A HISTORY OF THE EVIDENCE

In 1977, two young artists living in the San Francisco Bay Area, both recently out of art school, published a book of photographs they had found in the files of local corporations, government agencies, and research institutions.1 Somehow, through a combination of innocence and bravado, the two persuaded the guardians of those files, who were perhaps, in retrospect, even more innocent, to let the visitors in and not only see what was there but take some of it away with them—often for free. In many cases, these keepers of publicity shots and librarians of research files were persuaded not only by the seriousness of the two men, but by a letter on government stationery stating that they had received government funds to pursue a research project and would be granted an exhibition at an honorable museum where the materials they found would be displayed. They called this book and its accompanying show *Evidence*.

Today we are more accustomed to seeing pictures plucked from their original context and put on the wall of a museum or published as objects of artistic value, all without identifying or instructional text. One of the earliest to insist on this kind of autonomy for the photograph was probably Walker Evans, when he inserted his pictures first, but without identification, before James Agee's text in their 1941 book on Alabama sharecroppers, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. More recently, artists such as Carrie Mae Weems have appropriated other older (and often anonymous) photographs into their own art installations; during the period of high postmodernism, Richard Prince cropped advertisements down to make very different statements in very different situations.2 At the time Evidence was published, however, such a decontextualized presentation of photography, especially photographs made for the purpose of record, was a new phenomenon, and directed toward a still relatively tiny audience—those interested in photography as a kind of art. Yet the book proved to be a modest bombshell. It was elusive and poetic, it needed the viewer's active thought and engagement, it was not strictly speaking political, in those most political of times, and it was a challenge to those who thought they knew what art photographs looked like. Thanks to a renewed interest in conceptualism, and now also a regard for photography's central role in contemporary art, this modest book today seems premonitory rather than dated or quaint. Its republication is a tribute to the continued resonance of these pictures.

Evidence was a genuine and creative reflection of the two people who conceived of it and put it together. Both Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel—almost contemporaries (Sultan was born in 1946, Mandel in 1950)—were raised in Southern California's San Fernando Valley, a burgeoning postwar suburban flatland where their respective sets of parents moved, determined to experience the golden land of sunshine and opportunity. By 1960, Los Angeles had superceded Chicago to become the nation's second most populous urban center. The film industry provided the city with its indigenous culture, and this local preoccupation with fantasy encouraged a particular artistic climate. Movies and billboards were its folk art. Some, referring to the city as a cultural desert, might imagine a more fertile soil for young artists. In this case, however, Los Angeles provided Mandel and Sultan with a

little history and great freedom. When they were old enough to notice, the art that interested them in L.A. was, for the most part, inflected by conceptualism, a genuinely homegrown art movement in the 1960s. Most of the exciting new art activity rotated around the now legendary Ferus Gallery, founded in 1957 by the sculptor Edward Kienholtz and Walter Hopps (who would soon become the region's inspired curator at the tiny, active center for contemporary art, the Pasadena Art Center). Responsive to artists' interests as well as his own intuitions, Hopps organized a Schwitters exhibition in 1962 and a retrospective for the great, enigmatic Marcel Duchamp the following year, and in so doing provided historical context for the two main aesthetic trends of Southern California: collage and conceptualism, both important to Mandel and Sultan. By 1965, when the Los Angeles County Museum of Art opened, its staff and trustees determined to make it a competitive force regionally and nationally. It was there, in 1966, that Man Ray, Duchamp's friend and Dadaist colleague, was given a retrospective exhibition. In this admittedly modest center for art, Man Ray's show was a strong endorsement for conceptualism.3

By the mid-60s, Los Angeles had inherited the mantle of rebellious West Coast art center that, a generation before, San Francisco had worn as the capital of the Beats. When *Artforum* magazine was founded in 1962 as the self-declared voice of the post-Abstract Expressionist artists, it was originally produced in San Francisco. The magazine moved to L.A. three years later (before it left for New York two years later still). Los Angeles was ambitious in art and other enterprises and was ready to take on high culture, independent of the acknowledged postwar center, New York, but also of the Beat and incipient hippie culture in San Francisco. Important Los Angeles art figures of the time included collagists Edward Kienholtz and Wallace Berman (who also published the experimental Semina, an art and literary magazine familiar to Larry Sultan), Robert Irwin (who would become an installation artist and sculptor), and the more conceptually inclined Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari, and Chris Burden. In addition to locally produced work, much of the experimental art of the East Coast appeared in the new galleries and museums of Los Angeles. In the 1960s, Southern California was a relevant and exciting place to see art.

