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PICTURES FOR THE THESIS

Margaret McGarrity

submitted as a requirement for the degree
Master of Fine Arts

M.F.A. Photography Program
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, New York 14623
March, 1982

Charles Werberig

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March 10, 1982

Margaret Dull McGarrity

Margaret McGarrity

This thesis is dedicated to
my mother and my grandmother.

Ann Spence Dull
who died January 17, 1980 at the age of 60.
An accomplished needleworker and horticulturist.
She took great pride in her children.

Madeleine Heyder Spence
who died June 5, 1981 at the age of 86.
A fine pianist and teacher.

1.

THESIS PROPOSAL

Title: Private pictures in public places.

Purpose: I will photograph in and around public buildings, particularly the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. I am after pictures that describe how animate objects are, their elegance, and their involvement in a kind of theatre.

Scope and background of the thesis: This will be a continuation of past work--pictures of natural and man-made objects in public buildings and spaces. I'm interested in the forms these things have taken, their elegance, how animate they seem. I think I can put this mobility and elaborateness in my photographs.

The objects often seem involved in secret activities, small dramas that repeat with or without spectators, as in Sudek's garden photographs or Atget's pictures of parks and statues. Odd things are often juxtaposed and they unsettle one another, like the elements in a Dada-Surrealist collage.

My special location will be the Metropolitan Museum. For me, this museum is a gigantic curio cabinet, filled with interesting objects, splendidly displayed. I go there to enjoy the excesses--things so carefully made, carefully collected, carefully exhibited. Much of the lighting is very dramatic, designed to emphasize the physical splendour of the collections. The display is a little bit vulgar, and so is the notion of a huge treasure house filled with things from all over the world.

2.

PROCEDURES

I used six different cameras and included both color and black & white photographs. The cameras were a Nikon and a Leica 35 mm, a Crown Graphic 4x5, a Brownie box camera (number 2A), a Kodak Bulls-Eye (number 2, 1897) in which I used paper negatives, and a pinhole 4x5 of my own construction.

Although I had no access to color facilities at home, I returned to Rochester several times to use a friend's darkroom because two of my board members insisted I carry on with the color.

A lot of the work was taken at slow shutter speeds, ranging from 1/60 (the set shutter speed on the Brownie box and the Kodak Bulls-Eye) to several seconds or even minutes (the pinhole camera and photographs with the other cameras in low light). I had no interest in using flash and, although I did use a tripod sometimes or rested the camera on a solid surface, I often hand-held slow shots, even to several seconds. I was not interested in excessively indistinct pictures and made the exposures as steadily as I could. The pictures range from being obviously blurred to being just slightly unsharp. The slight loss of definition--which is also provided by the poor lenses in the box cameras and the lack of lens in the pinhole camera--seemed to work well in many of the pictures.

THESIS PROPOSAL AS I SHORTENED IT FOR THE EXHIBITION

The project is about the animateness of inanimate objects. Sometimes this is simply perfection or luxuriousness or excess in the form the object has taken; sometimes it is an appearance of stress or mobility, aggressiveness or threat; or it may be

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a certain theatricality or the suggestion of secret activities or small dramas that repeat with or without spectators.

THE EXHIBITION was held November 16 to November 22, 1980 in the M.F.A. Gallery, School of Photographic Arts and Sciences, Rochester Institute of Technology. Thirty-two photographs were exhibited.

4.

THE PROPOSAL IN RELATION TO THE WORK

I chose my thesis project in the simplest way I could, by choosing a place where I wanted to work. I am a place-oriented, not an idea-oriented photographer, and I thought that restricting my location would act as an irritant on my work process, making me hone my seeing and decision making.

I enjoy the Metropolitan Museum for a variety of reasons and had suddenly started photographing there the previous summer. It seemed a good idea to make it my thesis site. I thought of it as a big image bank, where I could burrow in photographically, refer the photographs to the real objects, go back and repeat shots that didn't work, and produce an exhibit with a clear thread.

