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A DIFFERENT KIND OF CANDID CAMERA: DOUG BUSCH'S STREET PORTRAITS

At first glance, photographic street portraiture seems like a contradiction in terms. After all, we expect pictures taken on the street to be somehow shot "on the fly" using lightweight cameras all the better to capture the subject unawares. In this sense the very candid nature of the picture – its un-posed informality – is directly associated with its objective truth, whereby the subject is directly caught up in the surrounding context of the witnessed event. This is the traditional domain of photographers such as Garry Winogrand (*Women Are Beautiful*), Walker Evans (particularly his hidden camera "Subway Portraits") and Beat Generation cohort Robert Frank (*The Americans*), whose controversial works laid the foundation for a critical debate that is still ongoing. On one hand they are praised for their gritty verisimilitude and refusal to aestheticize the predominantly lower middle-class urban underbelly of post-War America; on the other, they are frequently vilified (especially by Feminists in the case of Winogrand) for their use of the camera as a kind of perceptual weapon, a peripatetic mechanical gaze that invades the subject's privacy to a degree that is often tantamount to a form of scopophilic rape.

Garry Winogrand, "Young Woman in Phone Booth," 1975. SBMA, Gift of Charles Burston, M.D.

Which brings us to Doug Busch – the subject of a critical conversation whose "Scene on the Street" series is currently on display at the Museum until December 2. During the 1980s and '90s Busch was also a "street photographer," shooting a broad range of photo vignettes in Denver, Chicago and Atlanta. However, his methods were completely different from those of Winogrand and Frank. A former assistant to Ansel Adams and Al Weber – which helps to explain

his predilection for crispness and clarity as well as a broad tonal range in his work – Busch was originally trained as an architect and indeed he often interweaves and parallels his series of street portraits with complementary architectural works so that the formal parameters of one infuses the composition of the other. Moreover, instead of using easily portable 35mm cameras with a wide angle lens, Busch deliberately employs what others might consider to be impossibly cumbersome equipment. Busch opts for hand-built, large format cameras – mostly 12 x 20" and 30 x 50" – that produce correspondingly large format negatives that could be used directly to produce highly detailed contact prints. This methodology is far more common with traditional studio portraiture and indeed Busch's subjects undergo the same kind of photographic process that, say, a young boy or girl might endure for a formal family portrait. In other words, there is often a lengthy wait while the camera is set up, and then a further delay for the required exposure.

Douglas Busch, "Money to Loan, Girl and two Guys, Denver, CO," 1986.
Silver chloride contact print. Courtesy of the Artist.

However, it would be a misnomer to describe Busch's work as "uncandid" (i.e. compared to Winogrand and Frank) because that would suggest his images are somehow calculating or deceitful. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. It would be more accurate to describe them as articulating a different form of candidness. During the set-up time, the subject has ample time to reflect not only on the mechanics of photographic reproduction but also their relationship to the artist, his audience and the broader cultural ramifications of image making as a whole. More importantly, they are also part of a painstaking capturing of reality that is far more detailed and complex than that witnessed by human perception. As Busch himself puts it, his images are the artist's attempt to "record reality more accurately than I can actually see it." This allows the images to take on a non-judgmental sociological tenor – unlike Diane Arbus, Busch eschews the

voyeuristic and the grotesque, preferring to respect people's choices rather than condemn them – which positions him much closer to portraitists such as Mike Disfarmer and August Sander.

Doug Busch, "V13 Gang on Venice Boardwalk, Los Angeles, California," 1993. Courtesy of the Artist

Disfarmer (1884-1959) was the assumed name of Arkansas photographer Mike Meyers, who renounced his family and their farming roots (thus Dis-farmer) and set up a photo studio in the small town of Heber Springs during the 1930s. Much like Busch, albeit within the studio interior, Disfarmer spent an inordinate amount of time setting up and tinkering with the lighting in order to capture the detail and intimacy he required as his local subjects stared directly at the camera with a mixture of stiff propriety and quiet confidence. Significantly, both Disfarmer and Busch avoid the common trap of turning their subjects into types. They are always individuals first and members of a class or community second, presented warts and all with all their physical deformities and excesses. Yet at the same time we are also aware that both men are recording a slice of Americana that is infused with issues of time and place (the Great Depression on one hand, post-Vietnam America on the other); class (is this the silent majority of countless statistics and polls, or merely an eclectic cross-section of middle America?) and last but not least, race. While Disfarmer's oeuvre is almost exclusively composed of whites, Busch takes great pains to frame an eclectic range of ethnic neighborhoods so that no one culture exclusively represents the fabric of the nation.

Known chiefly for his magnum opus, *People of the 20th Century*, Sander (1876-1974) deliberately set out to create an anthropological photo portrait survey of Germany in all its difference and variety during the Weimar Republic. The import of the project's latent socialism became all the more pronounced with the Nazi seizure of power in 1934, because Sander deliberately included representatives of the broadest cross-section of society possible, ranging from students and

peasant girls to industrialists, SS officers, bricklayers, lawyers and communists. In this sense his project was a precursor to the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) Movement with its explicit rejection of the self-involvement of the artist (and its corresponding expressionist tendencies) on the one hand, and a deliberately hierarchical social programming on the other.

