

## BOOK REVIEWS BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA

### **SLEEPLESS NIGHTS**

**HELMUT NEWTON**

Congreve Publishing Co.—1978

Pp. 150 hardcover \$27.50

Erotic art has the feel of a peach in the hand. Voyeurism is a forbidden glimpse of others as they touch, lick and feel.

While Helmut Newton's latest book, *Sleepless Nights*, provides keyhole views of the ripest fantasies, the images are the antithesis of erotic. Frigid and tightly composed, they are decadent down to their aubergine margins—but decadence is not necessarily erotic. The people in these photographs are too flawless to be touched, or violated. Their beauty is the less interesting for its remoteness: Like well-groomed animals, the gorgeous beings stand and stare with eyes glazed with boredom.

The beings and the objets d'art of their baroque settings are interchangeable. Both are reflections of a certain taste. . . . the taste of that monied elite who are more concerned with surfaces than significance. The willowy, high cheekboned ladies and their stilted escorts are hollow trophies, all dutifully gathering dust in the sitting room.

Newton doesn't seem the consoracious type, but he certainly stages his observations with a harsh, distanced irony. The people in his work are less spontaneous than store mannequins. Women are projected as voiceless, predictable creatures, often contorted in claustrophobic, box-like spaces. Their long white limbs are twisted into painful postures—Newton's running metaphor for woman's place in society. *Vogue*-faced women wear saddles or dog collars, not to set off their beauty but to reveal them as beasts, pets of the leisure class.

At times, the metaphors are too literal. The saddle images may be a case in point. One is initially fascinated by the bizarre and naughty aspects of black garter belts, fur bedspreads, mirrors and whips. But towards the end of the book, it is a relief to see some antics, some humor. In "Maxim's II," a man bends to kiss the disconnected hand of a mannequin. "A Quiet Evening in Beverly Hills" is a hip, young couple watching porno films on their four foot Advent monitor with expressions of bovine complacency and, once again, boredom.

In Newton's lengthy career as a fashion photographer, he has seen the seamier side of that glamorous world. And he has recognized the perverse side-effect of privilege—that of glutting the senses to the point of catatonia. One is never tempted to envy these pasteboard characters their bejeweled surroundings.

The book is marvelous, a masterpiece—certainly more thoughtful than slick first impressions might convey. These are lasting images. They're capable of provoking insight if permitted to, but, like the civilized souls within, they would never dream of forcing the issue.

### **WORKING**

**(I Do It For The Money)**

**Bill Owens**

**Simon and Schuster—1977**

**No page # paperback \$9.95**

Bill Owens must wear a perpetual smirk behind the lens. His photographs of even the most ennui-laden topics are witty and intelligent. This was true of his first book, *Suburbia*, and is equally apparent in *Working (I Do It For The Money)*.

The subtitle, which is also the leitmotif for *Working*, owes as much to photojournalism as to the formalist qualities of art. Most of the frank black-and-white prints of people on-the-job are captioned with smartly edited quotes. These snatches of aspirations and opinions reveal each person's desire to be what he is not—condition endemic to human nature, especially in the U.S.A. Along with their dreams of change and glory, most of the subjects take an exceptional pride in their work. The Saranwrapper of mass produced sandwiches maintains that his P.-B.-and-J.'s are cheaper than any you can make at home. Three homely salesgirls at the D.Q. recite their banana split recipe with a smile, adding that countermaids have to have a pleasant personality to work with the public. One is shocked to realize that we all believe the information we are fed by our employers or other authorities. Even as "art employees," we know all the arguments to justify our daily occupation.

Each photograph here is a shrunken moment in time. We catch a mere glimpse of a person's life and life style and the conditions exposed are often very foreign to us. After all, most of the workers in the book have very little in common with



got their due and are beginning to realize that they may never get it. They see dozens of young photographers fresh out of school snapping up the grants and the museum shows and the stalls for photographers in the stables of suddenly interested art galleries. And, after three or four decades of work, they begin to wonder if, in the current public feasting on photography, there are any scraps for them."

Coleman also argues with the crassness of the marketplace. He complains, quite rightly, about the "hardware-consumerist orientation of most photographic publications" and their failure to publish meaningful writing. When Art in America tried to jump on the photography bandwagon by sponsoring a conference called "Collecting the Photograph" Coleman exposed the symposium as a fiasco—poorly conceived and mismanged, exploring dollar signs instead of significant issues.

