

# **POETIC RESEMBLANCE**

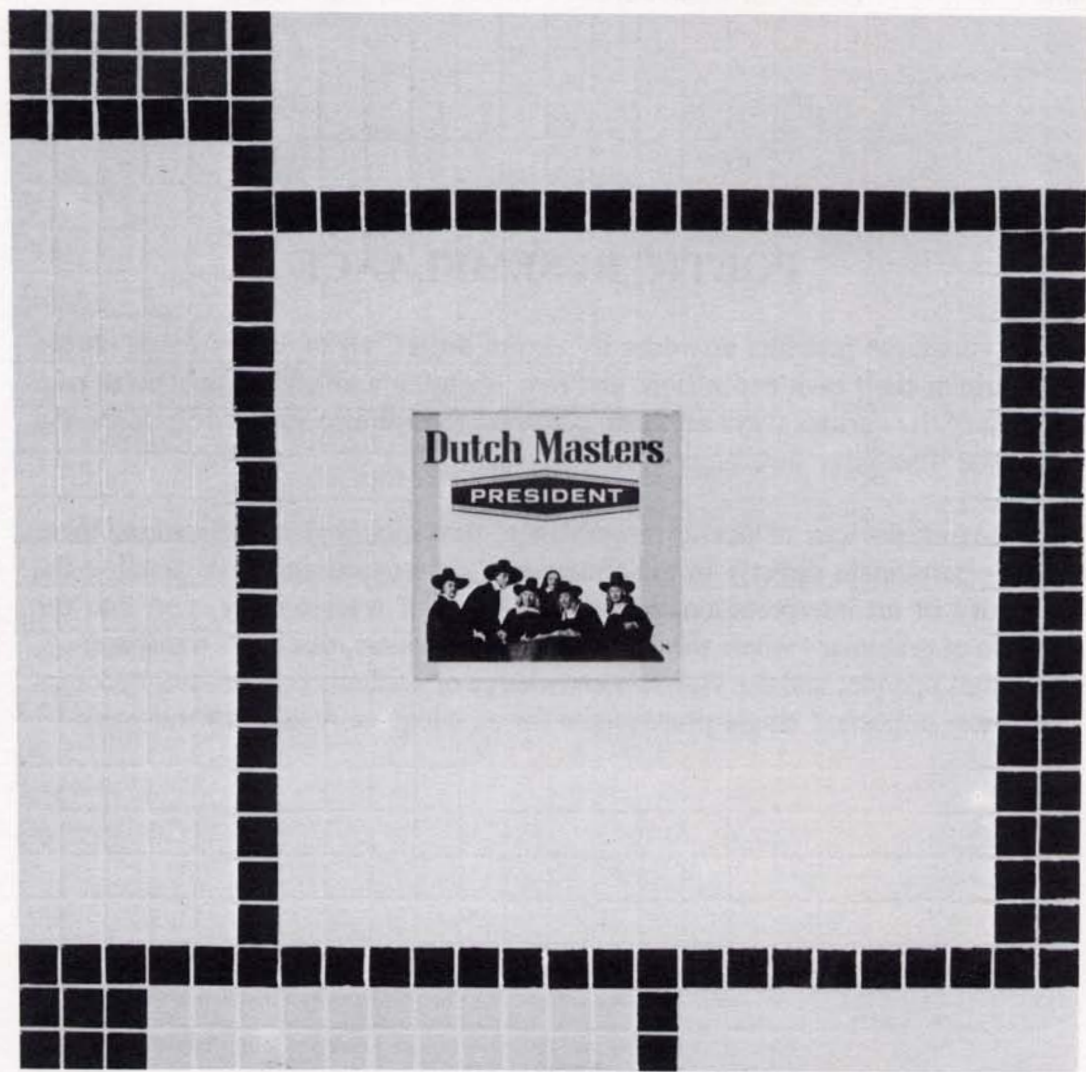
**CATALOGUE & TEXT BY BARBARA BROUGHEL**

## **POETIC RESEMBLANCE**

This catalogue presents artworks by eleven artists, all of which focus on the rhetoric of their own exposition, and in one way or another, compel us to take notice of the various ways aesthetic conventions mobilize viewer responses and regulate discursive meaning.

Employing devices of poetic resemblance, deviation and condensation, these artists participate directly in the strategies they are examining - extending the territory of art-interpretation beyond the limits of referentiality, and into the terrain of grammar - where the degree-zero of discourse, that is, its transparency, becomes opaque, and the viewer's knowledge of aesthetic conventions becomes the most important single prerequisite for an adequate reading of the work.

