



Gary Schneider: Recent Photographs
Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University

April 18-June 1, 1997
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Performance in Photography: Gary Schneider's Photographs

Gary Schneider comes to photography with experience as a painter, filmmaker, and performance artist. It is the latter experience that primarily affected his approach to photography. The art world is familiar with performance as an element in the action paintings of Jackson Pollock and others whose explorations with painting included the act of performing a painting, and has found a place for performance art as a medium distinct from performance in conventional drama, music, and dance. There has been, until now, less reason to think of performance as an element of photography. This is precisely the perspective that Gary Schneider brings to recent photographic works when he defines his role in the process of making photographs as performance. Schneider gives new life to photography by applying lessons of performance art to the field. He performs actively both in the shooting and printing processes, where he searches for the hidden properties of the negative surface, disclosing these in richly textured prints that offer a fresh interpretation of his subjects. By employing multiple sittings over hours or even days, he brings to the still photograph some of the qualities of a live performance where the development of a character or an action involves the duration of time. Previously he had merely used photography to document performance art or as an element of a performance.

This exhibition includes selected works from various series done over the past ten years, including portraits of his friends, hands, and botanical images, as well as botanical, biological, and entomological specimens printed from found microscope slides and negatives originally made in the nineteenth century. This is the first one-person museum exhibition of Schneider's works and also the first to group together representative images from the various series. The diversity of these works would on first appearance defy any attempt to link them coherently. And yet the artist believes that they can be linked together as a part of a ten-year search for a visual language sufficient to express his own artistic vision. Schneider's experiences with film did not provide him with any satisfactory answers, and it was necessary to move beyond performance itself as it evolved in so many different directions.

In his work, Schneider continues in the tradition of experimentation and innovation that has characterized photography from its beginnings in the nineteenth century. Photography has resisted all efforts of artists, curators, and other art world forces to define its limits either formally (as pure photography), or critically (as an expression of a particular ideology). Since the 1970s, the theorists and practitioners of photography have reexamined its history and incorporated into current practice techniques from its past, such as the production of cameraless images. They have engaged in social criticism, and also moved on to concentrate once again on unique ways to create objects. In contrast to numerous other artists of this postmodern era, Schneider eschews a sociopolitical approach to photography. Rather, he has chosen to reenter the postmodern world by looking at history and constructing a visual language based on a revival of the aesthetic approach to making objects imbued with a beauty of form and strong expressive features. His works thus regain the spiritual aura that Walter Benjamin cites as being lost in art in the age of mechanical reproduction. The photographs are often full of potent metaphors with a philosophical edge that touches on fundamental questions of meaning. The themes are questions concerning identity, mortality, and the organic processes of nature. His hand-manipulated objects enhanced by elements of performance thus appropriate and carry forward into the late twentieth century the creative explorations that were very much a part of photography in the nineteenth century, reflected in the works of photographers such as Robert Demachy in France and H. P. Robinson in England.

Schneider's experiments with photography have in part satisfied his quest for a visual language. This visual language incorporates, but is not limited to, existing practices in photography. Like Man Ray and many other innovators, Schneider used or abandoned the existing photographic means such as the camera, the negative, and the many diverse ways of treating subjects, in the process of discovering his own visual language. He treats the negative and the print, as well as the subject, as raw materials in order to reveal their fullest possibilities for art. He is driven by scientific curiosity to explore the visual and emotional surfaces of his subjects and by aesthetic need to express through his art the properties of both.

Of the works included in the Haggerty exhibition, the portraits are the most immediately compelling. They are the most obvious symbols of identity, but not the only ones. These portraits are of friends of the artist, posed

before a large-format studio camera. Once the image is composed on the ground glass, Schneider begins his performance, moving in close to the subject and actively lighting different parts of the face with a small beamed flashlight, all before the open shutter in a timed exposure. This action takes place in a dialogue with the subject and is intended to condense into a single image different stages of the subject's being over the duration. He in effect "performs" the photograph, constantly directing and also interacting with the subject in the photographic process while meticulously counting the light strokes deposited on the film emulsion. The experience is highly personal and intimate. The exposures last up to thirty minutes, and often the process requires that the subject undergo multiple sittings.

Schneider's intent is to capture in his portraits complex layers of a subject's being over time, rather than to capture the person's essence in a split-second exposure, as previous portrait artists may have aspired. He achieves this in part through recording multiple exposures on the same negative. This allows him to actually incorporate the duration of different moments in the life of the subject and in effect to compose his image in a narrative format. In the darkroom, Schneider continues his active role in the process by manipulating the negative's light and surface properties to obtain the desired print. Each print is unique, even when several prints are created from the same negative.

The results are deeply probing images expressive of intense emotional tonalities. The portraits are highly sensual and even erotic in tone. Although the works are essentially apolitical, this does not mean that they lack psychological or social poignancy. These works also carry religious overtones: they are metaphors casting haunting shadows as they evoke existential questions of mortality, tragedy, and human suffering. Some of the portraits reveal expressions of angst, possibly hinting that all is not well in the land where his subjects dwell. Yet the artist participates sympathetically as he performs their narrative with them.

