

# ON VIEW

Ellen Brooks, The Lobby and Window

"T.V. PICTURE": Diana Formisano,  
John Glascock, René Santos



...and if it was capital which fostered reality, the reality principle, it was also the first to liquidate it in the extermination of every use value, of every real equivalence, of production and wealth, in the very sensation we have of the unreality of the stakes and the omnipotence of manipulation. Now, it is this very logic which is today hardened even more against it. And when it wants to fight this catastrophic spiral by secreting one last glimmer of reality, on which to found one last glimmer of power, it only manipulates the signs and accelerates the play of simulation.

--Jean Baudrillard

Since the mid-1970s, a major portion of fine art photography has been devoted to an examination of the issue of representation as produced and promoted by the media. Much of this activity has assumed the form of "appropriation," either by re-creating the look of conventional photographs (Cindy Sherman's film stills, Eileen Cowin's soap operas, Martha Rosler's pseudo-documentaries), or by literally re-presenting pre-selected and pre-extant images (Sherrie Levine's reproductions, Richard Prince's advertisements, Barbara Kruger's politically-charged photomontages). The works here, which comprise both Ellen Brooks' untitled window and lobby installations and the exhibition "T.V. Picture," adopt similar strategies of appropriation, but operate in the less familiar (in light of current art production) arenas of, in the former case, commercial display, and in the latter, television and mass communication. The glowing rectangle of the television screen and the lavish color displays are the sources of all of these pictures, however, the reasons for the investigation of television's or advertising's spectacular effects, from their seductive visual aesthetics to their role as entertainment and information industries in the marketplace of late capitalism are radically different.

For Ellen Brooks, the window on Broadway has been conceived as both fact and fiction--as a conventional area



of commercial display, like all of the other merchandise-filled windows on the avenue, and as a metaphorical (or fictional/allegorical) site of our desire (or as Brooks has said, "our longing for what is contained behind the glass"). Her commodities, or goods-for-sale, are not commodities at all, but photographic representations of the "real thing." Yet, in Brooks' rarefied atmosphere of simulated display, what is the "real thing?" The string of pearls surely refers to that most precious commodity, a luxurious object of exchange with no function other than fetishism. But what is the fish that figures so prominently nearby? Is it a symbol (like the running man) of the men who pursue their true object of desire, the wearer of those pearls? And what of the high-heel shoe? Could it be a symbol of the women who must perform endless acts (like the woman with a hoop) in order to become the owner of these jewels? Finally, what are we to make of the man who oversees this erotic scenario? He is tossing a gold brick, but is his gesture one of rejection or merely the means to shatter the illusion?

Obviously, there are no firm answers to these questions, just as there is no easy reading of the single image of the corsage or the recent triptychs. Does the running man pursue the lure of money in a so-called democratic society guided by Liberty, or does money force him to flee? Ambiguity, games between the sexes, and issues of economics and power have always played a role in Brooks' work, and her window installation and triptychs are no exception. More emblematic than ever (the dolls of earlier photographs have been replaced by less familiar sculptures, both found and created; the mundane scenarios replaced by more mysterious tableaux), Brooks' newest works seek to reveal the truth of all representations: they are neither true nor false, but merely the images of our own desire.

Desire also plays a significant role in the works in "T.V. Picture," but in these works, it is desire for meaning rather than longing for the commodity. As Baudrillard has remarked, "the T.V. image suggests nothing,...is only a screen or not even that,...a miniaturized terminal located directly in your head--you are the screen and T.V. is watching you." And the artists in "T.V. Picture" are the screen or rather, their camera lens is the screen and their resulting photographs are additional screens upon which an active rather than passive intelligence has been exercised. Thus, John Glascock presents a fragmentation of



T.V.'s narrative structure in order to expose it as possessing no meaning in and of itself. Television is a total fabrication and Glascock's disjointed sequence of images functions as a reiteration of T.V.'s own lack of a master narrative. René Santos, in contrast, aims to deconstruct the smooth flow of television's simulations, which pose as television "truth," in order to expose them as neither true nor false, but as ideological constructs (representations). His Portrait underlines television's own lack of specificity, and in many ways, points to T.V.'s hidden agendas. Finally Diana Formisano redirects the practice of appropriation through the simulation of the visual effects of television by manufacturing her own images with an analogue computer. These images are subsequently run through a monitor and photographed. Though, as Formisano says, her works are "simulations of simulations of simulations," their origins rest in her own subjectivity and thus signal an attempted renewal of concepts which, to date, have been nearly discredited: originality, subjectivity, and abstraction.

