Brooklyn. When he's on the train, he has all these images in his head of what he's going to find. And somebody says, "Hey man, there's a depression in L.A., there's a water shortage, there's no work." He gets there—he was a clothing salesman in New York—and stands in line waiting for jobs at unemployment offices. He said he would have been better off sitting alone in a dark room. There was nothing. So there was this terrible sense of disappointment, initially. His home movie shows what he's photographing outside the train: all these landscapes going by: the winter storm in the East when he left, huge vistas in New Mexico and Albuquerque. He stopped in Albuquerque. And then the next cut is L.A., he's mowing the lawn. (*laughter*) Now I never understood that.

CL What a transition.

LS Why did he set that up? I hated mowing the lawn. That was the biggest source of family arguments, I was a lazy fat-ass, the dreamer. So the lawn, for me, has very negative connotations. Recently, I was thinking that the lawn is the perfect myth of the West. You have your own front yard and your own back yard. And you tend your garden, the garden of Eden. It was a suburban garden with marigolds and manicured lawns and a barbecue pit in the backyard. When we came out—he finally did get a job—he filmed us. In the movies, we're running into the backyard, and mother has this huge turkey to barbecue. So

they did live out this utopian dream. With movie stills, the event has been distilled into myth. I would imagine that's why it looks like everybody else's past. By taking stills, I've transformed the movies themselves. If it was just the movies, their general effect would be that kind of edited, distilled recreation of cultural history. By isolating stills, I can make my own incision. The off-moments, that look of worry on someone's face, in the middle of all this…

CL Feasting.

LS Yes, yes, there's picnics and then there's a look, just a look, that betrays a little bit of what else was going on. It seeps through in film. Which doesn't happen in snapshots. The interesting thing is that my images, the stills, are both highly fabricated and mediated. But the fact that they have this filmic quality or this sense of family archive, makes them seem very personal and very real and, hopefully, they are able to do exactly what they did to you, which is to make you think about your own past.

CL The colors in the contemporary photographs, the ones of your parents in their suburban home—the quilted bedspread, the wall colors—it was almost painful for me to look at these things, embarrassing. All this postmodern good taste in interior decoration which surrounds us in the art world is a complete reaction to that suburban space, that failed utopia; a reaction to that disappointment. What these new postmodern objects of good taste communicate is the message that we can be liberated through consumption: buy this and you'll be free of your past, of that pink and avocado playroom you played in. But the gaze that you directed towards your parents or those objects in your work wasn't a gaze that was ironic or cynical at all. That's what made them so painful.

LS It would have been very easy for me, to emphasize from a very cynical perspective, how their taste, in relation to ours, is bad taste, or kitsch. I loaded the deck by doing this project. If I had gone into someone else's home in suburbia, I would have gone in as a voyeur. What is crucial here is that this is my family, these are my parents, and I care deeply for them. I have an enormous argument with their culture (perhaps it's my culture as well), but I have something else, too, compassion. It's the depth of love. The hardest part of the work, was dealing with the question of whether or not I was betraying them. I could be using them, as a symbol of the failed American Dream. And, coming to terms with those questions has been very difficult and that's why the text is there—I want them to have a voice in this.

CL If the work consisted only of the photographs, you would be subjecting them to all of our gazes. By giving them a voice, you allow them a little space to exist outside of the photographs.

LS It is absolutely crucial. All the photographs raise the issue of voyeurism—it's unavoidable. I mean, no one believes in photographs, right? We're much too sophisticated. Yet, in fact, we do. There's always a photograph that will wound us still, that will, as you said, make us feel something painful or embarrassing. It's because of the intimacy of photographs. The collaborative work I have done, and still do, with Mike Mandel, has been mostly about media and advertising and is presented on billboards. There was something missing from that work for me. And it is this notion of how we function or don't function on a daily level. My daily issues are about family and relationship, success, failure, and disappointment. And the everyday was the site for this work. And I wanted to approach it with tenderness, rather than with dismissal.

