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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

# GARY SCHNEIDER'S PHOTOGRAPHS THROUGH GLASS, DARKLY

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No consideration of photography can any longer pretend to credibility without a full recognition of photography's imminent eclipse. Our end-century vintage prints are destined to be the last. The digital image, with its electronic and algorithmic matrix, has made chemicals, even to a degree optics, obsolete. Its binary logic has pinned down the pulverized world of light-sensitive granules, converted luminosity, color, and tonal gradation into measurable, calculable bits of information. What hasn't budged, though, is a basic story of activating energy. At some point, no doubt, we will acknowledge that a technique for manipulating light, often for representational ends, developed in the 19th century and evolved with great physicochemical inventiveness, only decades before a powerful conceptual apparatus, quantum mechanics, ratified light's corpuscular quantum condition and made the activity of light particles the model of all things. From then on, phenomena would be handled obliquely, if not blindly, and light, that is to say, energy, would be understood, once and for all,

as exceeding the visible, but not at all our grasp.

This technological interregnum assigns a new value to the photographic print, just as it relaunches an inquiry into the process that produced it: photonic flow, reflection, refraction, chemical reaction—the succession of material mediations, with their incremental abstractions, that scuttles facile references to a physical trace of “reality” severed by a frame and

found, unproblematically, in the photograph. “Reality,” in this suspiciously metaphysical scenario, which romanticizes the sensible world and lapses into a “once present, now absent” syndrome, is nothing but a macroscopic chimera: the objects, the scenes, that got in light's way. The “indexical” position seems to swear by the “iconic” rather than shift its sights to what exactly made the mark, and where that mark is lodged: the activity of light on the negative's light-sensitive emulsion. The premium now placed on information and its storage, divorced from any ultimate image, points, with retroactive acuity, to that protean matrix in the negative as the paradigm of the photographic.

Gary Schneider emerges from a long experience of the negative. There seems no simpler way to define who he is, how he sees—darkly, densely, virtually—or the specific qualities to which his photographs aspire. An established master-printer, he enters photography, so to speak, in medias res. The eminent photographers, artists, dealers, and curators who frequent his laboratory deposit expo-



Above: Gary Schneider, *After David*, 1993, toned gelatin silver print, 35½ x 28½". Opposite: Gary Schneider, *Rose*, 1989, toned gelatin silver print, 36 x 29".











Opposite: Gary Schneider,  
*Vegetable*, 1993, toned gelatin  
silver print, 33½ x 28½".

## THE SILVER PRINT BECOMES THE CUSTODIAN OF TONAL VALUES THAT ARE RARE AND IMPERILED. SCHNEIDER REJECTS ANY NOTION OF A RE-CREATION *CON BRIO* OF A PERIOD PIECE. HE'S AFTER SOMETHING MUCH MORE MATERIAL: THE STATE OF THE PLATE.

tures. The future of the trace devolves, then, on his craft. That such an admitted though unacknowledged service should exist—the translation of the negative into some distinct finality—demonstrates certain, perhaps erroneous preconceptions about where the “photographic” in photography lies. Somewhat contradictorily, however, it also attests to an enigmatic hiatus inherent to the medium. Hardly a “mechanical” transfer of relative densities from film to paper, the printing process reveals the negative as a surplus, a multiple, an inexhaustible matrix, and the photographic image as a singularity, potent in its essential nonidentity.

What does it mean to print other people's pictures—to be the maker of a culturally valued artifact attributed to someone else? The recognition came to Schneider on viewing Sherrie Levine's photographic appropriations. The temerity of Levine's signature is, undeniably, a contribution. Yet her “discounting” of celebrated images relies on the look and the resonance of “reproduction.” The concept of the “already photographed,” which was to reorient the definition of the artist and of artistic practice in the '70s and '80s, is a byproduct of a massive diffusion of images, a cultural mutation perspicaciously anticipated and analyzed by Walter Benjamin. Only several years before his seminal essays, however, László Moholy-Nagy fixed the photographic activity squarely on the light-sensitive silver bromide plate, in light phenomena “*which we have ourselves composed*.” Are these impulses antithetical? Not necessarily. For Robert Smithson's intense confrontation with the “already photographed” in *The Monuments of Passaic* reveals the issue to be quintessentially a matter of light: the bridge he sees has undergone a seeming transmutation merely in its quality of being sun-drenched.