In a chapter on plagiarism he grapples with contemporary "collaboration"—voluntary and otherwise—and suggests that artists who use others' images or products should give credit to the originator. The point is well taken, though carried to an extreme in his remarks on Edward Weston's "Bed Pan, 1930," (In Coleman's eagerness to honor the anonymous bed pan designer and chastize Weston for failing to credit his lovely image to "the creative energy of someone else," Coleman seems to forget the pan's graceful form might never have been seen at all if it weren't for the likes of Weston.)

But it is usually outside powers, not artists, who rankle Coleman. He finds politicians and judges who impose censorship the most odious, and says that most recent incidents of censorship "are directly traceable to the Burger Supreme Court's decision which established 'local community standards' as the basis for obscenity prosecution."

*In a chapter called "Shouldn't We Be More Concerned?" Coleman argues brilliantly for freedom of vision and finds museums exercising their own brand of censorship: "As a process of change and growth, art is an explosive force within our culture. To defuse it, the culture has evolved a variety of mechanisms, most notably the museum. The preservative function of the museum disguises its self-protective function, which is to certify that whatever is housed within its walls is acceptable and safe—and, thus, no longer art in the most meaningful sense of the word, merely artifact. The art object, after all, is only the embodiment of an idea. Once the idea of any work enters the bloodstream of a culture, its vehicle becomes a corpse—exquisite, perhaps, but a corpse nonetheless. The calling of the artist is not simply to be a manufacturer of objects, a craftsman, but to be a progenitor of new myths, new truths, new definitions."*

Once again, Coleman's heart and head are in the right place, but his zeal seems to get the best of his judgment. There is great art that is timeless—objects that have survived because they have been cared for, albeit in a mausoleum-like structure. He seems to discount all those artworks that continue to nurture and renew living people even though they are encapsulated in museums. Art's meaning changes with the people who see it but the best work never loses its human connection.

Coleman is at his most practical and level-headed in discussions on photographic education. In a "manifesto" and, later, an address to educators, he stresses a need to integrate photography with other disciplines. "If we are to come to grips with the phenomenal power of the photographic image . . . we must recognize that photography has multiple functions in this society, and that many of these functions have little or nothing to do with the aesthetics and goals of 'serious' photography. It has already been demonstrated . . . that photography is an art form; but to teach it only as such—that

is, to teach only the craft, the history, and the aesthetics—is woefully, if not willfully, short-sighted."

He recommends realistic counseling and an honest consideration of the difficulties of getting jobs without proper skills in a flooded market. In other education-related discussions, Coleman cites the need for critical training, lively forums and the development of a "common language." (One hopes that language will be based on clear English, not a new variety of "artspeak.")

As Coleman wends his way through several years of thinking and writing about photography, returning as he does, over and over, to issues of ethics, morals and politics, he seems to miss something important: Despite numerous reviews of artists' exhibitions, it's possible to read his entire book without giving a thought to aesthetics. The power of Coleman's political convictions tends to bury mere artists and their pictures.

Most criticism of Coleman is bound to sound trivial because he has a good grip on the photographic "forest." Still, his insistence on substituting politics for aesthetics and his failure to delve deeply into a decade's artistic insights is disappointing and annoying.

A ten-year anthology of a major critic's writings seems to carry the implication that those who are included are important (unless, of course, the author states otherwise) and that those omitted don't matter. Coleman's choices are often questionable. He doles out praise (justly) for such strong artists as Judy Dater, Diane Arbus and Robert D'Alessandro, but gives undue attention to Les Krims, Robert Heinecken and Jerry Uelsmann.

Coleman doesn't hesitate to point out Paul Strand's lack of growth at the end of his career, Ansel Adams' failure to demand anything from his audience and the dangers inherent in non-stop worship of Edward Weston. As he deposes old kings, he imposes new pretenders—most notably Heinecken and Uelsmann.

According to Coleman, Heinecken is "a man for all dimensions" who creates "miraculous" photographs that are ". . . tender, even lyrical, for Heinecken's vision transmogrifies them in such a way as to restore an honest eroticism to these manipulative masturbatory fantasies." Heinecken has, as Coleman says, expanded the limits of photography through experimentation and teaching but his own vision is nothing more than a tiresome substitution of titillation for communication. It seems ironic that Coleman fails to see Heinecken's guru stance as a cover for shallow gimmickry.

