

The Window

April 3—June 3, 1982

Kenneth Shorr

Crowds and Power

THE NEW MUSEUM



Kenneth Shorr/Crowds and Power

Kenneth Shorr is a photographer who embraces painting and even sculpture, combining all to portray a "damaged sensibility" of the individual in contemporary society.¹ By superimposing painted or drawn images over photographs or by slashing and tearing his prints, Shorr violates if not destroys the photograph as an art object. Both this handling as well as the imagery in the photographs arise from the artist's successive rejections and redefinitions of the role of the photographer as artist as well as the tradition of the photograph as art object.

In its unsettling and disturbing psychological effect on the viewer, Shorr's work owes a debt to Diane Arbus. Her subjective portrayal of human physical and psychic deformity inspired Shorr's early work and provided a decisive direction in his subsequent search for a truth-revealing subject. However, the corresponding role of the artist as "freak" was an alienating and negative myth for Shorr who renounced this *modus operandi* in order to address not a marginal human experience but the psychological core of mass society.

Like many artists, Shorr turned to the media environment as a source of available and powerful images that both create and reflect our society. In his work of 1977–80, he investigated advertising images and the cultural meanings, often sexual stereotypes, implicit in them. Usually these images focused on a single product and/or figure displaying or suggesting the use of a product. For the artist, the critical importance of this directed attention was its fictional enhancement and inflation of the role of the individual, a portrayal which belied the mass consumption it was designed to provoke or the set of values it transmitted. Shorr observed that the consumer culture created by advertising replaced individual values with a "damaged sensibility," induced by a persuasive offering of empty choices and meaningless behaviors. In the resulting work, the artist fabricated and photographed sets of objects and/or figures imbued with the psychological isolation of Arbus's subjects as well as a strangely exacerbated advertising mystique.

Although Shorr wanted to expose the emotional aura surrounding and the cultural meaning permeating advertising images, he came to feel that his work was reinforcing rather than disarming consumer values. For the artist, a power of the images was revealed in their ability to absorb and accommodate his attack while still concealing the beneficiaries of the behavior they induced. A growing awareness of less visible forces propelling mass consumption made the artist take another, more encompassing look at society. While maintaining his investigation of the "damaged sensibility," Shorr stopped staging his own photographs and began using pictures he found in books or magazines which reflected a larger field of cultural values and which served as vehicles



Fig. 1. *Sex Criminal Viewed*, 1981 (detail). Oil stick, ink and charcoal on silver print; 40" × 72".

for the transmission of social attitudes and relationships. For instance, in *Sex Criminal Viewed* (1981), Shorr re-presented a photograph from a police manual in which two naked men are sitting in a precinct house being booked (fig. 1). While the implication in this photograph is that the men are guilty, the perception of the viewer today is that they have been stripped of their rights and dignity. One is left to wonder who is guilty of perversity—the two men or the police officers who humiliate them? Do the "criminals" have a sick mind, or do the police? Or do they both?

The subjects and setting of this photograph—police and deviants in a precinct house—suggest one possible answer. The "damaged sensibility," a psychological state of mind, can be seen as a symptom arising from a complex social structure, not simply from the media environment, and characterized by "the institutionalized society, the administered world, the culture industry, the damaged subject."² In the work in this window, *Crowds and Power*, Shorr uses images of masses of people to visualize figuratively the social forces



Fig. 3. *Crowds and Power*, 1982. Oil stick, ink, acrylic, chalk, and charcoal on silver prints. 8'22" × 22'4" × 1'6". Photo: David Lubarsky.

shaping the individual. The several crowd scenes included here represent Shorr's analysis of the "damaged sensibility" as a lack of individuality—a loss of uniqueness, awareness, and authenticity.