Synthesizing these impulses from within the medium, Schneider was to invert Levine's formula, turn from the summit to the base of our archives, from derivatives to the root, the negative, not for “reproduction” but for photoreactivation. In his first “experiments,” with 19th-century glass plates, the artistic stakes are already flagrant: an unveiling

of the history of photography, a scanning of the image's *materia prima*. He seizes on that history by way of its most haunting classification: the anonymous, the object without provenance (photographer: unknown, subject: unknown, circumstance: unknown, series of specimens: incomplete). The resulting inscrutability of the images transcends their self-evident genres: scientific microphotography or commercial studio portraiture.

What the plates have in common is the compelling fact of their preservation and the equally compelling fact of their active deterioration. Suddenly, conservation and contemporizing are indistinguishable gestures. The silver print becomes the custodian of tonal values that are rare and imperiled. Through gross enlargements, Schneider rejects any notion of a re-creation *con brio* of a period piece, or even of a simple deposit of period evidence. He's after something much more material: the state of the plate. Flying in the face of photographic distance, stunning in their detailed presence, his “Entomologicals,” 1987–91, and “Nineteenth-Century Women,” 1990, are poignantly indissociable from the decomposition of their constitutive emulsions. The intriguing botanical configuration of *Entomological Specimen* #5, 1992, with its diaphanous wings and almost motile cilia, appears organically reanimated by erosion's unpredictable visual effects: the mark of time, the mark of pure materiality. Its blemished chemical surface, its torn translucent ovoid mask, like the vestiges of masks, the crackling, the striations that attack the “Nineteenth-Century Women,” designate these photographs, with curious emotional force, as pictures of the negative.

Benjamin's brief history of photography, long since milked dry, yields to Schneider's conception of photography as a brief philosophy of history, Benjamin's own: that awakening to the past in the present moment's retrospective pregnancy. Susceptible to endless resuscitations by light transit, the negative may well be an ideal dialectical image, and the blow-up merely an extreme formulation of how we retrieve its microscopic material organization. Schneider's

investigations, however, work through inventive redefinitions of the negative. His “Entomological Specimens” and “Botanical Specimens,” both 1992–, are unusual variants on the photogram. Here real organic matter—insects, bits of vegetal tissue, all preserved across more than a century between thin glass slides—operates the recomposition of light. Employed as negatives, these slides provide enlargements with negative values and, paradoxically, unique photographic qualities. In their alternating transparency and opacity, the microscopic specimens demonstrate the sense of the photogenic. Linear forms consubstantial with the empty space in which they float, these delicate, isolated, captive fragments refute the necessity to impute planar complexity to the photograph. In Schneider's rendering, the thick circular seals that store them enter massively into the overall design—the storage chamber and its stock. Circles in a square, they touch emblematically on an inevitable tension between the convention of a frame and a photographic exposure, by its very monocular nature round.

With an expanded definition of the negative, Schneider finds the means to constitute his own without recourse to any conventional exposure. He will treat an ordinary object as if it were a negative—submit it to a light-beam probing, palpate one kind of matter with another and by ricochet activate the light-sensitive film. Composite compositions, his “Botanicals,” 1989–, come into being by a process of accretion. Accretion of what? On the surface of it, botanical fragments—a leaf, a poppy, an anthurium, an anemone, repeatedly displaced, refocused, relit, re-exposed; on the surface of the negative, successive layers of light—successive alterations in the chemical substance. To call this “superimposition” would suppose a specific visual effect, something for the eye to unpeel. No such effect is discernible. Schneider is accumulating a compact, unified packet of information. What all the “Botanicals” share is an extreme foregrounding of the vegetation, a kind of right-up-there-on-the-surface-of-it appearance that could never have been achieved without piece-by-piece close-up range. Contiguous areas that might be read



as background (but what is background in a photograph?) are modeled or modulated by his beam, suggesting only a shallow, uncertain depth, never wholly demarcated from the botanical fragment. The "Botanicals" do more than underscore the photograph's ultrathin material support. They embody the experience of the negative.

Sustaining this experience would seem to be Schneider's venture. *Rose*, 1989, exemplifies that perilous area/moment between full bloom and recession into darkness. The unnatural luxuriance of the plant's petalous form at first glance strikes the eye as a performance in *haute couture*, an extravagant draping in accessory foliage borrowed from an adjacent naked stamen: a "pseudoplant," then, in the manner of Joan Fontcuberta, though infinitely more elegant. Its fleshiness and voluminousness, however, its hallucinatory allover high-definition right down to the petal grain, the impossibly highlighted petal rims and petal roots, sink back into indeterminate or unqualifiable shadows, into a substance from which "rose" cannot be distinguished or dislodged. Schneider's purposefully incoherent lighting, his improbable proximity and focus (there's a touch of bravura in the fuzzy leaf), show this made-for-photography "sculpture" to exist uniquely in an excessive, virtual process. The confounding conundrum posed by his photographs resides in a burning, bleaching, dodging, and toning that cannot be exclusively assigned to either the print or the negative, but would seem to inform even the exposure. Repeated reconstruction is Schneider's modus operandi, and amplifies what any printer knows: the nonrepeatability of any single photographic image.