As it happened, Los Angeles was also a liberating place to study art. During the boom of the 1960s, tracts of Southern California orange groves were bulldozed to make way for the campuses the University of California built in their place. In preparation for what the government expected would be a burgeoning economy, the state dedicated itself to strengthening its educational institutions, and fine arts faculties shared in that growth. Thus many photographers who would have been out of direct contact with Mandel and Sultan's generation were in a position to make these suburban teenagers think twice about the world they saw. The most powerful photography teacher of this time was probably Robert Heinecken, who taught for many years at U.C.L.A. and who, in his work, embraced "found" photographic matter. Heinecken culled pictures from soft-porn magazines and ads and news photos from *Time* and *Newsweek*, superimposing them into a kind of dual collage—porn or advertisement over news shot from Vietnam—or abstracting the picture to such an

extreme as to make unrecognizable the erotic, objectified nude in the suggestive, landscape-like shape of the final picture.4

Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan met as graduate students in photography, when both had come north to attend the San Francisco Art Institute. They elected to come for different reasons: for Sultan it was a chance to connect with the heritage of the Beat generation and escape the art school experience he had at the Rhode Island School of Design (where his teachers were Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind); for Mandel it was far enough away from home as to feel really separate from familiar territory, but not so far as to be really distant. Both men had backgrounds in political science before becoming artists, a commonality important to their friendship. They became collaborators because they both felt that the art world in San Francisco was limited and wanted to challenge it. The collaboration suited their temperaments: Mandel's analytic personality responded to the more private and literary Sultan. They provoked each other in fruitful ways, and together formed a kind of special armature with which they tackled the photographic conceits of the place and period in which they were living.

Unlike Los Angeles, early-70s San Francisco was living off its older reputation as an art center. In some measure, it was this very history that drew Mandel and Sultan northward: it was where a recognized West Coast version of abstract painting flourished, where the recent history of the Beat poets still had meaning.5 Early-70s San Francisco had also become the center of new political and cultural upheavals: the antiwar movement, the activity of the Black Panthers, emergent feminism.

But San Francisco was also a town with a defined and sustained history of photography as a serious art form, which also accounted for their attraction to it. Both local museums had been showing photography in their galleries since the 1930s. The important *f/64* exhibition had taken place locally, at the De Young Museum, in 1932, and the tradition of expressive modernism remained strong. Furthermore, the very school Mandel and Sultan attended, the San Francisco Art Institute, boasted Ansel Adams as the founding father of its photography department—the first place where photography was taught consciously as a form of art rather than as a trade. Many of art photography's elders were still alive and nearby: Adams was born and lived in San Francisco when he was not in Yosemite or on the road; he settled in Carmel before his death in 1984. Edward Weston also lived his last years in Carmel. And Imogen Cunningham, a cantankerous contemporary of Adams and Weston, found herself, by the 1970s, deeply interested in the liberated young people who came to San Francisco; she spent much of her later years teaching, befriending, and photographing them. A later artistic presence—the person who inherited Adams' job at the Art Institute—Minor White also had a strong following there, and after his tenure he frequently returned to California to teach and photograph.

As a young artist, Sultan was included in White's exhibition and modest volume called *Octave of Prayer*.6 The most influential teacher of that period, White considered photography a form of spiritual exercise and proposed a metaphorical reading of photographs, assisted by the insights he found in psychology and Eastern religious practice. In the mid-70s, San Francisco photographers generally

considered their work as a craft; they tended to be concerned with print quality and personal expression, and were not inclined toward the ironies, humor, or apparent objectlessness of conceptual art. Coming to San Francisco represented a cultural conflict Mandel and Sultan only later understood, but it clarified and enlarged their work. It unified them against what they considered an outdated café society where photography was accepted as a form of aesthetic self-expression, and where the idea that photographs had a role in understanding the world seemed foreign.