This exhibition was premiered at Hallwalls, February 8th - March 22nd, 1986



**GARY BACHMAN**

*Double Dutch (Hip Hop Pop)*, tile and boxtop, 24 × 24" 1985



*"Metaphor is a device for seeing something in terms of something else . . . A metaphor tells us something about one character considered from the point of view of another character. And to consider A from the point of view B is, of course, to use B as a perspective on A."*

- Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Grammar*, pgs. 503-504

## GARY BACHMAN

In his plays (jokes) on "aesthetic induction" Gary Bachman employs an elaborate range of aesthetic devices and materials ("Double Dutch: Hip Hop Pop" is composed of a cigar box-top and bathroom tiles.) These may seem aesthetically inappropriate choices, but then this inappropriateness seems only to echo the *"impropriety"* of a cigar company utilizing the "Dutch Masters" painting by Rembrandt for its logo.

Bachman is calling attention here to what semanticists refer to as "category mistake" - the presentation of *facts belonging to one category in the idioms appropriate to another*. The box-top itself functions as a ready-made example of this phenomenon, but to reinforce his point, or in case you hadn't noticed the first time, Bachman has reframed Rembrandt again, with a *bathroom-tile reproduction* of Mondrain's "Composition: 1921".

Though his pieces have the personality of "insiders' jokes", they also have a serious side. Bachman's choices echo the cultural predicament of art - the potential that history, cultural commodification, and stylistic mainstreaming have to erode the integrity and the self-authorization of an artwork's packaging and presentation.



**STEPHEN FRAILEY**

*Untitled*, laminated black & white photograph, 30 × 30", 1984



*"Metaphor allows us to intercept the formation of the "genres" (or generic relationship) which is "checked" by the resistance of difference. In this manner, metaphor reveals the dynamic at work in the constitution of semantic fields. A family resemblance first brings individuals together before the rule of a logical class dominates them. Metaphor, a figure of speech, presents in an open fashion, by means of a conflict between identity and difference, the process that in a covert manner generates semantic grids by fusion of differences into identity."*

- Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, pg. 198

## STEPHEN FRAILEY

Utilizing devices of partial compatability and family resemblance, Stephen Frailey places his work into the terrain of sub-generic operations, or what Greimas refers to as "aspectualities", in order to draw the viewer's attention to the fact that "much of genre-based comprehension operates in a synthetic and intuitive manner by means of a reaction that begins and ends in the imagination."

With a keen sense of "alliteration and dissonance" Frailey looks for heretofore unlexicalized relationships of poetic resemblance - usually finding them in the places where generic models have not yet caught up with a vocabulary of consumer usage.

His pictures begin as found images, which he chooses because he detects in them the *traces* of a "lexicon", and the *potential presence* of paradigmatic image gestalts. On top of this image he literally "places" a household object which he feels *only tangentially* bears a relation to the lexicon of the picture, and which he then photographs, one on top of the other, to finally (re)produce a photograph which is in a one-to-one scale to the household object.

What we have then is an image of a household object which appears, (like a fly in the ointment) to be "stuck" inside of a pictorial space whose "degree zero" it is disrupting, and to which it is only partially acclimated - juggling a *pictorial limbo* of simultaneous fixing and displacement.



**JAMES WELLING**

*Untitled: 1984, black & white photographs, 8 × 10", 1984*



*"(An artwork's) strategy may not produce the effect it 'intended' ... since the viewer's knowledge of aesthetic conventions can exceed the expectations of the text and its author."*

-Paul Ricoeur (paraphrased)