When Schneider turns his searchlight to the human face, the erotic aspect of this triangular machination of a photographer unhinged from his camera becomes fully apparent, and an unexpected dilation takes place: like the pupils that record the séance in a luminous graph, the visage swells, sometimes beyond the reaches of the frame. Take the *face as a negative*, stroke it, knead it inch by inch, and it inflates to unmanageable proportions, escapes. Radical close-ups of large dimensions, faces in your face, the "Portraits," 1989—, impose the "presence" that has become a desideratum in contemporary portraiture yet will not hold. Their imperceptible bit-by-bit montage touches on the problematic character of seeing—



the eye's fleeting adherence to fragments regulated by some conceptual integrity—and pushes it past a critical point. The sum of *all* the parts is supernumerary, too much, a face in exponential expansion and all the more elusive. Schneider forces the issue, playing on disturbing indistinctness or troubling clarity. Whether in *Jobn*'s gauzy, masklike lamination, loosened from an ossature, its blurring about the eyes and mouth, or in *Telma*'s too-dense, too-defined stony substantiality, the bits add up not so much to a face but a heavily impregnated, heavily invested screen.

The skin, however, is a kind of ideal reflective surface, one that deflects from natural contours and promotes the disengagement of autonomous light forms. Helmar Lerski's "Metamorphoses through Light," 1936, are an object lesson in this photodynamic pregnancy. Schneider's photographs, however, show an incongruity that no preestablished lighting can afford. Only the extreme freedom with which Degas approached positive and negative values in his pho-

tographs, converting shadows into effulgent patches, can begin to explain this photographic impropriety. Find it in *Jobn*, 1989: the highlighted furrow in the brow, the heightened tones above the eyelids, down each side of the nose and across the cheeks. Find it in *Telma*, 1990: the truncated, alternating reflections on the upper and lower lips, the abrupt illuminations above an eye, above and below the nostril, down the slope of the nose, its fulgent tip. This scoring further defamiliarizes the portrait, brands it unmistakably with the artifice of the underlying physical interaction.