The work Larry Sultan made on his own, before his friendship and collaboration with Mandel, were suggestive photographs shot underwater, strange and gentle pictures in black-and-white that evoke a kind of dream landscape of people. When he arrived in San Francisco, Mike Mandel had already published a small photographic book, *Myself: Timed Exposures* (1971); the lank-bodied, bespectacled young man (with his fashionable shoulder-length hair) appears in each picture, caught along with others by his own photographic devices in the meat section of a grocery store or in Yosemite with tourists. In 1974, Mandel published another small book, *Seven Never Before Published Portraits of Edward Weston*, a deadpan group of photographs and accompanying questionnaires filled out by various Edward Westons located via the telephone book—none of whom had any relationship at all to the photographer. (The book was dedicated to Abbott and Costello, Woody Allen, Charlie Chaplin, Imogen Cunningham as a Cinncinati Red, and Lawrence of Sultan, along with the participating Edward Westons.) This was followed, in 1975, by *The Baseball-Photographer Trading Cards* project, where he photographed willing players in the (at that time) tiny photography community: the established greats like Adams and Cunningham, the teachers Robert Heinecken, Jack Welpott, and Peter Bunnell, the up-and-coming new stars of the field, Jerry Uelsmann and Judy Dater. All of these projects shared their unpretentious and homemade appearance, their perfunctory, even bland reproductive quality, and some of their sense of humor with Ed Ruscha's deadpan, industrialstyle chapbooks *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) or *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1962), and had nothing at all to do with the serious, self-conscious artistry of the *f/64* tradition. There was a kind of nonsensical seriality to Mandel's little books, and an outrageously banal conceptualism that he willingly relates to Ruscha's productions.

Self-produced books were attractive projects because they were relatively inexpensive to make, their author (in this case the artist) had full control of content, quality, and distribution, and, more importantly, a book could give a fuller shape or further dimension to a visual idea. The book was the work of art, not the individual pictures which made it up. Books appealed to the political subversiveness of the young Mandel and Sultan. Publications they found helpful or provocative included those of Ralph Gibson, especially *The Somnambulist* (1970) and *Deja-vu* (1973), where allusive, open-ended, uncaptioned pictures were sequenced to take on some general narrative meaning; the experience of looking through the pages was thus more mysterious and provocative than the individual pictures were if seen alone. Gibson was so engaged by the possibilities of personal photographic books that he founded Lustrum Press in 1969, and notably produced such autobiographical narratives as Robert Frank's *Lines of My Hand* (1972) and the scrapbook-plus-journal *A Loud Song* (1971), by Danny Seymour.7 All of these were important and

compelling predecessors to Evidence, if not directly related. Besides these more autobiographical tales, there was other wonderfully whimsical work to be found in books produced in Southern California, especially those of John Baldassari (e.g. *Throwing a Ball Once to Get Three Melodies and Fifteen Chords* [1973]) and the sprightly, funny narratives made at the time by Bill Wegman, Robert Cumming, and Eleanor Antin. To these artists, photography was something to be explored sequentially, often with humor if not irony, questioning the idea of art and the artist's role, and testing what has been called the "aura" of the photograph. Mandel and Sultan were familiar with all of this work, and they admired it.

One major and especially pertinent figure for them, but for Mandel in particular, was Chris Burden. Although probably not obvious, since its intent is poetic rather than specifically political, Evidence has a consistent theme and a kind of narrative. The work in the book is a sort of funny referendum on the new technology, burgeoning close by in the incipient Silicon Valley. Sensitive to the desensitizing implications of a technology gone out of control, Sultan and particularly Mandel found Burden's work especially relevant. Burden was, for the most part, a performance artist, but his pieces emphasized the realness of the artist, the importance of the gesture of the individual, and the role and value of the creative, humane, and whimsical personality, and they illustrate how slight but heroic the mere body can be.8

Mandel and Sultan found the local offices of NASA and the Ames Research Center at Moffett Field, in nearby Sunnyvale, and though they were interested in the expected beautiful pictures of space coming in across the wires, they were fascinated by the chaotic, marvelous, mournful, and funny pictures of people engulfed by a new technology no one could understand but experts. Pictures about photography were also housed there—pictures, for instance, of family snapshots left on the moon, which interested the artists. Engaged by these discoveries, they explored the enormous resources nearby. The Jet Propulsion Lab, TRW, General Atomic, and the ambitious research laboratories at Stanford were seen as poetic sources for the kind of picture they were impelled to find. And the places had literally thousands—even hundreds of thousands—of pictures to explore. Moreover, they realized that with the recent changeover to 35 mm documentation, the older and more formal 4 x 5s, made in black-and-white and illuminated by flash, possessed an archaic, deliberate, crafted quality which intrigued them. Besides their inherent elegance and quirkiness, the two felt that this almost archaic formality could give better clues to the future through the language of the past. Evidence, therefore, is a post-Vietnam, post-Watergate work of art, one which engages the loss of belief provoked by that era and an examination of the resulting ambivalent relationship of people to the new machines.