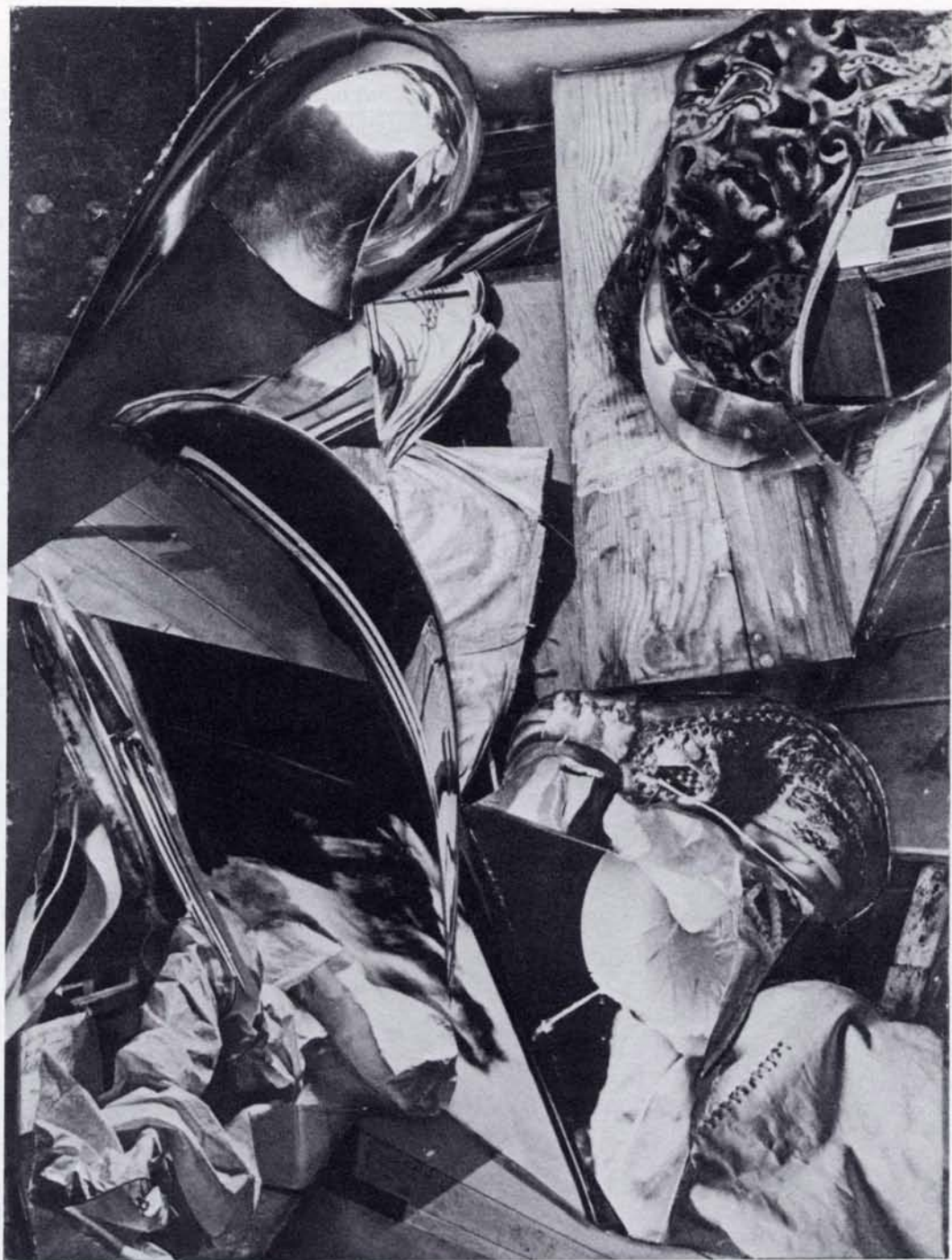
## JAMES WELLING

In composing his pictures James Welling selects subject matter which defies identification even when photographed in sharp focus and reproduced in a one-to-one ratio to itself. (The subject he has selected here is pastry dough on fabric.)

*By placing a partially abstract lexeme into a "realistic" viewing paradigm (the photograph) the artist has created a (perceptual) perpetual motion machine of shifting visual focus.*

While the linguistic space of art moves *from an oriental landscape, to a black and white abstract composition, to a "realist" document of a definable object*, etc...figural lexemes line up with each semantic shift, fixing and arresting meaning into relationships of interiority and exteriority with regard to whatever model of reception we might be passing through at any particular moment - experiencing with each formal articulation a moment of sudden intuition and a wholesale shift in lexicon.

One has to wonder how a text so minimal in its deviciness can so economically supply the conditions for such a wide range of directions in reading. Whether its full range is intentional or, in part, an accident of reader-intervention, (one never knows for sure because the text never gives itself away), Welling's photographs are a testament to the fact that *culture creates a plurality of readings within every signifying situation.*



**FRANK GILLETTE**

*In the Springs #1*, photomontage, 10 x 8¼", 1983 | Photo: Barbara Broughel



*"Rhythm (composition) is the basic force, the basic energy of verse. It is impossible to explain it, one can only talk about it as one talks about magnetism or electricity. There can be a single rhyme in many verses, even throughout the whole work of a poet, and this does not make the work tedious because rhyme (composition) can be so complicated and difficult that one cannot get at it even with the aid of several long poems."*

(parenthetical insertions are my own.)