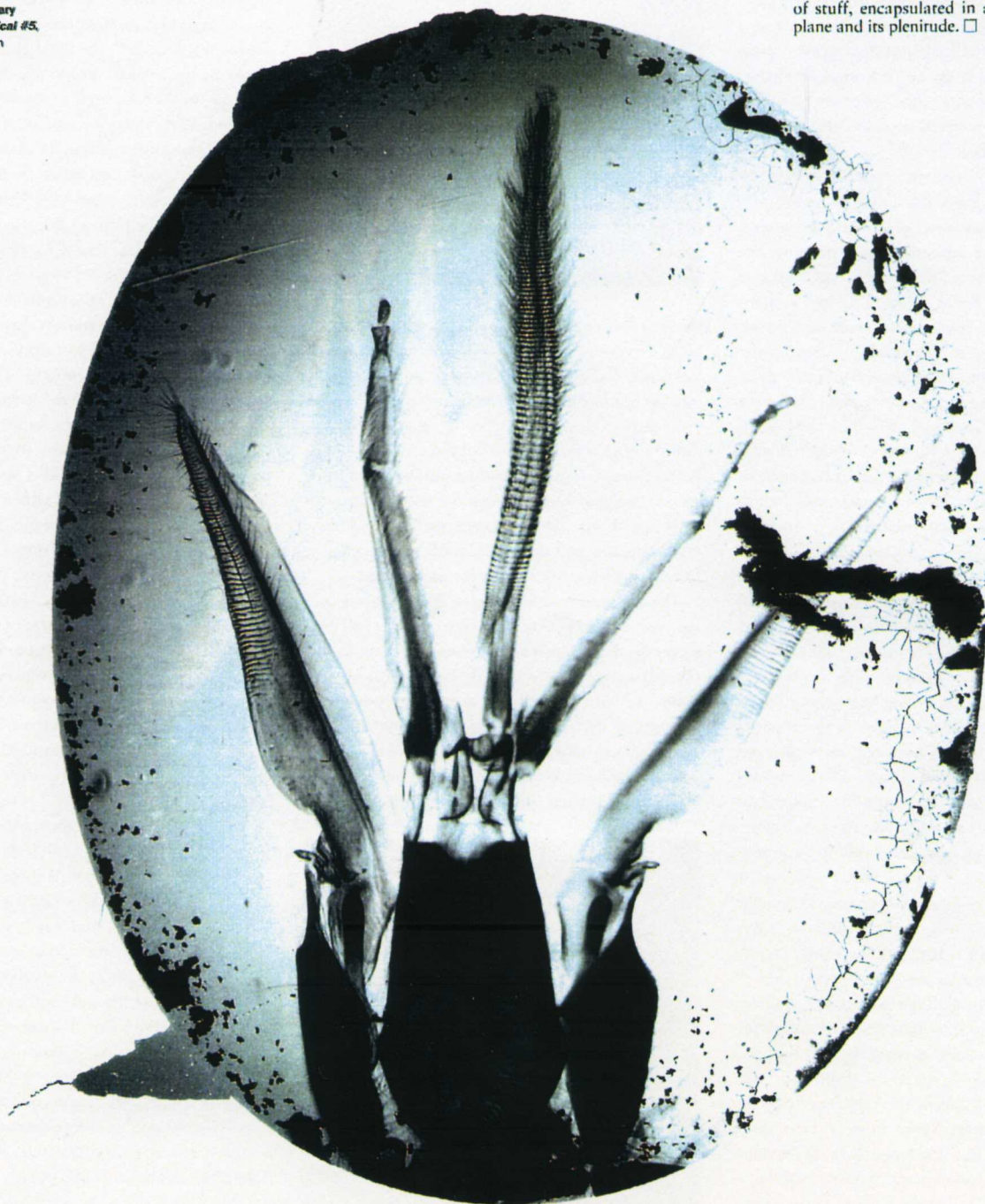
Schneider's "Hands," 1993—, as their dedicatory titles suggest, are also portraits in their way, commemorations of the definitively departed, who, in an act of sacramental substitution, can be substantialized and reactivated in light. The symbolic exchange is private, but not the iconographic significance of the photographer's hand. In the tradition of such hand-print photograms Rosalind Krauss has read an atavistic need to leave a direct bodily trace, as well as an assertion of an artistic prestidigitization that exceeds the powers of the eye. What remains to be explained are the hands' shadow contours, a pure product of light, an imprint, quite possibly, of a different order. For Schneider's "Hands" proliferate precisely within the parameters of this graphic difference. Add to this photography's contemporary context, consecrated, as it is in its most provocative manifestations, to the production of iconography, and read in Schneider's "Hands" signs that say Halt! This is iconography enough, an overflowing storehouse of information, a surfeit in the film, waiting to be potentialized!

*Vegetable*, 1993, is a phenomenon, the kind of synthesis in the laboratory that shakes the roots of the whole enterprise. It is as if the continuous discontinuousness of quantum light and silver salts, of chemical developers and paper grain, had found their perfect formal expression in the seeming contractions and dilations, the startling emergent quality captured on the very surface of the image. Eruptive, proliferative, buried in an inextricable density, the compound organic motif seethes with a potential neoplasticity. Some sort of gourd, of mind-boggling irregularity, has been insistently reconfigured in light—panoptically explored, obsessively examined for the unsuspected, often explicitly lubricious detail. Karl Blossfeldt's *continued on page 119*





Opposite page, top:  
**Gary Schneider, *Telma*, 1990**,  
 toned gelatin silver print,  
 36 x 29". Bottom:  
**Gary Schneider, *John*, 1989**,  
 toned gelatin silver print,  
 36 x 29". This page: **Gary  
 Schneider, *Entomological #5*,  
 1987-91**, toned gelatin  
 silver print, 38 x 28".



**SEDOFSKY / SCHNEIDER** *continued from page 72*  
 clean, flat, self-evident botanicals of the '20s, the knot at  
 the source of Schneider's work, burgeon into what looks  
 like a display in Arcimboldo's pantry. Unaccountable  
 shifts between legibility and illegibility, focus and blur, high-  
 lighting and tonal evacuation, convert depth into a mat-  
 ter of thickness, the illusion of voluminousness into a  
 conviction about the quantity of substance, the magnitude  
 of stuff, encapsulated in an ultrathin surface: an odd  
 plane and its plenitude. □