Many of the scenes in the window were found in history books, which defined different cultural, political, and racial groups by means of crowds. The artist notes that the likelihood of identifying these groups as "other" is increased by the depiction of them as masses rather than in terms of the unique individual or the nuclear family structure by which our dominant cultural group tends to portray itself. Citing the long-standing visual and verbal identification of Africans, Chinese, and most recently Iranians as "hordes," Shorr points up the intention of the media to make a less palpable and more complex reality visible and therefore, in some way, "known and understood." Reduced to a manageable image and embedded in an explanatory context of caption/text or television commentary, such scenes convey a false sense of security engendered by the impression that someone else can and will take care of any threatening situations.

Like vicarious emotions induced by consumer advertising, a viewer's experience of the photographs of these crowd scenes is once removed from the original. Shorr cites C. Wright Mills:

[People] are aware of much more than they have personally experienced; and their own experience is always indirect. The quality of their lives is determined by meanings they have received from others. Everyone lives in a world

of such meaning. No man stands alone directly confronting a world of solid fact.³

In this window, however, Shorr attempts to create a solid fact which will jolt the viewer by exposing the very way and process by which we experience through photographs a reality once removed. Shorr blows up textbook images, displacing them onto Fourteenth Street where one expects these large images to be selling something. The explanatory and familiar context in which the images first appeared is jettisoned, and the viewer must surmise what these images are and mean. Some of the crowd scenes are familiar, and the viewer might imagine being present or witnessing the events in the window. Shorr encourages this feeling by centrally placing a photographer taking a snapshot and a detached observer, whom he associates with the viewer (fig. 2 *detail*). Both figures have their backs turned to a collapsing building; in this juxtaposition, Shorr illustrates the common dismissal of a disaster news photo as tragic but ordinary. Shorr contends that the individual in consumer culture is similarly unaware of the destruction of his or her own sensibility.

Through his juxtaposition of images and treatment of the photographic surface, Shorr seeks to evoke a latent tension—a mood of "controlled hysteria." In an extreme and revealing close-up, a glazed eye in the upper-left corner "erupts" through the overlying photograph (fig. 3). This image suggests both the artist's perceived use of the photograph to "inspect" ourselves and its inherent limitation

as "a skin that separates us from knowing." Debris of fragmented glass, strewn across the surface of the eye by the force of the rupture, suggests the shattering of a self-image. Next to the eye, the artist paints a black half-moon, echoed across the window in the whole and refracted orbs which suggest fields of microscopic or telescopic vision and also imply the travel of a spinning planet.

In the central globe, the artist paints a white emblem of Africa by which he symbolizes that what we actually come to think after viewing photographs of crowds such as these is a gross simplification. Instead of portraying masses of black Africans, he outlines a visual cliché of our cultural perception of the "teeming, dark continent," and further upsets white preconceptions by depicting blacks in the role of authoritarian military figures (middle right, fig. 3). In another white outline in the center, a police-like figure talking through a megaphone is growing out of the head of the detached observer and between the collapsing building and threatening continent. Here the artist diagnoses the illusion of false security at the basis of the "damaged sensibility": the passive observer mentally fantasizes an authoritarian figure (in a pose reassuringly like his own) who will take care of the situation. Further elaborating on the nature of this sensibility, Shorr describes it as a survival response: "Damaged things are difficult to destroy. They are still living, adapting, but they have been in a very fundamental way hurt." In almost imperceptible silhouette traces, Shorr draws vignettes of these responses: from left to right, we see two figures supporting a third who seems hurt (lower left), a woman caring for a sick boy (center lower left), a nuclear family drawn on the observer (center), and a male figure handing something to a female superimposed over the group of black officers. At the end of this sequence, on the far right in the largest drawing, the artist crudely depicts a totally inert naked body on a surgical table. The image, suggested by a line of T.S. Eliot's,⁴ clearly ends the sequence with the conclusion that only an unconscious mechanism will be left at the end of this process of numbing. Shorr values the clarity and impact of poetry and prose, quoting Ezra Pound: "Literature is news that Stays news."⁵ Unlike the response of dismissal towards a news photograph, the artist wants the viewer to see and be aroused by poetic associations in his work.