- Vladimir Mayakovsky

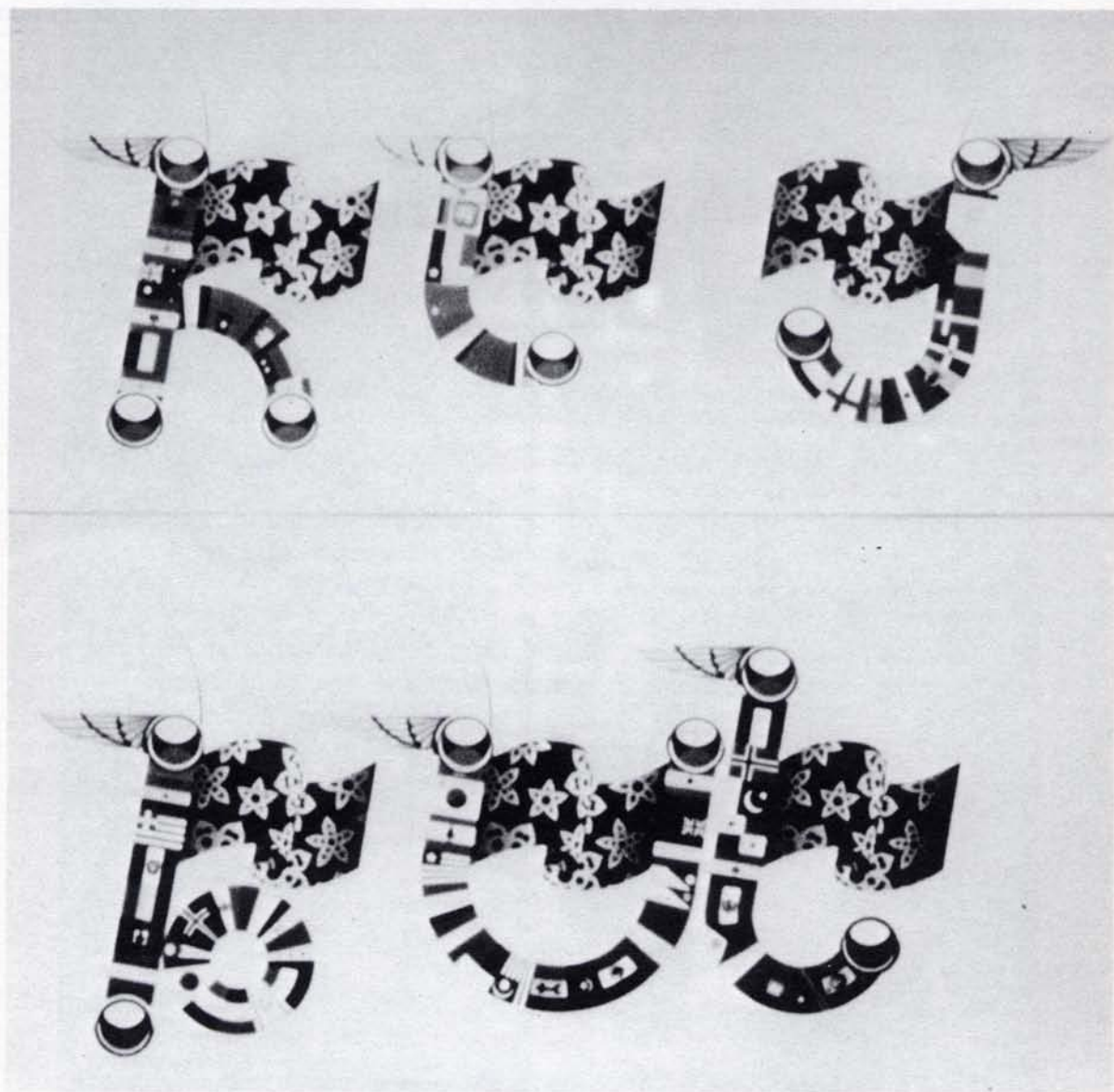
## FRANK GILLETTE

Frank Gillette's photo-collages point to one of the intrinsic problems of a visual or literary text, namely, that while language functions by giving directions for behavior, it is also susceptible to abstraction and unexpected fractures of meaning and focus.

With the skill of an optogeometrist Gillette dismantles printed color reproductions into abstract picture parts. After this abstraction is performed, he recomposes them into figural articulations which are neither abstract nor realistic, but operate somewhere in between - as *documents of their own focalization* - their own *coming into clarity*.

In an 8 × 10 rectangle, he plays off the rules of verisimilitude and chiascuro, creating a space of abstract formalism - one which feels (resonates) simultaneously foreign and familiar, haptic and intangible.





**ASHLEY BICKERTON**  
*reg but*, paint on masonite, 96 × 96"/(2) 48 × 96" panels, 1983

*"The metaseme is always a 'pseudo-proposition' because it presents a contradiction to which logic objects, and which rhetoric accepts."*

- Paul Ricoeur

## ASHLEY BICKERTON

When Ashley Bickerton's word paintings first present themselves "all trumped up and absurd", it is not totally clear whether we are being confronted by a personality which is cynical too, or just aberrant.