In 1973, Mandel and Sultan began to work together, first on open-ended, allusive billboards, where words and appropriated drawings were conjoined without apparent meaning. They enjoyed working publicly and anonymously. One of the first billboards they designed and produced was *Oranges on Fire* (1974-75), whose title was included on the billboard next to a drawing of bare, muscular arms that held, in fact, flaming oranges.9 They chose collaboration in part as a statement in opposition to the kind of photography they were taught in school; it was a

challenge to the old romantic idealism of "originality" and artistic authorship. In 1974, Mandel and Sultan also produced their first collaborative book, *How to Read Music in One Evening: A Clatworthy Catalog*. This comprised a series of drawings and rather lowbrow photographic illustrations lifted from cheap ads or instructional manuals, the sort found on the back of comic books, inside matchbooks, or in the pages of *Popular Mechanics*. The advertised electric neck warmers, machines for stripping corn off the cob, and tape for repairing automobile water hoses were arranged and cropped, and these wonderfully ordinary, naive pictures were reordered to become a mysterious and funny metaphorical book that was essentially about sex.

Those strange gray pictures, which demonstrated how a mechanical nose hair trimmer worked or how to place potatoes on a metal spike for more efficient cooking, resembled the collaged work of Bruce Conner and Jess.10 In How to Read Music, however, the pictures were arranged with a respect for the authority of the original image, which, while cropped (and with its text excised) retains its identity while simultaneously being altered by the anomalous relationship it has with the other pictures. Even though the mechanics the images illustrate is decidedly low tech—mop handles, shoulder strap details—the consistent theme is of people using mechanical devices in a kind of banal but utopian association: women smiling giddily as they try on sunshades or use telephone receivers. Only toward the end is there even a sense of foreboding: a close-up of a handgun near a man's shirtless chest, a man's face covered with a ski mask except for the eyes and nose, a box of jewels and documents with ghostly flames licking its surface. Not surprisingly, this little book gives clues to the photographic project that would immediately follow it.

In 1975, Mandel and Sultan were awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to investigate the files of government, science, and industry, and to publish a book of what they found. Armed with an official letter, which enabled them to do some immediate research in the files of local institutions, they approached John Humphrey, the Curator of Photography at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMoMA), and persuaded him of the project's value. He offered them a show at the museum.11 They also proposed Humphrey a wager, for a good bottle of scotch, to see if he could detect an "evidence" type of picture they would make themselves and slip into the show—a bet he won. As the project progressed they broadened their research horizons and included visits to institutions and organizations in Los Angeles and eventually Washington, D.C., as a way of ensuring that what they saw was not only a local phenomenon.

The pictures Mandel and Sultan chose for the show extend those in the book. Like it, they are uproariously funny and desperately sad, and while the subjects vary widely, the photographs they retained for both have a kind of melancholic and bizarre resonance. But the book is more tightly considered and has a clear narrative, one that they derived from the evidence within the pictures themselves. The transitions are subtle, not directorial, because comparisons or linkages are made at the turn of the page rather than on facing pages. And there is no obvious clue to the book's meaning except in the pictures, their order, and the introductory list of all the offices and agencies from whence the pictures came. The shape of the book, its cover, and the choice of typography all indicate a kind of legal authority and

detachment, as though to assure the reader that the perpetrators are speaking the language of truth, which documentary photography is reputed to represent.

Thus structured into a kind of narrative, the photographs describe first a world of human traces: dusty or possibly bloody footprints on a patio floor; a handprint at a crime site; and a picture of a photograph, damaged and bleached by an apparent fire and abandoned on a chair. Then there are the parts of people: a man's lower body, standing as though in a police lineup; a gloved hand holding up a rope like a noose; a man standing in water holding a sheet of white paper behind a stand of growing rice; and, most pathetic (or hilarious), a man standing dolefully in his underwear, apparently wired to a clock and a nearby cabinet. As the story proceeds we see the increasing inclusion of objects for measuring and observing: a ruler, a pencil for scale, an intrusive focusing lens, gridded panels. Gradually, we notice a consciousness of space or spaciousness in the pictures—most of them were made in the West, after all—that also conveys a certain sterile hollowness, a sense of urgency, of intense attention to strange detail, of anxiety only slightly mollified by busy attention. Nature, when it appears, is contained, sanitized, measured, observed, and usually distanced from contamination by humans. Often the humans in nature look awkward and ill at ease, as in the picture of suited, bespectacled men clustered in back of a boulder, one at a lectern, holding forth. One of the scariest pictures shows another group of suited men striding, with walkie-talkies, over the crest of a hill, as though they control the universe.