I wanted to investigate three things in particular: emphasis on point of view in the photographs; awareness of how the skin and surfaces of things are described in photographs; considerations of the impact of the photographs on the viewer.

Instead of being the simple statement I intended, however, once written the thesis proposal became a dead-weight and a definition that intruded on my work.

I've always found that working within a project is counter-productive for me because I try to define my way into photographs. The approach becomes too verbal and academic. The proper process for me would have been to recruit a thesis board on the basis of my past work, skip the proposal, and go on photographing.

As it was, I did an enormous amount of work with the proposal in mind, and the vast proportion of this did not

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engage me and was not exhibited. Although I normally take many pictures and print only a few, the great quantities of discarded thesis work eventually blunted my approach and dusted the whole project with doubt. I lost my acuteness.

This was also a function of drawing the project out for so long and doing it while I was also doing a large book-project with my husband on U.S. Route #1. I'm best at a fast turn-around in my work. The thesis was my initiation in making time for my own work without the privilege of being full-time in school.

These problems with the project did clarify some of my ideas. Although many contemporary photographers depend upon closely defined intentions, I don't like work that functions mainly to support a thesis. Many of my favorite photographers have a broad purpose--Atget, Sudek, Bellocq--but they are not deductive, calculating workers. They haven't set a definition to their work which they are busy filling up with photographs. Order, says the American poet William Carlos Williams, should be thought of as what was "discovered after the fact, not a little piss pot for us all to urinate into."¹

THE PROPOSAL EXHIBITED WITH THE PHOTOGRAPHS was meant to be a workable simplification, which hit on some of the reasons I photograph the things I do. As far as I know, it was almost entirely mis-read and proved to be a problem for many viewers, who thought that by 'animateness' I meant something like 'personification' and expected to see in the photographs inanimate objects resembling people or animals.

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That isn't what I intended, either in the statement or the photographs. By animateness, I mean the suggestion in certain objects of mobility or will or intentional display, a pathetic fallacy I see occurring in both Atget's and Sudek's photographs, for instance. Not all objects have this, as not all people have what Ralph Waldo Emerson calls 'character' or 'self-reliance.' It is as if the objects participate in attaining, for example, a perfection of form or an elegance of appearance or an unusual adaptation to their location. Because of these extraordinary arrangements, the objects seem to take on life and purpose. They seem to insist on amply living space and even to intrude upon our own space. This is all largely because they have reached a sort of force and exquisite^{ness}, and to that attainment we impute life and will.

PICTURE AND IMAGE

Although image seems to be the preferred word among contemporary artist-photographers, I prefer the word picture. Instead of putting emphasis on the invented artistic object, as image seems to, picture carries three meanings which refer to the aspects of photographs I like to see in balance: 'picture of,' referring to the original subject; 'to picture,' referring to how the photographer re-invents the subject in the photograph; and 'the picture,' the photograph itself.

I am not too interested in photographs that fall at the ends of the spectrum--photographs that are interesting only because of what they are about and photographs that are interesting only because of the way they are made.

7.

This question of style and substance takes some peculiar turns in photography, because it seems so easy or almost inescapable to have substance, given the camera's natural inclination to record, and so difficult, at least superficially, to establish or apprehend style, because of the chemical and mechanical nature of the medium.

In fact, the question is often resolved in favor of style, as substance. Manipulations of the camera or processes, or, more often, simply 'photographicness' become the substance. The emphasis is on the image, and the subject becomes merely raw material for technical or artistic manipulations. Work like this bores me, usually after a brief interest in its inventiveness or its technical expertise. It often seems to run in a very tight circle, with the photographer imitating his own or other photographs.

In a 1976 article on Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind, New York Times art critic Hilton Kramer describes both photographers as "wandering over the country and the world in search of the precise image (they) want to project in (their) work." He speaks of Callahan's "deliberate detachment" and describes both men's work as "deeply entrenched in the technical and material processes of photography."²

Callahan and Siskind are obvious examples of this kind of onanism in photography. It is more difficult to recognize in photographers who have not so carefully minimized subject matter but for whom, nevertheless, photographicness is the real subject.