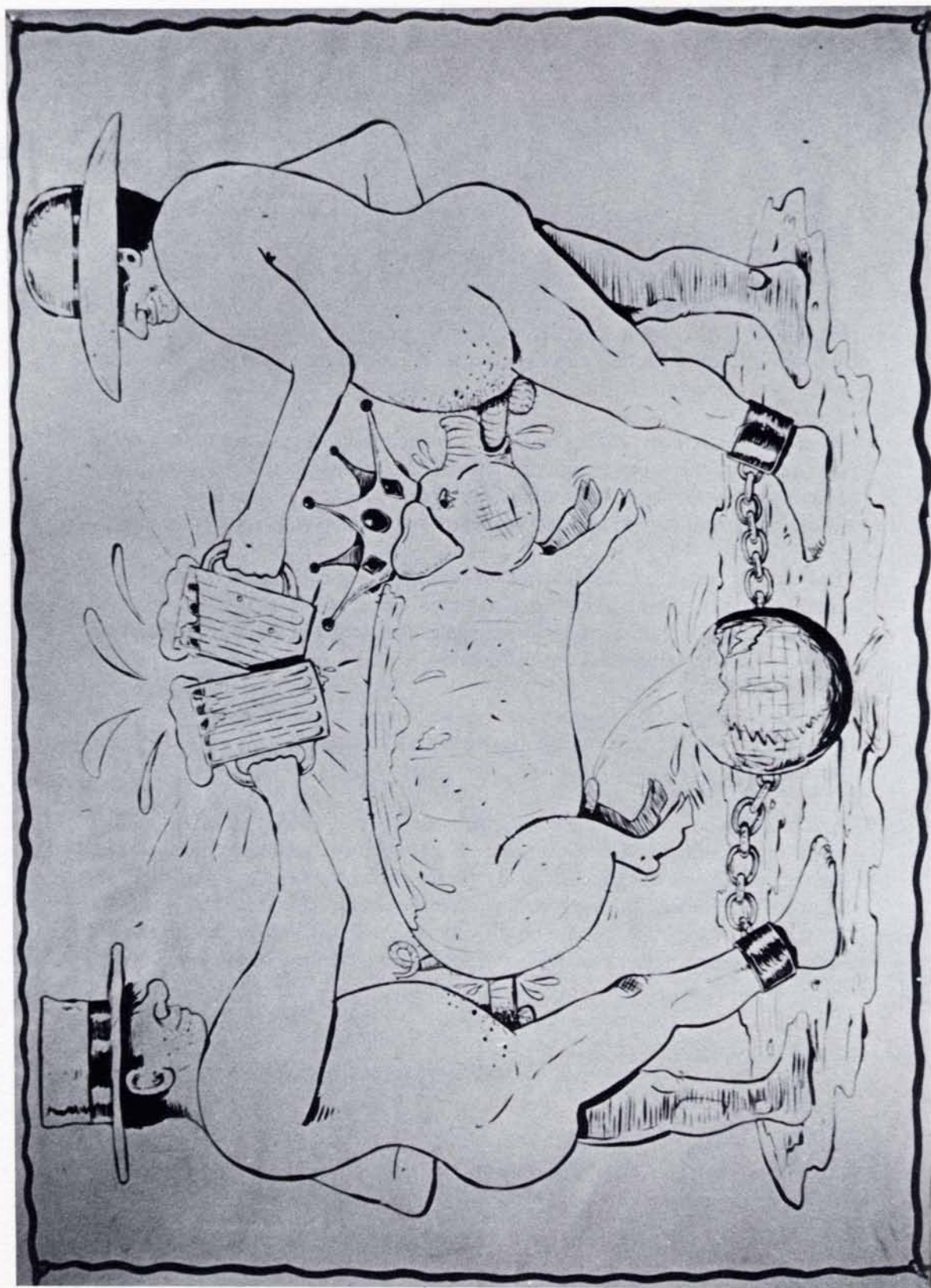
What is clear is that "when a word is a collection of flags", we are not being confronted by the usual signifier/signified relationship. There is something disquieting about *the wrong performance of such a simple signifying task* - about a figure so excessive and saturated in its presentation and so absent in meaning.

The lexical "gestalt" of the phoneme (or signified) "reg but" means nothing in our culture anyway. This makes it easier for us when, as Ricoeur might say "the expansion of the signifier causes a consequent contraction of the signified" and we are left with "hyperbole of pure nothingness".