These pictures of men entrapped or commanding technology, assuming they have the upper hand, form the core, the tragic motif of the book. Men enclosed in a box, pruning, climbing on, and attending to a caged tree; a corporate-looking man seen from behind, his impassive hand lingering at a control panel, facing a window shot with flash; and one of the most eerie, the shaved head, arm, and vulnerable ear of a monkey held in the tight grip of an enormous leather glove, his face thrust into a leather pouch—all of these pictures are central, key to understanding the book's essential meaning. What sprouts naturally in this universe are tangles of wires, as choking as crabgrass or the kudzu vines that grow in the American South, and the strange mushroom-like forms of plastic foam that evolve and expand most likely in the dark. Some also possess a kind of disconcerting beauty: toward the end of the book we discover an alluring, mysterious, glowing aeronautical body, a mystical presence in white worshipped by its attendant workers. Large and then small scattered explosions and traces of apocalyptic fire follow, and the last pictures show evidence of disorder, fragmentation, and a man struggling to escape.12

When the pictures were exhibited at SFMoMA they were pinned to the walls, backed by board but protected by simple pieces of glass cut to the size of the print. Thus their record-making property was respected, and so they were seen by Davis Pratt, the Curator of Photography at the Fogg Museum of Harvard. Between San Francisco and Cambridge, where Pratt showed the pictures, there developed a confusion about the way they should be displayed, a disagreement that arose from the nature and intent of the pictures, and the implied question they proposed on the nature of photography as an art. To defend his position, that the pictures should not be displayed as art but as documents, Pratt cited a recent essay that had appeared in the *New York Times*, "The Paradoxical Museumization of Photography," by Hilton

Kramer.13 At the center of the contention was Pratt's own confusion about the anomalous meaning of these photographs, assembled and presented in a museum context, and a relatively recent interest in examining the intrinsic meaning and aesthetic resonance of pictures never intended to be art.

For those who remember it, the photography world in 1977 was an intimate community where everyone knew each other, and where a sense of comradeship and experimentation was much in order, and little financial award at stake. In retrospect, the mid-70s was a moment of great fertility for photography. The older tradition of expressive photography descended from Alfred Stieglitz to Minor White and Paul Caponigro was still a viable and even vital aesthetic path for young photographer-artists. However, the examination and production of photographs without aesthetic affect seemed a more central approach to making pictures. In other words, there were the photographers who saw their work as a more private spiritual expression based in accepted (if somewhat outdated) traditions of art, and there were those who shared a new understanding of photography as an expressive form most distinctive in its documentary or vernacular aspect, with the conscious or obvious presence of the artist missing. This old dichotomy—between art photography and something called documentary—was broached when Hilton Kramer set Jacob Riis against Alfred Stieglitz as the proponent of an art "that we now value…so much more, and are so eager to annex so much that hitherto fell outside [the] boundaries to the mainstream of artistic experience."14

By the mid-1970s, therefore, photography was not only acknowledged as a power in the art world, but much of the great work made then was work that was allied to this new kind of photographic vision—a photography that engaged the world rather than a medium that was essentially a reflection of an artist's consciousness. Many projects of great distinction and originality date from this time: *New Topographics*, a 1975 exhibition from the Eastman House, Rochester, NY, presented the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, Lewis Baltz, and Robert Adams, among others; *William Eggleston's Guide*, a 1976 exhibition and catalogue from the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA); and *Mirrors and Windows*, a 1978 exhibition and catalogue, also from MoMA, which attempted to establish a distinction between photography's two poles, alliance to the author or to the represented subject. From the vantage of hindsight, the now classical figures of Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand, and Diane Arbus, who worked within the tradition of documentary photography, all came to maturity during the 1960s and 70s. But beyond the common interest all these photographers had in their deference to the observed world, most also recognized that in spite of its descriptive powers, the photograph—particularly the solitary, uncaptioned documentary photograph—was essentially mute, allusive, and poetic rather than an independent carrier of information.