His photographs of hands, which are cameraless photograms made by placing his own hand directly on the film, were at first autobiographical, and later referenced friends who had died and were no longer available for portraits in the usual sense. The hand portraits metaphorically exemplify features of his deceased friends and thus serve as conventional symbols of identity. In choosing hands for this purpose, Schneider has adapted a symbol of universal intent, akin to the human face in its diversity and its ability to mark differences. Schneider is not the first to see hands as a symbol of human identity. We can recall, for instance, Dürer's praying hands, Michelangelo's image of God touching Adam in the Sistine Chapel, or Stieglitz's hands of Georgia O'Keeffe. In 1930, the French photographer Roger Parry produced a gelatin hand print that closely resembles Schneider's hand prints, although it was produced with a camera instead of by contact between the hand and the negative surface.

More recently, contemporary artists such as Peter Campus and John Coplans have also photographed human hands. Coplans has made a series of photographs featuring hands.* By comparison with Schneider, Coplans's hands are merely sculptural and transparent; they lack the troubling formal and expressive subtleties found in Schneider's work. Schneider's hand pictures are the kind that stimulate the hungry imagination and fantasy through their enigmatic contrasts of light and shadow and their intensity of feeling. When subjected to the imagination of a curious viewer, each hand reads like a map of a soul yet to be discovered. Through scrutinizing these works, the viewer participates vicariously in the intense curiosity of the performer-photographer who previously scrutinized the surface of the hand and its attending negative for all possible clues that his process of discovery might disclose to the curious mind.

As he departs from the human body to examine the surfaces of the botanicals (including rose, fig, and onion), Schneider recalls for us the painterly tradition of still life present in the history of art from ancient Greece and Rome on into the twentieth century. Still life typically refers to compositions featuring inanimate objects such as fruits, vegetables, or flowers arranged on a flat surface, intended to display the artist's skills in the naturalistic rendering of objects. Such compositions are admired for their aesthetic features, and often convey to knowledgeable viewers additional symbolic meanings. Similarly, Schneider's botanicals are admired for their beauty, and for their implied metaphors. They celebrate the patterns of growth and energy in nature and are unabashedly sexual in character. Their shadowy forms also unveil patches of the dark sides of nature and the

human spirit and are thus tokens of mortality. Hence, his botanicals are also imbued with metaphorical expression, along with the faces and hands.

In the microscope series of insects, botanicals, and biological images, Schneider does not use the camera. The prints are made by enlarging found negatives and microscope slides originally produced in the nineteenth century. Schneider's use of existing images differs from the work of Sherrie Levine whose appropriated images of Walker Evans's photographs differ only in their bearing Levine's signature and in their deliberate conceptual appropriation of Evans's original photographs. Schneider attempts to record the actual sensation of being inside the microscope. He tries to become the person looking through the microscope, to become one with the author without intruding. As the authors of the original negatives and slides are anonymous, there is not the same issue of authorship that arises with Levine's photographs. The negatives and slides are simply the starting point, and the images are enlarged and substantially manipulated to produce images whose authorship undoubtedly belongs to Schneider. Perhaps the analogy to Andy Warhol's manipulation of the Campbell's soup labels in his serigraphs and paintings or Roy Lichtenstein's uses of comic strip images applies to Schneider's use of found material. Just as the soup labels and comic strips were transformed by Warhol and Lichtenstein, the slides and negatives are transformed by Schneider into original works of art though the medium of photography.

Schneider's portraits objectify the individual character of each subject, and are at the same time replete with feeling. They record the dual experience of the artist in the process of making and the subject under scrutiny. The anonymous and arbitrary subjects of the hand pictures require more of the viewer's imagination, for in these the artist has invested his own meanings which depend upon relationships denied to the viewer. The viewer is invited to engage in the vicarious projection of the artist and to create his or her own experience based on the cryptic notes provided in the artist's communication. The imagination is further challenged for narrative context by the amorphous organic shapes formed by delicately manipulated rose petals or onion skins. Perhaps the greatest challenge is provided by the stark, often abstract forms of the specimens and entomologicals. It would be impossible for the viewer to be in tune with every nuance afforded by the artist's own experience, but the photographic language that is evolving in Schneider's hands is sufficiently powerful to evoke intellectual curiosity and strong feelings.

Curtis L. Carter
Director

*Jean-Francois Chevrier and James Lingwood, *Another Objectivity* (Paris: Centre National des Arts Plastiques, 1989), 97-99.

Acknowledgments

The Haggerty Museum is pleased to present this exhibition of the work of photographer Gary Schneider. We are grateful to the artist, P·P·O·W Gallery, Wendy Olsoff, and Tom Morrissey for their assistance in making work available for the exhibition. Funding for the exhibition was provided in part by the Richard and Ethel Herzfeld Foundation. Thanks are also due to the Haggerty Museum staff. Allison Smith oversaw shipping and insurance of the works; Steven Anderson, assisted by Jason Rohlf, installed the exhibition; Lee Coppernoll coordinated public programming and tours; Paula Schulze served as curatorial assistant and designed the gallery guide; and Maria Kangas served as administrative assistant.

C. L. C.

Images

Front: *John's Eye*, 1989, toned gelatin silver print, 36 x 29 in., courtesy of the artist and P·P·O·W, Inc., New York.

Inside: *Anthurium*, 1991, toned gelatin silver print, 36 x 29 in., courtesy of the artist and P·P·O·W, Inc., New York.