In the case of Uelsmann, a creator of endlessly soggy manipulations, Coleman could hardly be more enthusiastic. He sees Uelsmann's latter-day Surrealism as, "disturbing symbols, whose meaning, like a carrot dangled before a donkey, remains several steps ahead of the viewer, leading him ever onward." Apparently, Coleman's taste runs heavily to curiosities.

While Uelsmann's sophomoric dreams are harmless, Krims' staged photos often reveal new and ever more clever ways of doing violence to women. He hides behind humor, suggesting that mutilation of female bodies (though only in photographs) is somehow of a higher order than Hitler's "medical experiments." Odd that an author who exposes moral issues elsewhere, finds nothing to question in Krims' "fictions."

For all its excesses and occasional inconsistencies, "Light Readings" is an eminently readable and welcome addition to photographic literature. In Coleman, we don't have the world's most sensitive and demanding aesthete but we do have a bright and likable humanist. One of the best things to be said about "Light Readings" is that it sounds like a real person wrote it. ●



that clique of society that *buys* the book. We are tempted throughout to laugh, to make ironic judgements. But there is some moral quality that keeps us from it. Owens hasn't built a freak show or taken advantage of his subjects' guileless confessions. It is this subtle blend of empathy and humor that raises *Working* from the status of lampoon to that of provocative art.

His off-beat focus on the way we spend most of our waking hours is poignant and perceptive. We begin to notice how people look like their jobs, we wonder how people and their careers find one another. Is it as haphazard a decision as marriage? Whatever the answer to that, we can at least be thankful that Bill Owens chose photography as his work. I don't think he's doing it for the money.

**CREATIVE CAMERA COLLECTION 5**  
Edited by Peter Turner and Colin Osman  
Coo Press, Ltd.—1978  
Pp. 236 \$20.00

To my mind, *Creative Camera Collection 5* is trite and boring, and certainly not worth the publication's recent elevation from magazine to hard-bound format. First known as *Creative Camera International Yearbook*, it changed its nature when editors Colin Osman and Peter Turner decided to liberate themselves from what they perceived as the limitations of an annual report.

They've dredged up and dusted off an international selection of old hacks and resubmitted them to the public. Considerable energies were spent filling the "Young Contemporaries" section with imagery that was overworked fifteen years ago. Expensive sepia-toned paper supports an inane text, but no funds were channeled toward color photography. And what could possibly be the function of an obscure 45-year-old essay on the work of Moholy-Nagy without the accompanying prints? The translation reads like a skit from "Saturday Night Live" and is wholly gratuitous.

There are just a few photographs worth mentioning, as they provide momentary escape from the bleak but copious collection. Duane Michaels' prints of the Egyptian pyramids by moonlight are brilliant, radiant, gorgeous. Period. The "Homage To Cavafy" series is a moving tribute to that Greek poet and an effective mesh of poetry and image.

Shuji Terayama's work is always interesting. Already a prolific producer of experimental film and theater, he is committed to aesthetic exploration. His "Unsent Postcards From Shanghai" is a series of staged, absurd little photo-dramas, mixed with bits of Japanese poetry. It is a measure of Colin Osman's gall that he asked Terayama to rewrite the project differently, in English, for his personal edification!

John Benton Harris (I refuse to hyphenate that decidedly Yank surname) is an expatriate American living in England. He is represented by some very astute prints of Ascot and the Jubilee. The work shot in England is much stronger than that done in America, however.

The rest is dross.

The editors were concerned only with displaying what had already been proven commercially successful. It is infuriating to recognize the money and time expended on such reactionary technique mislabeled as "Art." Instead of learning from the photo-pioneers they so dogmatically uphold in their writings, Osman and Turner seem afraid to take the slightest chance.

Where are the mixed media and SX-70 images? The color Xerox work and documentation of conceptual projects? I'm fortunate enough to know of recent developments in the art of photography. But any novice who believes this to be a representative sampling of this year's photography, might just as well opt for the TV set.