Within this creative nexus, and in a way acknowledging its power and presence, photography was included within a larger cultural and social critique. Because this medium seemed so potentially expressive and dangerous—it was conceded a powerful means of representing both fantasy and truth—photography was studied to reveal its component parts or hidden meanings. Susan Sontag wrote that photography was easier to understand than art because much if not most of the

point of photography was about the subject. In the mid 70s, the two prominent new critical voices about photography, those who sought to open discussion of it in these new (and unaesthetic or antiformalist) ways, were Sontag and Allan Sekula. Sontag's provocative book *On Photography* was much discussed and was especially offensive to photographers who saw themselves as artists.15 Sontag and Sekula examined the unacknowledged political meanings, the unseen and unread text they found contained within pictures or in the context into which they were set. Recognizing the medium's new acceptance under the umbrella of the museum and art gallery, where photographs were now acknowledged as part of the modernist enterprise, they were not the first to analyze photography's role in the larger mass culture. Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* had appeared in 1964, and both Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes were acknowledged by the younger writers as important precedents. Sontag and Sekula, however, were cautious of the newly acquired celebrity of the medium. They expected photographs to have a kind of narrative meaning that was not only readable, but ultimately political. Sontag claimed, "Only that which narrates can make us understand."16

One kind of photograph, therefore, that received increasing attention was the so-called vernacular picture. Such photographs were discovered and presented in museums, and were also analyzed critically for what they revealed about social structures. Thus pictures whose author was not known, or which were intended as purposeful or made as a private artifact to preserve the memory of family, were examined within this newly active forum of discussion, where boundaries of interest between artmaking and critical thinking were fluid. It was in this context that, in 1973, Michael Lesy published a strange compendium of what were considered the works of an unknown, small town photographer who lived in rural Wisconsin at the turn of the century, alongside clippings gleaned from the local newspaper, all of which had been found in the local historical society, collaged together, and entitled Wisconsin Death Trip.17 Three years before that Lee Friedlander published a book of prints made from negatives he discovered by the unknown New Orleans photographer E.J. Bellocq, unaffected and unmoralizing pictures of prostitutes in their quarters. At the Museum of Modern Art in New York there were exhibitions, such as *From the Picture Press* (1973), which presented pictures from the tabloids without their captions, and examined them for their consistency of form and ritual meaning. All of these examples attest to a new respect for the photograph as an artifact and as a poetic object, an admiration for a more classical, detached approach of photographer to subject, where the medium and message seemed to cohere.

This broad and open range of critical discussion was evident in other contemporaneous publications: one was the Massachusetts Review, which brought forth an issue in 1978 entitled *Photography: Current Perspectives* that the photographer Jerome Liebling, its guest editor, devoted to what he considered the current debate "between proponents of photography as a detached, symbolic, and formalistic art and those who regard the photographer as necessarily mediating between the objective world and a particular humanistic and engaged vision of it."18 Allan Sekula's essay exploring the social assumptions of documentary photographs was published in this issue.19 Virtually contemporaneous was the Wellesley College project *Photography within the Humanities*, where photography

was acknowledged as a great and live force, appropriate to study not only as art, but for its place within the media, as a cultural subject and an historical tool.20 Probably the most articulate defender of the artistic power, indeed the magic power, of the vernacular picture was Wright Morris, himself a documentary photographer. *Discussing Wisconsin Death Trip*, he wrote, "At this moment in photography's brief history, the emergence and inflation of the photographer appears to be at the expense of the photograph, of the miraculous."21