CL There's something of stripping the object naked—the photographs are without artifice.

LS I disagree. That ambiguity is interesting to me. I use the suburban house very much as a stage. I'm conscious of what the bedroom signifies and how it's arranged. I do see it as a theater. Sometimes they're not posed at all, yet those

can look the most posed.

Larry Sulta, *Practicing Golf Swing*, 1988, Ektacolor Plus, 30×40". Inset: *Argument in the Hallway*, 1988, Ektacolor Plus, 30×40".

CL What did your parents think of this project? How did they feel about their participation?

LS The major problem has been more my guilt than their ambivalence. There was a point when I realized, after a few years, that I had to show them the pictures. I'd bring them the pictures, but I'd edit them.

CL You mean you didn't show them all the pictures?

LS I'd show them a selection. There were pictures that were very troubling. Of course, when I'd show my father pictures, he'd say, "Well, why should I be sitting on the bed with my suit on? Why do you want that image?" We would actually discuss what my point of view was and how he felt about it. Of course, whenever we're photographed we want to look good. Vanity cuts across all the cultures. We think we're clear about how we're going to be portrayed, how we want to appear. So that was an issue. But when I showed him these pictures, he said, "Well, why are you so upset about these?" And I said, "I feel like I have a responsibility to show you in a way that's accurate for me, but that doesn't violate you." And he said, "Hey, I know who I am. This is your point of view." I thought, what a remarkable sense of self-knowledge that he could allow me—these pictures were becoming public at this point—to have these images. That generosity was part of their relationship to me.

CL You were afraid that these pictures would change them, like the old Indian myth.

LS No, not change them.

CL Diminish them.

LS Yes, very much. I think pictures diminish us.

CL Do you?

LS Absolutely. Absolutely. We exist in time. That's who we are. Our whole identity is about change and temporality and a photograph is a slice, a stoppage of that. When you take an image out of time, it's like an insult. It's when someone says to you, "You are this." We can always become something else, something fuller. I think photographs take the richness of our temporality and reduce it. To me, it is the most crucial part of photography. This project was changed for me when I was looking at a particular picture I had made, writing about it, decoding it, and it struck me that this picture might outlive my parents. And it became like an elegy, a memorial. It's not that they're just symbols. They're not just symbols to me. It shifted from something very distanced, a sociological or deconstructive analysis to something much deeper than that. There was a sense that these images are traces of them, their existence is necessary. It's the bottom line of all photographs.

CL So behind every photograph is the idea of a death or an absence…. I wanted to backtrack a little bit. You mentioned your billboard work very briefly.

LS Coming from L.A., where most of the culture is automotive, and most of the images are things you don't choose to see, billboards are a powerful context, for imagery. In fact, growing up in L.A., you'd drive down Sunset strip and look at billboards instead of going to art galleries. It's an awful thing to admit, but the advertisers were the visionaries of our time. They gave us the notions of what we should become. Our myths of heaven and hell were right there on the billboards. So, while in graduate school, I began to collaborate with Mike Mandel. We wanted to work in a way that would give us that kind of immediate access to the public. We just called up the billboard companies to get free billboards. That was in '73.

CL What were some of your slogans?

LS "Whose news abuses you," "You're so easily influenced," "We make you us."

CL I like that, "We make you us."

LS We used Kent Three cigarette ads and blackened the faces through an offset press. All the men are holding cigarettes in their mouths and letting go with their fingers, and all the women are holding the cigarettes tightly in their fingers. They're very clear about how they stage these ads. A lot of our billboard images come from advertising that we just alter slightly. Recently we produced a series called "Trouble Spots," scenes from a '50s Bible.

CL Billboards?