Artificial intelligence - *the space between an image and how it's articulated* - has overstepped its boundaries here. Obscurantist embellishment has taken over in the translation from nature (the uttered phoneme) to culture (the linguistic sign).

And in the process, if we were wondering what this image might mean, or whether it had "no significance whatsoever other than itself", we can amuse ourselves with the fact that "once the piece is titled, the signified becomes the signifier for its signifier". Whether this suggests that we are in the claws of pure artificial deviciness, or experiencing *the ultimate in linguistic sophism* we'll never know until we decide whether reading is essentially psychological or sematic.





MIKE KELLEY

*Royally Porking His Lardship*, acrylic on paper, 42 × 59", 1984

Courtesy Metro Pictures



*"Metaphor is the reassignment of labels, but a reassignment that fashions its figure from 'an affair between a predicate with a past and an object that yeilds while protesting'"*

- Nelson Goodman

## MIKE KELLEY

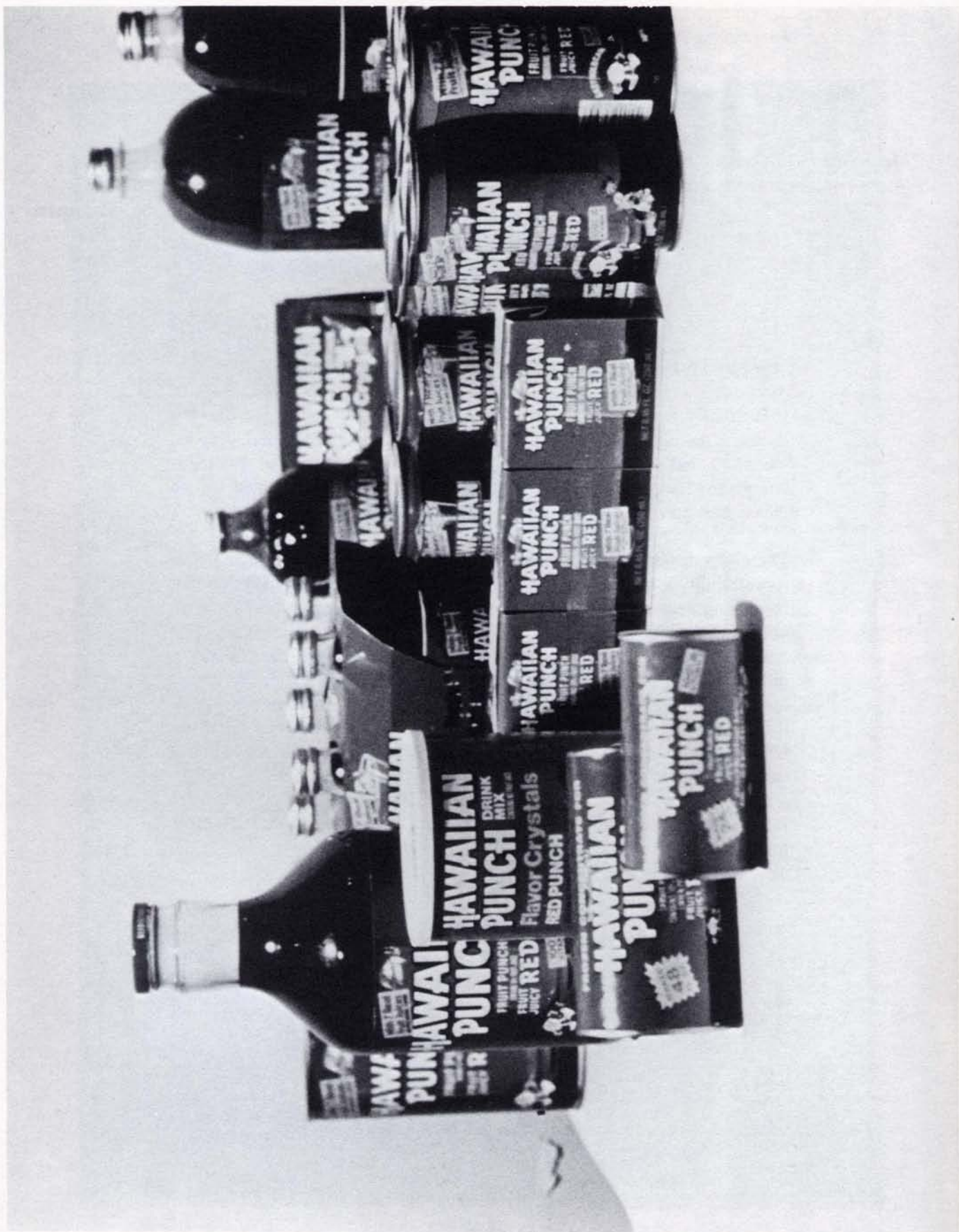
"Royally Porking His Lardship" is the sodomization of a satire.