Doug Busch, "Gay Stars, Denver, Colorado," 1986.
Silver chloride contact print. Courtesy of the Artist.

Busch's project works in similar ways. Although he often isolates sub-cultures into discreet photo series – e.g. tattooed bikers, homeless people intertwined as frieze-like nudes – the street portraits are notable for their deliberate mixing and matching of a broad spectrum of the urban social fabric, such as a pair of gay men, one black, the other white in *Gay Stars* (1986); two mounted police officers in downtown Denver; a mixed race gang on the Venice boardwalk; and a maintenance man standing next to a flower stall, also in Denver. As in both Sander and Disfarmer's projects, all the subjects have a confirmed sense – even pride – of belonging. Unlike Busch's early works, where the figures emerge from the *chiaroscuro* of almost jet black backgrounds, here the extreme detail of the gradated *mise-en-scène* further integrates them into their surroundings, suggesting a larger panorama of existence beyond the confines of Busch's rigorous, slightly off-kilter framing. This is one of the rare instances where rigid formal and architectural control in the visual process actually liberates the subject to speak with their own voice rather than serve the artist's restrictive personal vision.

SIX DEGREES OF DOUG BUSCH
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If you were around in the 90s, you may remember a game called "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon"—or the number of movies it takes to connect any actor to Kevin Bacon.

Douglas Busch, "(3) Generations, Denver Zoo, Denver CO," 1986.
Silver chloride contact print.

The next game should be a similar search for photographers. Despite the growth caused by the digital boom, the field of photography works in much the same way—everyone is connected by just one or two moves. In photography, however, these connections go deeper, often bearing the aesthetic and/or conceptual marks of these relationships. This is especially true of Doug Busch.

Recently, I had the pleasure of working with Doug Busch on the current Vantage Point exhibition, *Scene on the Street: Doug Busch*. This presentation showcases an extraordinary group of large-format contact prints—that is, the prints are the same size as the original negative. The photos are both compositionally and formally stunning and the wealth of detail is enhanced by the beautiful printing.

Ansel Adams, "Pinnacles, Alabama Hills, Owens Valley, California," 1945.
Gelatin silver print. SBMA, Gift of Arthur and Yolanda Steinman.

Busch's introduction large-format photography is a result of his relationship with famed photographer Art Sinsabaugh, who is noted for his use of a banquet camera that produced 12-by-20-inch negatives. Later, Busch served as an assistant to Ansel Adams and Al Weber. As an assistant, he refined his technical skills and developed a deeper sensitivity to tonal range.
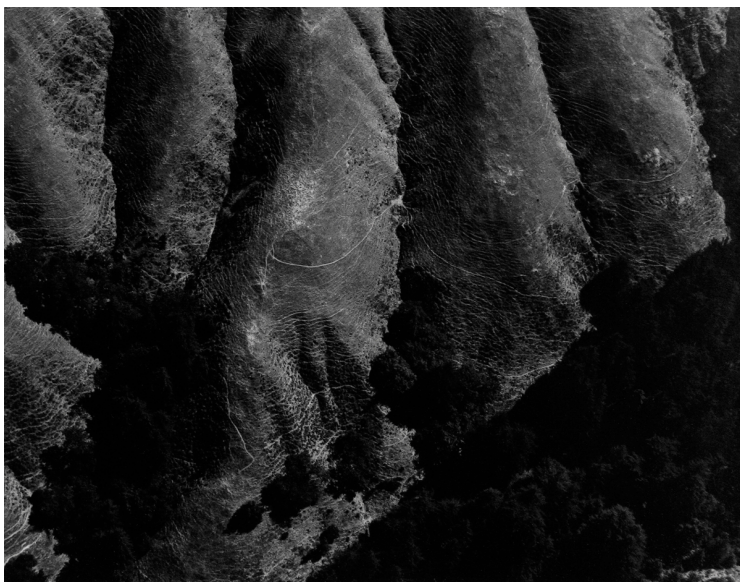
Al Weber, "Hillside, Big Sur," 1963. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the Photographer

After forging connections with these noted photographers, Busch took to the streets of major cities with large-format cameras—ranging from 12-by-20 inches to 30-by-50 inches—which he built himself. The images in *Scene on the Street* focus primarily on the 1980s and early 1990s, as the photographer lived and

moved about from Denver to Chicago, Atlanta, and other cities. Busch's degrees of connection infused his work, yet the result was a series that is uniquely his own.

Today, Busch's abilities as a technician and a photographer have formed new degrees of connections. Many photographers work with cameras that Busch has made for them. Busch notes, "Eikoh Hosoe owned one of my 20×24 cameras…Fredrick Marsh and Ardene Nelson owned and shot with many of my cameras…they both received the Guggenheim grants last year." But when asked about who he has mentored, Busch only highlights that connections between photographers work both ways, "I feel strange saying I mentored anyone…it is always a shared learning and teaching experience for me."

On display at SBMA until December 2, *Scene on the Street: Doug Busch* has already inspired many visitors and practicing photographers, only adding to the degrees of photographic connections for viewers, scholars, and possibly Google to query in the future. Come hear more about Busch's work and his connections.