Shorr feels that these trace drawings reveal his critical attitudes and that without them the repetition of the image of crowd scenes would seem to endorse a Pop art esthetic in which the repetitive use of an image portrays a "blankness" and evokes a feeling of banal horror. But the artist disclaims the evolved role of the Pop artist as a "voyeur of an extraordinary campy coolness," a denouement which "has made Andy Warhol my generation's answer to Salvador Dali." What Shorr has done in his repetitive use of the crowd scene is to present the photograph more didactically

as a "scrap of information," forcefully demonstrating its excision of scenes from their original context and the resulting "morbid" reduction of the original event into a lifeless trace. The blunt abutment of prints clarifies the nature of the individual photograph, demonstrating that it is not a complete pictorial whole mirroring a non-fragmented reality but the ruptured remains of a moment in time. The crowd scenes, used repeatedly, portray a mass existence of reductive fragmentation and choking catharsis. Enlarged, these photographs serve as a backdrop on which the artist paints and draws, tears and slashes in order "to strip away the banal opacity of these images," revealing them as "coded messages not only describing events but demonstrating values of the dominant culture."

For Shorr, the divorce of the individual from real events—the lack of confrontation with and determination of a social order or personal reality—results in the individual being unable to establish some meaning of life, allowing others to do so; the consequence of this abdication is that the individual forfeits a painful awareness for a numbed sense of security. Shorr humorously but seriously describes his style as "post-atomic primitivism" and recently has turned to non-photographic means to express this vision (see cover). Although his term may evoke a nostalgia for the future, the artist believes the holocaust has already happened and we are its damaged survivors. Shorr wants us to wake up and come out of the bomb shelters.

Robin Dodds

Notes

1. All quotations, unless rhetorical or otherwise noted, are transcribed by the author from a conversation with the artist in Chicago, March 1982.
2. Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 52–53.
3. C. Wright Mills, "The Cultural Apparatus," *Power Politics and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 405–06.
4. "When the evening is spread out against the sky/like a patient etherized upon a table/..." T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *The Wasteland and Other Poems*.
5. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1934) p. 29.