Immediately upon entering Kelley's cartoon, we become aware that the direction the figure is carrying us in is not toward its usual context. Anyone who might have thought that they were being invited to the usual "humanist hootinanny" soon discovers that instead, they're being lubricated by the grease-ball goings on of (literally) two beer-drinking pigfuckers.

There is a desire in this picture to "lampoonize" beyond the pale of social respectability - beyond what is allowed even by a formal convention that society suggests will accomodate the most "wayward" of "subject" voices.

Surely, when the U.S. and Australia are lampooning the U.K. there is plenty of room for hyperbole. But even with political pretensions this text's choices of aesthetic hyperbole were not motivated solely by political causes. Questions of the author's politics are academic and logically absurd in comparison with the question of *the fact of the author's pleasure in distortion* which in this case has taken over as the real motivational "fact" of the text.

In sodomizing his "subjects", His Porculency succeeds in sodomizing the form.



ALAN BELCHER  
Freedom of Choice: Hawaiian Punch #1, cibachrome color print, 8 x 10"



*"The devices of textuality are themselves part of ideology's very armory."*

## ALAN BELCHER

Through the creation of a "mock" exercise in commercial packaging, Alan Belcher offers the motivated viewer *an opportunity to consider the "facts" of visual literacy in commercial America.*

The task: the concealment of contradictions, both in form and content, that might be involved in the presentation of a number of the Hawaiian Punch "family of products".

The strategy: to tone down the uselessness and hyperbole of the Hawaiian Punch products themselves through the utilization of the most conventional and undistinguished presentation possible. What we are striving to achieve here is "the look of the resolved monovalent", the average look - the one that will go unnoticed by the "shopper in the family".

When we think we have found it (a Hawaiian Punch "family portrait") we call in a team of experts for the consensus opinion. Finally, once it's been "O.K.ed", we realize our "aesthetic vision" vis-a-vis the technical clichés of the table-top still life. The result is an honest and straightforward photographic achievement which functions as a "rhyme" for liberal democracy's tendency to "choose", when exercising its "freedoms" the road of pure mediocrity.



**MICHELANGELO**

**CHRIS BURDEN**

**LEONARDO DA VINCI**

**REMBRANDT**

*"First of all I must capture the interests of the viewer by means of ambiguity, so that it is not clear whose side I am on."*

## CHRIS BURDEN

Somehow business aesthetics - in terms of self-authorized rhetoric, and in terms of overall personality - reach their degree-zero (transparency) at the point at which they (are forced to) represent a real individual.

In an attempt to reconcile his relationship to this large, complex and most disturbing of language organisms, Chris Burden's video ad is a comic play on the economy (literally and literarily) of the text-situation. It is simultaneously hilarious, pathetic, curious and lunatic for an individual (whom we imagine to be using his/her resources as IBM or AT&T might) to run a prime time ad during the Super Bowl.

As witnesses of this gesture we are struck on the one hand by the "heroic" ballsyness of the form. A single individual challenges the corporate giant. (One cannot help conjuring up images of David and Goliath.) On the other hand, we are worried that the coded susceptibility of morality within the corporate media canons have infected the individual gesture with bad intentions.

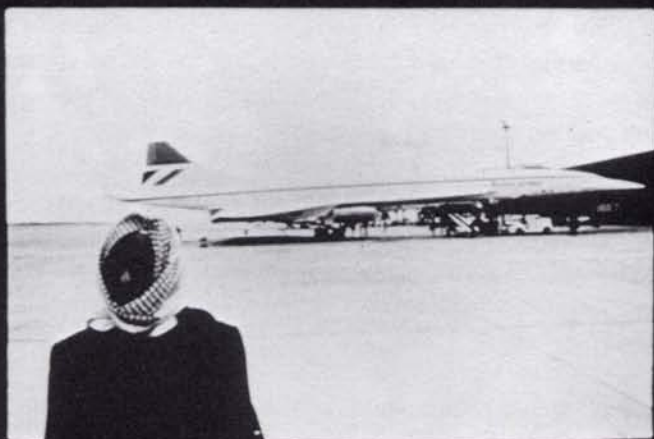
To play on our fears, Burden's presentation does not have the personality of "the little guy crushed by the discourse of television", but conversely (and perhaps more frightening) they are images of the individual presenting himself through the crass mediocrity of self-promotion - through the window of corporate signature - structuring himself through corporate syntax - and buying into the corporate model wholesale.