**CAPE LIGHT**  
JOEL MEYEROWITZ  
Published by The New York Graphic Society  
Copyright 1978  
Price: \$12.95

Joel Meyerowitz' color photographs of Cape Cod are radiantly simple—and like so much that is simple, they are refinements, the filtered essences of a lifetime fat with experience. Pearlescent veils of color at sunrise, saturated fluorescents at dusk, a sky and sea of colors evolving through time. They are like Monet's studies of the Rouen Cathedral—multiple paintings of one building as it changed with the light. Meyerowitz' "Bay/Sky" and "Provincetown Porch" pictures are empty vessels. Only by containing so little could they convey so much.

These lush 8x10 products of a Deardorff view camera are even more startling given Meyerowitz' background as a street photographer. He was a 35mm speed-shooter from New York City and counts Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank as major influences. In a needle sharp interview with Bruce MacDonald, dean of the Museum of Fine Arts School in Boston, Meyerowitz explains the change in his approach. "These are slow pictures. *Energy* is what's right for the street . . . (Cape Cod) is in human scale. It allows me to make formal photographs . . . I'm trying to insert into that formality some vitality—some street wit."

These images are more than just gorgeous, however: they are instructive. Meyerowitz knows that the full sensations produced by his work are beyond beauty. "The trick is not to be seduced by the beautiful but to struggle against accomplishment and push toward something more personal. Shared beauty is not enough."

Meyerowitz is responding to the act of seeing, becoming transparent so that the visual experience can flow through him. The resulting tranquility of his work is as compelling as any "action" photograph. He calls himself an "emission center." "We receive sensations and we put them out. That's what artists do. They separate their experience from the totality, from raw experience, and it's the quality of their selections that makes *them* visible to the world."

These are joyous and moving pictures. They seem to leave so many other attempts in the class of mere trivia. And Meyerowitz is obviously his own best agent. The 15-page preface is packed with articulate comments on photography in general, on his work in particular. It is just depressing that there aren't more books of this caliber around. This one is a jewel.

**PHOTOGRAPHY YEAR,**  
**1979 EDITION**  
THE EDITORS OF TIME-LIFE BOOKS  
Copyright 1979  
Pages; 248  
Price: \$12.95

The perennial return of the Time-Life photography series has a rather unique function. It is essentially a survey, an overview of one year's developments in the field of photography. But like *Time* and *Life* themselves, the Time-Life books are designed to reach a mass audience—in this case, amateur and professional photographers in all areas of a field that seems to expand by spontaneous generation.

America, 1979, sees few individuals unfamiliar with the picture-making process. Consequently, although the information presented in this annual is useful, and fairly objective, there just isn't enough of it. The format is slick and pretty but hungry for specifics. The copy relies on needless redundancy as photo-captions simply repeat any pertinent information from the text. We get only the scarcest outline of >>>



an issue, never any guts.

The volume is divided into chapters of "Trends" and "Attitudes," "Discoveries" and "Shows," "New Technologies" and "This Year's Books." Such cataloging uncovers those photographers who received grants last year and those photojournalists who received awards. But any observations as to the actual merit of the images is left to the reader. (The critical faculties of the Time-Life editors appear to be as blunted as their prose.)

Another chapter presents Arthur Ollman and John Pfahl as "discoveries"—when both photographers have been well established artistically for a respectable number of years. The "controversial" Museum of Modern Art exhibition, "Mirrors and Windows," is reduced to a page of cursory explanation. And perhaps most representative of current attitudes, the technology section tells us that new computerized cameras are so smart, we never need think about lighting or focus again. In principle, such improvements are fine. But the long-range repercussions won't be examined here.

*Photography Year, 1979* exists as a primer, as a glance at the state of the art. Most of the pictures selected are noteworthy, some are even extraordinary. But such visual efforts deserve more profound support from the text. There were more than 138 major photography exhibitions held last year. Obviously, the public's involvement with photography is considerable. The journalist's awareness should be equally so.

#### **HOMAGE TO CAVAFY**

**DUANE MICHALS**

Published by Addison House

Copyright 1978

Price \$9.95

*Constantine Cavafy, 1863-1933, was referred to by E.M. Forster as "a very wise, very civilized man," the extent of whose ambition was "to be understood in Alexandria and tolerated in Athens."*

The late Greek poet's verse is as startling and spare as the sun-scarred isles from which he came. It is frankly homosexual, admitting to frustrations but never to fear. Many of the poems are painful, for he came to know himself well through his work, and the process of self-discovery is always agony. But Cavafy was a brave man, neither self-conscious nor sentimental. The sensuality of his writing is precise and candid. "After his shower he dried himself very carefully. And although he would never admit it, it had all been for my benefit."