LS Yeah. Trouble spots: Japan, Russia, Nicaragua, Arizona, etc. They're difficult to describe except that they're very simple. We wanted to display the '50s vision of what these places used to mean to us, especially Russia and Japan, and what they mean now. For instance, the image of Japan is an arm pulling back a curtain, revealing six Americans in suits, behind them are flames, hot glowing yellow flames. The flames suggest both Nagasaki as well as Japan's current economic power. The myths of these places are changing. Yet, we still hold on tenaciously to our past fears.

Larry Sultan, Untitled (detail), 1985–90, Ektacolor Plus, 20×24".

CL How do you feel about being labeled a post '68 artist?

LS I wouldn't think of myself as that but I was influenced and affected by that time. I was in political science at UCLA and UCSD and I became a photographer as a way of participating in those times—as a witness and a creator.

CL Those were formative years.

LS Oh, I don't think I'd be sitting in this room without the '60s. The '60s gave me permission to stay right where my values were and that was really crucial, the times gave me my role as an artist. It was such a confusing time. I was both part of this time and also very isolated and alienated from it. There was a great deal of paranoia in the '60s. If one wasn't correct—it's the same kind of paranoia we have now—and none of us are correct, in our deepest souls we're all very incorrect, who do we share that with? It becomes a very alienating paranoia that we carry with us. In '69, I joined VISTA and worked in South Chicago as a community organizer. I also joined Newsreel, a radical art collective. I was in it for about two weeks before I quit because of the infighting, like everybody calling each other pigs. We were all trying to get up the heap and you got to the top by climbing up the bones of everybody you had annihilated, philosophically, ideologically.

CL Back in the '60s, activists thought you could make this terrible short cut, leap into a kind of liberation or total freedom without having to deal with personal memory at all.

LS Growing up in the '60s, one had to turn against one's parents in a much more substantial way than that process of differentiating ourselves from them which occurs in all of us. There was an institutionalized form of rebellion that was really an attempt to sever. The image of both my mother and father in me still carries with it some of the stain of that conflict. Now I have a child and I, of course, see myself as my father, and I'm no longer afraid of that. It's no longer some awful echoing. I embrace it. That reconciliation for me has been crucial. It doesn't mean that I have to embrace their values, but I understand how they were formed by a time, by a historical circumstance and I don't see them as

victims in that. I see them as active players. That's where the compassion comes from.

CL Isn't it funny how compassion is something you have to work through to.

LS Yes. You're not given it. In the tradition of documentary photography you're mostly thrown out to photograph that which is different, the other, and you can have a general compassion, but there's not the sense of intimacy in contact. To me, that's very problematic. I don't know where I fit. I don't know whether I'm considered a documentary photographer or not. I love realism, but I don't think I could go out into a war zone right now and deal with the spectacle of war.

CL And play the role that you'd have to play there.

LS To me it's very important to deal with something I am in contact with and know. It's crucial to me.

CL It's the intimacy of your work that is so disturbing. The form of photography hasn't been one in which we see a lot of intimacy. Advertising and fashion photography, portrait and realist photography, really, are all about distance. It seems that only in that distance can we achieve some kind of relationship of desire. We seem to be looking at everything from very, very far away. Your images are very, very close. What you're asking the viewer to do is assume your position too. We all feel a terrible resistance to it because it is so intense.

LS The great influences on me are James Agee and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and Death in the Family*. The novel allows for an intense intimacy. We locate ourselves differently than we do in photographs.

Larry Sultan, *Untitled*, 1985–90, Ektacolor Plus, 20×24".

CL You're writing the text for your book now. It makes sense that you should be moving into this form. Writing is about interiors, opening a kind of inner space.

LS Yeah. That sense of a life lived and how we participate in it. What concerns me is setting the portrait back in time. To set memory in its place in cultural history. That's maybe the only way to make history real to us again. The novel does that. I see my work as a mutation between fiction and non-fiction. Divergent stories. Pictures say one thing, texts another. There's a set of contradictions between text and image which places the viewer in an awkward position. Who do you believe?

CL I love that statement your father made, about how he doesn't see himself in any of your pictures.