One of the first times I realized how much this bothers me was at an exhibition in New York City a few years ago. Coming upon

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a Walker Evans photograph, I was struck by how oppressive the photographic decisions were. The space in particular seemed static and compressed, determined by very finicky framing decisions, and considered so carefully in its photographicness that the suggestion of real space was pressed out. The photograph really didn't seem to be about two dancers standing in the middle of a studio, but about Evans' attention to photographic method and detail. It was all strict, tight, and perfectly photographic. I don't recall the date of this picture but know it followed the F.S.A. work, in some of which I find a similar photographic fastidiousness becoming the substance of the picture. Evans' best F.S.A. work was constrained by the necessity of following the project's intentions, to record a certain segment of Depression America, but I've read how peculiar he appeared doing this work--prim, tidy, groomed--and it's that Evans that comes forward in these photos about photographicness.

A more obvious contemporary example, stylistically very different from Evans, is Larry Fink. Fink is one of the recent M.O.M.A. proteges, and I've seen his work several times in the past two years. As in some of Evans' work, Fink's subject matter is so subsumed by technique that the real substance becomes photographicness. Fink's personal style is unmistakable, and calculatedly so, as with many young photographers. I find his work opportunistic and sly, because the technique he uses cannot help but 'reveal' things about the people he photographs. In fact, the discoveries are all photographic and the same social and psychological 'truths' are discovered about everyone.

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from rural Pennsylvania to cosmopolitan N.Y.C. It is self-serving. What is really being shown is camera-created caricature and shallow social commentary. Most viewers will understand the revelations, pat themselves on the back and agree, happy to see familiar notions repeated in a suitably emphatic style.

The point here is not that I am uninterested in materials and techniques or in the artifice that goes into making a photograph. In fact, I'm especially interested in the idea of exaggerating a little bit in the image and in how both the accuracies and the misstatements of photography lend themselves to the picture.

My understanding of how subjects translate through the medium becomes a more and more refined influence on how I photograph, but when that understanding begins to supplant the immediate connections with subject matter that are my primary reasons for ever picking up a camera, the whole process becomes calculated, harried, and unpleasant.

One of the most interesting things about photography for me is the combination of record and artifice. It's a kind of balancing act between a passive, receptive approach--recognition of something you want to photograph--and an active, manipulative approach--making sure that what you saw comes through the process and is successfully re-invented in the print.

If I were to say which is more lacking in contemporary photography, recognition or invention, I would say recognition--really having something to photograph. It's something I'm very keen on maintaining in my work. Whenever I find myself

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working with the achieved photograph in mind rather than out of excitement for what I'm photographing, using the subject only as a data bank for making the well-calculated image, I know I'm on the wrong track.

I've always been interested in 19th century photography, and I collect 19th and early 20th century work by amateur and provincial photographers, everything from Daguerreotypes to snapshots. What I like about this work is its enthusiasm, its clumsiness, and its interest in the facts, as well as the surprisingly fine photographs that result. Naive about accepted photographic approaches or too modest to consider art and style, these photographers at best produce pictures that are vivid in form, faithful to the subject and to the photographer's enthusiasm. The seeing is untutored, uncalculated, immediate and particular.

There is a kind of fascination with facts and a confidence in seen things in this work that seems lacking in a lot of contemporary work.

Today photography plays with the idea of the photographic lie as often as with the assumption of photographic truth. We no longer credit its accuracy, as 19th century viewers did. And, as Susan Sontag suggests, the multitude of photographic images which now comprise a great part of the average person's 'experience' serve to separate us from real experience, to let us depend on the photograph for being there and remembering being there, and to give us media and style in place of plain facts. We don't trust the facts and we don't trust the photograph, but at least the photograph has style.

11.

In a lot of contemporary photography, the realness and immediacy have been transferred almost entirely to the surface of the print and no longer carry back to the subject in any important sense. The subject is either just raw material for visual invention and technical exercises or has been, as content, spliced into pre-determined personal narratives.

In the recent Museum of Modern Art exhibit on Atget, I came across a small example of this transfer of intent away from the thing seen and to the surface of the photo.