Duane Michals pays homage to Cavafy through his art, his photography. The collaboration is natural. Uncrowded, unhurried, and lucid with his own truthful vision, Michals' work never illustrates Cavafy's poetry, it just adds an extra dimension. The pictures dance with the words, each medium succeeding on its own level without losing rapport.

Michals must identify with Cavafy's themes of aging, and of intimacy between men. "When he was a young man, it seemed impossible that he would ever grow old. Now that he is old, he cannot remember ever having been young." There is a fat, balding man sitting with his back to a window, staring at the youthful face of his painted portrait. The photograph and the poem share the feeling of captured longing, a step out of synch with progress, a breath that is held to feel if the heart is still beating.

"He was unaware that at the exact moment he removed his undershirt, his body had grown to its perfection. With his next breath, the moment had passed." Michals knew exactly what this verse described: The boy's supple naked torso is stretched full upward with the effort of pulling a t-shirt over his

head. He is perfect, a lithe pallid curve against the shadows of a darkened room. It requires a very special talent to infuse these least obvious events with a richness beyond description. In this, Cavafy and Michals are one.

The book is small, as are the black and white photographs. There are ten poems and ten prints. It isn't a lot and it doesn't need to be. This very special publication is worthy of time and attention.

#### **TO THE MANOR BORN**

**MARY LLOYD ESTRIN**

Published by: New York Graphic Society

Copyright: 1979

Pages: 115

Price: \$22.50

**70 black and white photographs with an introduction by Robert Coles**

Robert Coles' introduction to this book states, "Estrin's images had to be made by an insider—only then would the Old Guard willingly let theirs down." And therein lies the insurmountable weakness of *To The Manor Born*. Estrin went back to her "hometown" of Lake Forest, Illinois, a wealthy suburb of Chicago, to document what she perceived to be the fading traditions of the upper crust. By her own admission, she was not after polemical imagery or harsh judgments of that class's foibles and accomplishments. Hence, the photographs come off as large format, pretty snapshots of her friends and acquaintances.

Apparently, Estrin believed that individuals of influence should be recorded objectively, and preserved so that our children's children's children might know that such Mid-Western opulence had once existed—a dubious civic service at best, but not one without precedent. There is a historical tendency to preserve the relics of the rich and let the fumbings of the poor be forgotten. But Estrin is not an objective photographer. She is too close to the subject to see humor or irony. Consequently, the prints are just flattery.

Boredom reigns as a leitmotif throughout the 70 black and white photographs. So similar are the houses and clothing of these people that one begins to suspect that all were shot in the same suite of hotel rooms, sharing a suitcase from Talbot's. There is an obsession with symmetry as the established order keeps a watchful eye out for signs of decay or disarray. One notes the immutable room arrangements of immutable lives. Two lamps rest on two wing tables on either side of The Sofa, with The Painting on the wall behind. An unhassled and unintelligent-looking couple pose like a pair of stuffed pigeons, staring at the camera without a flicker of emotion in their eyes.

Somehow, the pictures of the children are the most depressing. They seem to be pathologically well-groomed, well-behaved urchins in resplendent salons, afraid to move for fear of scuffing the marble. It is not amusing.

Instead of mourning the demise of a social hierarchy, this book works oddly for the reverse. One wishes the revolution would hurry along and wash away this moldy, foolish group with their liver-colored age spots and leatherette skin.

There are only two images that sparkle with the potential of Estrin's failed project. A woman in a dress black hat and veil, wreathed in cigarette smoke, her brilliant black classic car as a backdrop. All very Grand Dame—but for her silly polyester blouse in a pattern of helium balloons—completely out of place and charming. Another puffy-faced woman with white hair sits on the edge of an actual divan with a pair of giant black poodles, as stiff and symmetrical as the end tables. These are the two Estrin prints that seem to forget their good manners. They're perceptive and funny and a bit cruel, but they're not boring. Unfortunately, the rest of the book is. ●