When *Evidence* was published in 1977, therefore, it was received in a slightly different climate than that in which it was made. This was made clear when Larry Sultan was asked by the critic Hal Fisher if *Evidence* was intended as a structuralist piece. Sultan explained that he had not even read the work of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss.22 When the reviews were published, one writer complained that, "though its neat design and apparent topicality suggest, perfunctorily at least, some autonomous structure, its prevailing lack of direction prevents it from having any cognitive effect."23 The point about *Evidence*, however, is that it is not a strictly political book—it is not a critique; the narrative is imposed on it by the two who selected and sequenced the pictures. It is not a postmodern production. Mandel and Sultan considered the pictures found objects, fully within the tradition of Duchamp's suspended snow shovel (ironically entitled *In Advance of a Broken Arm*) and Man Ray's mute and vicious iron with carpet tacks glued to its flat surface. As the artists explained in the press release for the San Francisco exhibition, "By definition these found objects are records and by implication they are cultural artifacts. This is a…poetic exploration upon the restructuring of imagery."24 Taken out of their original context and placed in a narrative formed from the internal logic found within the pictures themselves, these mute images provided a wealth of archaeological clues about the kind of society that produced them. But the narrative is allusive and open-ended; it does not have a real text, or political narrative. The book is rather like the experience of the 1966 Antonioni film *Blow-Up* (which fascinated Sultan): the closer the photographer gets, the more he enlarges the details of the picture, the less he sees, the more it becomes purely paper, the more disconcerting his relationship to the photograph finally is. All the wealth of information the photographs in *Evidence* provide, disrupted from their original context and placed into an intuitive visual essay about the ridiculousness of vanity and the pathetic loss of power, makes the pictures themselves essentially unknowable and inscrutable, and more strange and potent for it. The extraction of photographs from their original contexts has taken other avenues than poetry since Evidence was compiled. In the work of Richard Prince and many other postmodernists, photographic materials, particularly from the realm of advertising, have been restructured to reveal the commodity culture we inhabit. Similarly, Sherrie Levine's act of appropriating Walker Evans' pictures, originally made for the Farm Security Administration in the 1930s and intended as pictures of rural poverty that would elicit awareness and support for government aid programs, underlined their current status as objects of culture. But decontextualization or recontextualization also leads, in a curious way, to a reawakened sensitivity to context, to seeing beautiful pictures within the archive and admiring their strange forcefulness. Recently, there has been an interest in seeing evidentiary photography,

such as police pictures made as evidence in court, aesthetically, a phenomenon probably linked to reality TV and a certain anxiety about reality itself. Photographs of earlytwentieth- century murders in New York City, published in a book also called Evidence, are pictures of social phenomena, compelling and beautiful. Because of their fascinated regard for violent death, this later volume is really about rapture, the mysterious sacredness of life, and provides another kind of acknowledgement of photography's power.25

The makers of *Evidence* have certainly given permission to others to examine the archive in search of the aesthetic. The picture books produced by Carole Kismaric and Marvin Heiferman, for instance, delve into the anonymous photographic file with subtle and innovative results.26 They assure us that making photographs is not the only, or perhaps even the major issue provoked by the medium, and that understanding how photography is used can also be integrated into its meaning. As much as the photographs in *Evidence* represent the notion of a helpless entrapment by forces—usually unseen or unknowable—that are beyond our power to comprehend or direct, they also reflect a much larger discussion and concern with our culture. In much of the great, serious photographic work of the last thirty years—not only in "found" photographic artifacts like *Evidence*, but in pictures seen and made about our environment by photographers from Lewis Baltz to Robert Adams—reverberate the shared knowledge that we are fragile, that nature is as endangered as we are, and that the future of our culture as we know it is at stake.

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FOOTNOTES

1. This essay is much indebted to both Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel, who made themselves available to the author for interviews between September and December, 2002.
2. See Walker Evans and James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Farmers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969). Examples of Carrie Mae Weems' appropriated work can be found in Andrea Kirsch and Susan Fisher Sterling, Carrie Mae Weems (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, c. 1993), especially her appropriation of J.T. Zealy's daguerreotypes of slaves. There is also, of course, the political work of Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine, and other New York-based artists. None of these artists can be said to have been influenced specifically by *Evidence*—only by the idea of recontextualizing available photographs.
3. See Jay Belloli, Peter Plagens, et al., *Radical Past: Contemporary Art and Music in Pasadena, 1960-1974* (Pasadena: Armory Center for the Arts, 1999); Charles Desmarais, *Proof: Los Angeles Art and the Photograph, 1960-1980* (Los Angeles: Fellows of Contemporary Art, 1992); and *Man Ray*, exhibition, Los Angeles County Museum of Art in cooperation with the Museum's Contemporary Art Council under the direction of Jules Langsner, 1966.
4. The "found art" aspect of Heinecken's work was a revelation to Mandel. "For me, it was witnessing Heinecken's *TV/Time Environment (1970)*, where he installed a mock living room within a gallery at the Pasadena Art Museum. The key element was a TV switched on to broadcast whatever was on at the moment, but placed in front of the picture tube was a monochrome transparency of a female torso. Every changing image in real time on TV was now intermingled with the sexually charged objectified image on the female body. The