There were perhaps a score of prints by contemporary photographers, from negatives for which no original Atget prints were available. The contemporary prints were excellent, by contemporary standards. But they were different from Atget's own prints, and, in adhering to modern expectations about technical perfection, had become unfaithful to Atget's intentions.

The attention to separation in shadow and highlight detail, burning down areas of brilliant sunlight, and manicuring every corner of the print, transferred the realness and primary interest of the photographs to the surface of the prints themselves and away from the things photographed. A lot of the immediacy was lost from the photographs.

This represents several steps away from Atget's intentions, which are present as vividly in his 'good' prints as in his 'bad' prints--to record all those parts of Paris and its environs he considered artistic or picturesque. He was in something of a hurry, having started late in his own life and late in the lives of the things he wanted to photograph, many of which were being altered or destroyed.

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His appreciation of what he photographed and his desire to get it recorded faithfully are what illuminate the photographs. What elevates them above the charming and nostalgic is the vividness of his manner of photographing, the clarity and immediacy of the subjects and often their ordinariness, and his own sensibility.

He wasn't a finicky printer and he wasn't concerned with an elegant presentation of the pictures. In fact, his wife probably did a lot of the printing, on a few different kinds of paper, depending on what was available; and the finished photographs were simply stuck in plain albums, untrimmed, on pages not much larger than the photographs themselves. Nothing fancy, because what was fancy was already in the photographs.

In spite of this, and partly because of their rawness or plainness, these are elegant prints and fine technical expressions of the photographer's intentions.

The contemporary prints in the M.O.M.A. show have effectively turned this approach on its ear, making the immediacy of seeing and photographing secondary to printing the perfect image. The real light that is present in Atget's prints has become only paper tonalities, and Atget's sensibility has been stifled by doctrinaire prints.

IMMEDIACY - SENSIBILITY

Work that invests itself so much with the image and not with the picture lacks, for me, the most subtle and interesting aspects of photography--the urge to photograph something, and how the photographer's 'voice' or sensibility informs both the seeing and the technical expression.

13.

In a book review in The Nation magazine, the reviewer quotes another writer: "We are often able to hear an actual speaking voice behind (Ralph Waldo) Emerson's words." But the reviewer concludes that "according to current critical fashion, the idea that there is actually a human voice behind a written text (let alone an audience for it) is hopelessly reactionary." He calls this "psychological concentration" and distinguishes it from the more currently acceptable "stylistic cultivation."³

This is like the split I have been describing between image and picture, style and substance. 'Voice' and 'psychological concentration' are what I look for in photographs. Style should be thought of as the particulars of how form is given to that substance, rather than, as seems generally assumed, a sort of formal typology the artist applies to his product.

'Stylistic cultivation'--which I also associate with the notion of consciously setting out to put together 'a body of work'--always seems too constrained and procedural and not a particular enough reason to photograph.

To quote W.C. Williams again--he expands on the idea that order should come after the fact and talks about critics and artists who start out by applying general principles and depend upon categorizing and comparing: "The coining of similes is a pastime of a very low order.... Much more keen (is) the power which discovers in things those inimitable particles of dissimilarity to all other things which are the peculiar perfections of the things in question."⁴

14.

This is the kind of particularity and immediacy I'm interested in, rather than in the well-calculated body of work. If a photographer has something to photograph and can cut through accepted notions of substance and style and get cleanly to the picture, the work will naturally develop a style, or what I prefer to call sensibility.

In a critical essay about George Moore's novel The Lake, Richard Allen Cave writes: "Most importantly of all it was Clara (a friend of Moore) who, through her discussions of how she would reproduce certain effects of light on land-masses in paint, made Moore realize the degree to which an individual's mode of perception does reveal his quintessential identity."⁵ This is what I mean by sensibility--the play of perception on the particulars of the observable world. It is open-ended and direct, rather than formed in illustration of abstractions and generalities.

Another writer, speaking about his own work, describes his aesthetic as "the capacity to wonder at trifles," to "notice and fondle details."