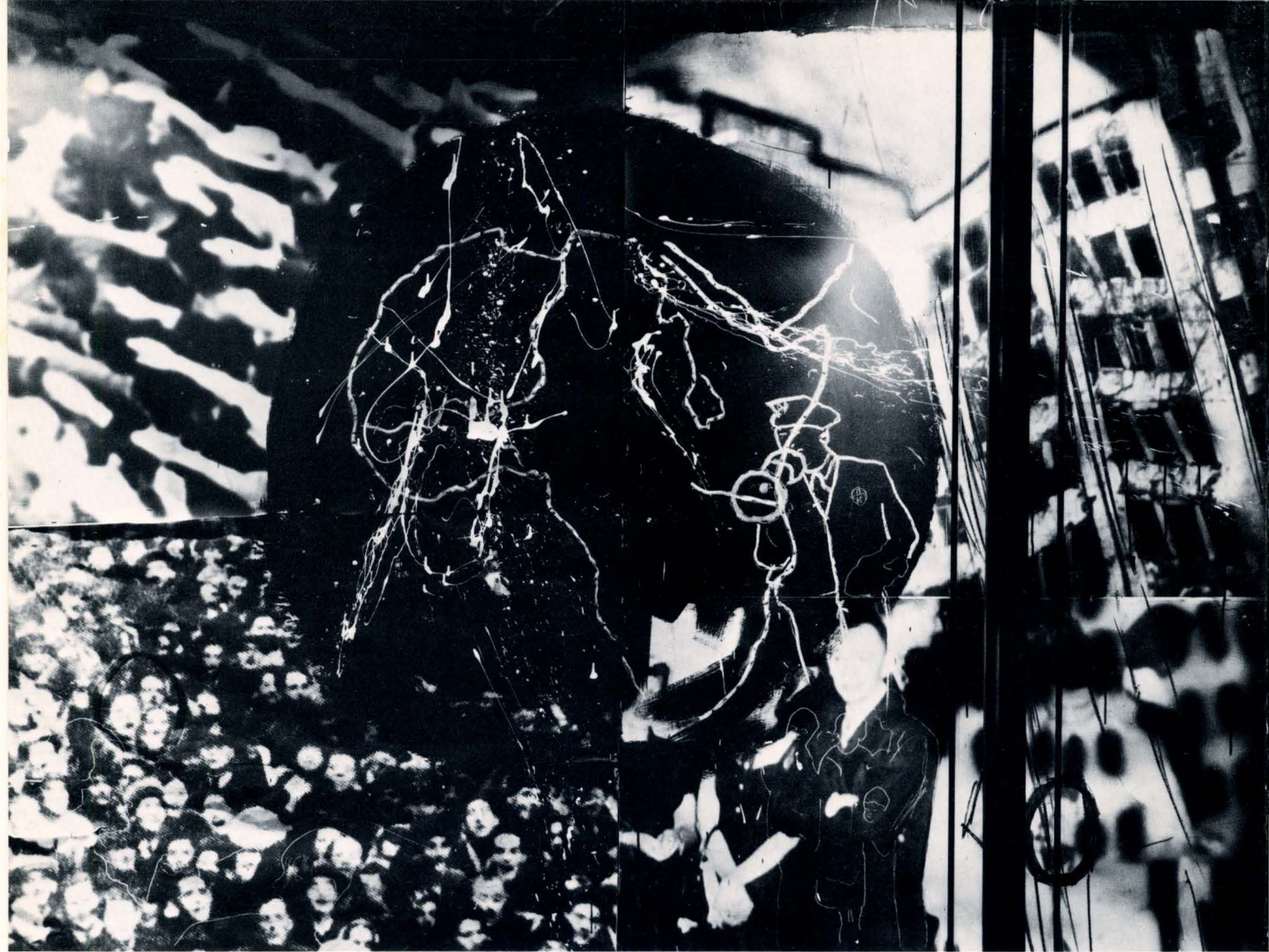


Fig. 2. *Crowds and Power*, 1982 (detail). Oil stick, ink acrylic, chalk and charcoal on silver prints. Photo: David Lubarsky.

Cover: *Post Atomic Family: Despair*, 1981 (detail).
Ink and oil stick on paper; 48" × 9'.

All works courtesy Nancy Lurie Gallery, Chicago.

Kenneth Shorr

Born in Goodyear, Arizona, 1952. Attended Arizona State University, Tempe (B.F.A. 1975); University of California, Los Angeles (M.F.A. 1978). Lives in Chicago.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1971 Phoenix College Library, Phoenix
1973 Spectrum Gallery, Tucson
1974 Arizona State University Gallery, Tempe
Focus II Gallery, New York
1976 Camerawork, San Francisco
1978 Neeb Hall, University of Arizona, Tucson (performance)
1979 Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography,
Columbia College, Chicago
Franklin Furnace, New York
1980 Camerawork, San Francisco
CEPA Gallery, Buffalo
1982 Nancy Lurie Gallery, Chicago

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1975 Soho Gallery, New York
1977 *Magic Silver Show*, Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia
(exh. cat.)
Polaroid Invitational, Camerawork, San Francisco
Refocus, Iowa State University, Iowa City
1978 *California Photographers*, Camerawork, San Francisco
Frederick Wight Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles
1981 *Midwest Photography*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (publication; text by Graham W.J. Beal and Lisa Lyons)
1982 *Critical Perspectives*, P.S. 1, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, New York
Decision by Arms, Just Above Midtown/Downtown, New York
For a Limited Time Only, Nancy Lurie Gallery, Chicago

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Huntington, Richard. "CEPA Features Photography Exhibit," *Buffalo Courier-Express*, December 28, 1980.
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