LS Yes. He says to me, very clearly, "That's you you're photographing. That's you sitting on the bed," and he's right. And he says, "I'm glad to help you with your project." It's funny because he's participated in this in such a way that I feel like I'm back in the state of being an adolescent. He calls me up and says, "How's the project coming?" And I say, "I haven't been able to get to it." He says, "You've been procrastinating, haven't you?" I feel like I'm back mowing the lawn again. So, I have the opportunity to work out the things I didn't do very well when I was fourteen. Originally my interest was to deal with the male, the male vision of success and career. This work is not just home movies and family pictures. The work in the book form is about Corporate life—public and private.

CL I saw something at MoMA about that. There was a copy of a letter of promotion that your father had received, praising him as a good employee.

LS He began as a traveling salesman for Schick Razor, and then he became one of the Vice Presidents. When he was first hired, he was told that he was a team player on a smooth working team. It's such a wonderful analogy to baseball because, in the beginning, you are a team player until you reach a certain age and then they trade you away. That's the American story, when a corporation changes hands everyone on the top is let go, because you have to bring in a new team.

CL Disposable razors, disposable people.

LS Exactly. Part of what that brings up is the notion of identity and how we form our identity through this duet of corporate and private life. It creates major conflicts in our notion of the self.

CL Especially in the male notion of the self. Especially for the father, bread-winner.

LS Well, when he lost…he didn't lose his job but when his job was finished with him, my mother got her driver's license. She didn't drive until I was sixteen. And then she got her real estate license. Now she's a very successful businesswomen. For the last twenty years, she's been doing that. Yet, there is still continuity in their roles in the family. He does some cooking but she is still seen as the housewife even though she is also a career woman.

CL What's the object of desire in your work?

LS (*pause*) Longing. Enormous longing. It's hard to say. I'm trying to think what I'm really longing for. I am still caught in that longing for that same utopia my parents were longing for by coming out West. And I'm caught between knowing better and still desiring that security and some past that doesn't exist except in home movies.

CL It's interesting, your relationship to utopia as a past and your father's relationship to it as a future. He was riding out on the train, making that eight millimeter film, thinking about California, as if utopia existed. It did. In the collective imagination. Utopia was the future.

LS The home movies seem to me the visions that a family in Flatbush, New York dreamed up. If you took all our hopes and projected them onto emulsion, it would look like those movies. The home movies are utopian because they're so selective. When I had the show at the Modern, an artist who grew up on the East Coast said, "I can't believe that this exists—that these are real. You lived that way? This was your past?" Because the images seem so impossible. They are true and they're not.

CL It's like discovering what being American is about.

LS It's a very middle-class American story. I don't know if people outside that experience have the same feeling.

CL Like Proust, you are telling a story whose intense specificity made it able to speak to so many different kinds of experience.

LS That's the key, the specific. That's the beauty of the photographic image. It's always the detail. There's a picture of my parents sitting on their bed and they're turned slightly to each other. It's just the degree in which they're turning to each other. It's the fact that my mother's bra strap is showing and my father's underwear is coming up, and there are sweaters folded on the bed. This image opens up to an enormous amount of conjecture—what are they talking about? What's happening? But the first thing that's established is the authenticity of that moment.

CL So no photograph lies. Each photograph has a kind of truth, a testimony to the moment. But somehow photography is not enough for you. That's why you have to write.

LS The meaning of that image is incredibly compelling and I feel the need to anchor that complexity into a larger discourse. I could fetishize that moment and I do. I want to make beautiful, powerful objects but I also want to have it the other way. I want that image to also become part of a larger narrative and to slam up against other images (an afterimage). I want to measure how a life was lived against how a life was dreamed.

If you like this article, you might also like:

Sebastiaan Bremer by Shoshana Dentz
Dana Schutz by Mei Chin

Edit | Delete

All rights reserved. © Bomb Magazine, New Art Publications, and its Contributors.