"In my academic days," writes Vladimir Nabokov, "I endeavored to provide students of literature with exact information about details, about such combinations of details as yield the sensual spark without which a book is dead. In that respect, general ideas are of no importance. Any ass can assimilate the main points of Tolstoy's attitude toward adultery but in order to enjoy Tolstoy's art the good reader must wish to visualize

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for instance, the arrangement of a railway carriage on the Moscow-Petersburg night train as it was a hundred years ago."⁶

Later in the same collection of essays (in one about Marcel Proust), Nabokov further clarifies this distinction: "Contrasted here are the literature of the senses, true art, and the literature of ideas, which does not produce true art unless it stems from the senses."⁷

As against "traditional notions which may be borrowed from the circulating library of public truths," Nabokov plumps for "a series of unique surprises which master artists have learned to express in their own unique way." Minor artists "do not bother about any reinventing of the world; they merely try to squeeze the best they can out of a given order of things, out of traditional patterns of fiction."⁸

THE VARIETY in my thesis exhibition bothered a lot of people, but at this point I much prefer an open-ended approach, rather than feeling compelled to offer a unified body of work. I chose each photo as much as possible on its own merits, rather than for how it fit into the larger exhibit. Some of them seemed unfinished, off-the-cuff, or raw to me--as if they needed more work or were only interesting quick notes--but, in other cases, the rawer versions were the better ones, as both Owen and Charles Werberig suggested. Many of these I didn't exhibit, although Charles wanted me to, because I couldn't get past the assumption that exhibited work must be polished.

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When I look at the photographs now, I also see some of them as random in size and many of the color photos as too dark and difficult to see. I prefer photos that are a little bit dense but that, when viewed closer up, present no obstacles to seeing everything in the print. The two large photos from paper negatives also suffered from this heaviness.

The most successful pictures, judging by comments and in my own opinion, were the ones I worked at most, especially the early black & white Metropolitan pictures and some of the color box camera work. These represent something of a change in my photography. Not only did I escape from the same-sizedness that crept into my work at R.I.T., but I also, on these pictures, worked long and hard in the darkroom, pushing the prints until I got what I wanted.

Although I guess, if I had to take sides, I would agree with Duane Michals when he says, "Craft is important but it's only secondary--I'd rather see a poor print of a good idea than a good print of a poor idea,"⁹ I also think the two go hand-in-hand and the picture is never there until it has been worked out in the print. The change for me here was in getting up to my elbows in the darkroom and making the materials work for me, instead of dictating to me or remaining inert.

Even though I printed some of these photographs many months after I had taken them, the immediacy and clarity of my intentions remained throughout the process. I knew what I had taken a photo of and I knew what I wanted to see in the print.

In these pictures I think I found answers for two of the

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notions that occupied me most, at least in terms of process-- how to re-invent the subject in the photograph and how to retain immediacy in the work. Part of the answer is that the artifice or the alterations I made in the darkroom almost are obvious. In fact, I think I would be hard pressed to make duplicates of some of these pictures because of the work involved, which included developing in mixtures of different developers, painting with various developers full-strength as the print came up, a fair amount of bleaching, and different exposure times for different areas of the prints.

When the alterations are less a matter of darkroom work, as with some of the color prints, there are often slight misdefinitions or exaggerations provided by the cameras I used (box cameras and the pinhole) or by hand-holding slow shutter speeds. Like the darkroom manipulations, these are just apparent, or at least not made too emphatic. The box and pinhole cameras tend to flatten color values, produce some color shifts, and provide a slight loss of definition. These deficiencies help to produce the tapestry-like effect of the circular pond south of Rochester and, as Hertha said of the long hedge in Rochester, "to describe as downy something we know as prickly."

This is similar to a comment Rod Slemmons once made about a lawn I photographed at night, which he said was like a cat's back, or to Steve Kurtz' description of the thesis photo of the Metropolitan balustrade as knees.