simplicity and elegance of a single gesture was worthy of Duchamp, and it clarified for me the position of the artist as a conceptualizer rather than necessarily a creator of imagery."
5. The Art Institute was on the edge of North Beach, near where Allen Ginsberg had read *Howl* and Jack Kerouac had patronized the tiny coffee shops near the City Lights bookstore.
6. Minor White, *Octave of Prayer: An Exhibition on a Theme, Aperture 17* (1972). Sultan's photograph, which looks like a Pieta (but is really someone holding a young man in the water) is reproduced at the top of p. 30.
7. Ralph Gibson was based in New York but had worked in Oakland with Dorothea Lange as her last printer (she died in 1965) and was at the San Francisco Art Institute in the 1970s, where Sultan met him.
8. Burden has consistently explored the "world engulfed in its own technology," as he poignantly states. From Chris Burden, *Beyond the Limits*, ed. Peter Noever (Stuttgart: MAK, Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, Cantz, 1996), 186.
9. It was called *Oranges on Fire* because the billboard company had eradicated an earlier billboard collaboration with a Sunkist billboard three weeks before agreed, and Mandel and Sultan considered themselves burned.
10. Jess is the artist's professional name. Both he and Conner are important San Francisco art figures; Sultan says he was especially taken by Conner's appropriated film work, such as his *A Movie* (1958).
11. Three years later the institution organized a major exhibition on conceptual art in San Francisco in the 1970s. See the catalogue: Suzanne Foley, Space, Time, Sound: Conceptual Art in the San Francisco Bay Area: The 1970s (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1981). The show ran from December 21, 1979 to February 10, 1980. The work of Mandel and Sultan is acknowledged in the catalogue's chronology.
12. The list of photographs in the SFMoMA exhibitions archive indicates something of Mandel and Sultan's thinking, since the titles were used only to describe the pictures for the registrars and never on the walls or in the pages of the book. They tend to be hilarious.
13. Hilton Kramer, "The Paradoxical Museumization of Photography," New York Times, 13 November 1977, sec. D, p. 35. Pratt was aware of the distinctions between the self-conscious photography that Minor White represented and the kind of documentary pictures in *Evidence*, because he was friendly with White and knew Sultan's work from *Octave of Prayer*.When he opened the shipping crates at Harvard, Pratt complained both to Sultan and the staff at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona in Tucson (the CCP was organizing the tour and had prepared the photographs for travel), that their framing of the photographs misrepresented the pictures. In a letter to CCP Exhibitions Curator Marnie Gilette, dated March 28, 1978, he wrote, "You chose not only to float the photographs but you added a beveled window mat to heighten the pretentious effect." In other words, he felt they had mistaken them for art.
14. This dichotomy was also discussed by Allan Sekula in his influential essay, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," which originally appeared in *Artforum*(1975) and was later reprinted in Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photoworks, 1973-1983* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984).
15. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977). The book was published after the essays had appeared in the *New York Review of Books*.
16. Ibid., 23. See also p. 3 in the same book, "They [photographs] are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing."
17. Soon after publication the name of the photographer was discovered: Charles van Shaik.

18. Jerome Liebling, ed., *Photography: Current Perspectives* (Rochester, New York: Massachusetts Review/Light Impressions Corporation, 1978), 2. See also*Massachusetts Review* 19 (Winter 1978).
19. Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," reprinted in *Photography Against the Grain*, 53-75.
20. *Photography within the Humanities*, eds. Eugenia Parry Janis and Wendy McNeil (Danbury, New Hampshire: The Art Department, Jewett Arts Center, Wellesley College & Addison House Publishers, 1977). The conference, from which the essays were transcribed, took place in 1975 and included a deliberately diverse group of practitioners: John Morris, Paul Taylor, Gjon Mili, Robert Frank, Frederick Wiseman, John Szarkowski, W. Eugene Smith, Susan Sontag, Irving Penn, and Robert Coles.
21. Wright Morris, "In Our Image," *Massachusetts Review*: 12.
22. From an interview with both Larry Sultan and Hal Fisher, January 2003. A quasi-structuralist reading of *Evidence* appears in Hal Fisher, "Approaches to Photography: The San Francisco Bay Area," *Art Contemporary* 2, no. 4 (1977): 24-5.
23. Henri Man Barendse, review of *Evidence, Exposure* (University of New Mexico) 15, no. 4 (December 1977): 36.
24. Press Release, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, for *Evidence* (1977): 1-2.
25. See Luc Sante, *Evidence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992); *Evidence: Photography and Site* (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1997); and *In Visible Light: Photography and Classification in Art, Science and the Everyday*, eds. Chrissie Isles and Russell Roberts, curator Russell Roberts (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1997).
26. See Marvin Heiferman and Carole Kismaric, *My Day: A Tale of Fear, Alienation and Despair* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, c.1993).