As should be apparent from the photos themselves, T.V. pictures are not merely an alternative to the fine art tradition of still photography, but more importantly, the results of alternative investigations into the homogenizing effects of television, arguably the most powerful and pervasive medium of social and cultural control in America today. T.V. pictures are not homogeneous, but diverse, varied, and intensely ambiguous, for no matter how much we might desire it, we cannot fix the picture.

--William Olander

ON VIEW is supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C., Jerome Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts, and by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

## ELLEN BROOKS

Born in Los Angeles, Calif., in 1946. Attended University of Wisconsin, Madison, and University of California, Los Angeles (BA 1968; MA 1970; MFA 1971). Lives in New York City.

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1983 Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York (1981)
- 1982 Galerie T'Venster, Rotterdam, Holland
- 1978 N.A.M.E. Gallery, Chicago

### Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1984 In Plato's Cave, Marlborough Gallery, New York  
(catalogue; essay by Abigail Solomon-Godeau)
- Pushing the Boundaries: Photography in California  
1945-1980, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art,  
Calif. (travelling; catalogue; essay by Louise Katzman)
- 1983 1983 Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New  
York (catalogue)
- 1982 Image Scavengers: Photography, Institute of Contemporary  
Art, Philadelphia (catalogue; essays by Paula Marincola  
and Douglas Crimp)
- 1981 New Voices 2: Six Photographers, Concept/Theater/Fiction,  
Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin,  
Ohio (catalogue; essay by William Olander)
- 1979 Attitudes: Photography in the 1970's, Santa Barbara  
Museum of Art, Calif. (catalogue)
- Fabricated to be Photographed, San Francisco Museum of  
Modern Art, Calif. (travelling; catalogue; essay by  
Van Deren Coke)



DIANA FORMISANO

Born in Newburgh, New York in 1960. Attended SUNY at Plattsburgh, New York (BA). Lives in New York City.

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1985 Computer Age, New Math Gallery, New York  
1984 Neue Kunst: Zeit und Elektronik, Off Galerie, Berlin,  
West Germany  
New Art with Time and Electronics, International With  
Monument, New York  
Summer NYC, International With Monument, New York
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JOHN GLASCOCK

Born in Walnut Creek, Calif. in 1954. Attended Oregon State University, Corvallis (BFA 1977), Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana (MA 1979), and SUNY at Buffalo, New York (MFA 1981). Lives in Oberlin, Ohio.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1983 Simulated Picture, FAVA Gallery, Oberlin, Ohio

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1984 1984 May Show, Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio  
1983 The Big Picture, Ohio University, Athens (travelling)  
Ohio Selections, Dayton Art Institute, Ohio  
1982 Ohio Selections II, New Gallery of Contemporary Art,  
Cleveland

RENE SANTOS

Born in Puerto Rico in 1954. Attended Tufts University, Somerville, Mass. (BFA 1976), and Hunter College, New York (MA 1983). Lives in New York City.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1985 University of Arizona, Tucson
- 1984 Feature Gallery, Chicago
- 1980 Artists Space, New York

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1984 The Dog Show, Grey Art Gallery, New York University, New York
- Drawings After Photography, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio (travelling; catalogue; essays by William Olander and Andy Grundberg)
- Opposing Force, Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York
- 1983 Painting Invitational, Concord Gallery, New York
- 1982 Face It: 10 Contemporary Artists, New Gallery of Contemporary Art, Cleveland (travelling; catalogue; essays by William Olander and Joanna Frueh)
- 1981 New Voices 2: Six Photographers, Concept/Theater/Fiction, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio (catalogue; essay by William Olander)



Photo: Ellen Brooks. Untitled, 1985. Cibachrome print,  
40 x 90". Courtesy the artist