In spite of the text's wonderful ironies, the viewer still wonders whether Burden's strategies are blatantly calculated to serve the "artist's interests" in extending his social base, and (by capitalistic implication) his economic base. Or are his strategies calculated to serve the "artist's interests" in finding the most direct and disturbing way possible to enter into the machinery of a complex socio-cultural organism?

As usual, Burden has placed himself in the center of the controversy. Literally, *the artist is the medium*, and thereby *the target* for all the bad faith, superstitiousness, and self-righteous indignation of his audience.

Whether it is possible to put multi-national ad networks to work for individual (as opposed to business) interests is certainly a vast and compelling (not to mention potentially useful) area of inquiry. Whether or not it is possible to corrupt the image?, the persona?, or the integrity? of an individual with the aesthetics of big business is another tangled, and perhaps not inappropriate area of inquiry the work invites.





**VISA**  
**MASTER**  
**CARTE BLANCHE**



*"There is something going on here, but in order to find out just what it is, each of those present must find his way through a facade of "nothing happening".*

- Barbara Bloom

## BARBARA BLOOM

Convinced it will be demoralized by inaccuracies, and boiling over with imperialist intentions, or sexism, or some other unsavory premise, most of us gave up long ago on taking media "information" seriously. Indoctrination by insidious media ploys is something we've all learned to live with, but few of us have learned to play with. Barbara Bloom uses this reader apathy as the performative context for her work.

In the presence of Bloom's pictures we get the funny feeling we are being watched. Why don't these images "beg" for our attention the way we expect them to?

There is something unsettling about being in the same room with *a media presence which does not need us to complete itself* - with a media presence which turns its gaze inward rather than outward in an act of assured self-containment. It is in this way that Bloom's pictures disrupt the stasis of the media paradigm, and in so doing, bring themselves to our attention.

Through strategies of "erasure", absence and discrete evasiveness, these pictures, with the intonation of a whisper, enter our psycho-linguistic subconscious. Once they have been "let in" we have the uncanny sense that we have been "set up". Crouched behind a veil of non-aggression, *these pictures have manipulated us into making the first move.*



**ADVENT**

*Fuck Sex*, silkscreen ink on steel, 30 × 40", 1978

*"Grasping a literary convention is not grasping the message."*

- Terry Eagleton, *Text, Ideology and Realism*

## ADVENT

ADVENT is a Southern California based "non-profit advertising religion" "devoted" to using ad billboards and other mass media ad forms to produce messages whose contents are antithetical to the form which they occupy. Its artists are anonymous and usually work illegally.

"Armed" with the personality of Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book*, and the purloining passions of graffiti, ADVENT's "semiotic revolution" is deployed according to all the rules of street-fighting - calling attention to itself as *a guerrilla attack on advertising and "sexploitation"*.

Their reliance upon contexts which are already in place function to their benefit in at least two ways - as the path of least resistance to their "target audience", and as a way of *"freeing critical discourse from the debilitating burden of paraphrase."*





DAVID McDERMOTT & PETER MCGOUGH

*The Business of America is Business: 1928, varied media, 16 x 48"*

Courtesy Massimo Audiello Gallery

*"We are not far from recognizing that semantic clash is just one side of a process whose other side is the iconic function."*

## DAVID McDERMOTT & PETER McGOUGH

In an ironic attempt to engage formalisms—or rather *formalities*—"to the letter" (a business letter), these artists mobilize a surreal space, in which *an extroverted immigrant's view* of an introverted cultural heritage (American folklore) is realized as an idealized cultural form (*The Portrait of an American Hero*)—a terrain of Chaplinesque misplaced presuppositions, of inevitable (impending) gaffes and impossibly optimistic cross-cultural slippages.

In an "heroic" attempt at "realism", the immigrant creates a space of naive "surrealism". Stars blend with clouds in a continuous flip-flop of day and night, and rays of luminosity turn an industrial location into the site of a spiritual "coming". In the foreground (in keeping with the codes of heroic portraiture) national identity and high moral fiber are represented by the American Flag and a medallion-cum status-symbol. And in the center of it all, the immigrant.

In Europe, this space would be set aside for kings and conquerors - "but here in America", it is a space which can be occupied by everyman.

At least the immigrant is operating on that premise - unaware that there is a snobbish emphasis on convention and propriety which could run roughshod over his well-meaning but ill-placed *Romantic problem of self*.



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ALAN BELCHER

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CHRIS BURDEN

STEPHEN FRAILEY

FRANK GILLETTE

MIKE KELLEY

DAVID McDERMOTT & PETER McGOUGH

JAMES WELLING

**CURATED BY BARBARA BROUGHEL**

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