I pay a lot of attention to how the skin or surfaces of things are described in photographs and to what sorts of transformations they undergo in the photographic process--the suggestion of very

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white, real flesh in the baby's bust at the Metropolitan, of softness in the wall of the public building in Rochester, or the excitedly artificial look of the real flowers at the Metropolitan.

Having the darkroom manipulations and camera misdefinitions just apparent keeps the photos shifting, active, and perhaps a little restless. Sometimes I think of my best work as having a combination of stability (even inertia) and tension, or an excitability beneath stable appearances. An idea that seems to come along with this is lushness or density in the prints, or what I also think of as pressure against the surface of the print--which I associate with Atget's photos of bedrooms and parks or with Vuillard's paintings.

When the photos lack this pressure and changeableness-- which goes along with the notion of the photographer as a walker, seeing things shift appearances as she moves by, something that both Charles Werberig and Steve Kurtz mentioned about my photos and something I always think of when I think of Atget--they become static and ordinary and, as Hertha said, "too much about physical point of view."

FORMALISM AND NICENESS

Throughout the process and at my thesis sharing, I heard criticism that some of the work was very formal or about design, and also suggestions that there was a current of passivity, niceness, blandness, or safeness in the work.

Hertha objected to photos she thought were "too carefully thought out" in cropping and point of view and commented that

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when the photographs fail "it's always bland rather than excessive."

Charles Werberig said he liked the ambivalence I had maintained in some of the photos between a documentary and a personal view but thought other photos were "very common--very conventional notions of design."

All my board members commented that in some of the photos--the couches at the Metropolitan, the chairs at the Cloisters, and others--they had the feeling that something was about to happen. Hertha described it as almost a threat--"awfulness," she said and spoke of "slightly surreal definitions" and an "hypnotic" quality about the best of the pictures.

Judy Hanlon was disappointed by what she thought was an interest in design and even graphicness and a consequent loss of the intimacy and privacy of some of my earlier work.

I was a bit surprised at which of the photos were considered formalist, because one thing that pleased me about the thesis work was that I thought I was finally freeing myself of a nasty bout, endured at R.I.T., with the exactitudes of framing and the calculated part-by-part organization of my photographs. Many of the cameras I use have built-in obstacles here--my viewfinder Leica, which does not offer the precision viewing of a SLR; my box cameras, which are a bit dim in the viewfinder and have a vague edge; and my pinhole camera, which can be aimed fairly accurately but not precisely edge to edge. I cannot piece together a photograph out of decisions about sharpness, composition, framing, and a score of other little formal considerations. This destroys my enthusiasm and concentration

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and leaves me with a calculation rather than a photograph.

(I also like working with these cameras because they are quieter, less obtrusive, and make fewer technological demands.)

For many photographers, I think, it is easy to take haven in formalism. It's a critical point well-taken about some of my work, and one that I hate to hear. I thought a lot about the 'pleasantness' of my work and about aggression, toward the subject, the materials, and the viewer. The bold or emphatic photograph, that insists on the viewer's attention, was something I wanted to investigate, because it is something toward which I am disinclined, both as photographer and viewer. In this interest, I may have come an unwanted distance toward graphicness and the calculated image.

The pleasantness in my work is something I am not averse to, although I prefer to think of it perhaps in a way Hertha once described it--nice, not like eating ice cream, but a little more strange, like eating an avocado.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Reed Whittemore, William Carlos Williams, Poet from New Jersey (Boston, c1975), p.279.
- ²Hilton Kramer, "Celebrating Formalism in Photography," The New York Times (New York, December 12, 1976), p. D29.
- ³Jackson Lears, "Democratic Voices," The Nation (New York, October 17, 1981, p. 382.
- ⁴Whittemore, p. 121.
- ⁵George Moore, The Lake (Gerrards Cross, c1980), afterword by Richard Allen Cave, p. 229.
- ⁶Fredson Bowers ed., Vladimir Nabokov: Lectures on Literature (New York, c1980), p. viii.
- ⁷Bowers, p. 237.
- ⁸Bowers, p. 2.
- ⁹Duane Michals, lecture at Rochester Institute of Technology, Wednesday, April 26, 1978.

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