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DUMB PICTURES

an exploration

as fulfillment of the thesis requirement of the  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS DEGREE

At ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
College of Graphic Arts and Photography  
School of Photographic Arts and Science

submitted by                      RICHARD MARGOLIS

March 1, 1978

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis, an exploration of dumb pictures, will define and isolate examples of a kind of picture that while existing for some time has not been treated formally. These pictures include family snapshots, post cards, newspaper pictures, and the nearly infinite mass of images that are not worth noticing, except for their flaws, accidents and visual flukes.

Because there is a new tendency for some creative photographers to imitate this kind of picture they have become worth clipping and preserving on bulletin boards. The family snapshot has become a source of inspiration for contemporary photographers who find the accidents fascinating. It is the photographic elements, the lens flare, the optical distortions, the two dimensional representation of three dimensions, and other formal qualities not understood by the snapshooter, that the creative photographers are using.

This may be difficult to appreciate in the context of a photographic history that has labeled subject matter, craft, intentionality and beauty as desirable. But when considered as an aspect of modern art where the rules are less rigid, and formal qualities given more significance, these images can be more easily understood.

If this change had occurred in another medium, painting for instance, the critics, whose function it is to inform the audience, would have been more helpful, and the audience, once informed, would have been able to appreciate not only the photographs, but the references to snapshots.

and the treasures in their own family albums. But this did not happen. A. D. Coleman says that "there is hardly an art critic today competent to discuss photography as a branch of printmaking much less as a creative graphic medium with a unique and distinctive field of ideas."<sup>1</sup> It is ironic that this is so because art has been influenced so much by photography, and there is a major branch of painting that deliberately imitates photographs. And yet photography is still something that is out there somewhere, distinct and complex, and maybe too common, and too easily done, without enough definite criteria to distinguish the successes from the failures for critics and audience to deal with it in the same way as "real art."

The topic of dumb pictures addresses itself to the problem of everyone being a photographer (takes pictures), thus photographs surround us to the extent that we do not notice them much of the time. There are now deliberate attempts being made by artists employing photography to imitate the kind of pictures that we have learned not to notice. It is understandable that there are many people who do not appreciate this new photographic style.

In this thesis there will first be a definition of dumb that collects descriptive terms which could be applied to images, and to the people who make them, and to the response of the viewer. From this beginning there will be a survey of the various forms that the photographs may take, and because of the variety available, six categories will be suggested to organize them.

In addition, the most important category, those pictures that have been inspired by the first six kinds, will be described. It is because of the widespread use of the snapshot aesthetic and the lack of understanding of the way these pictures function that this thesis was proposed.

The process of consideration is a bit more complicated than just trying to hit the aesthetic target because it is possible to learn from failures, or to employ attractive secondary qualities, like tonality or grain pattern, or what are commonly considered technical failures like focus or lens flare, and to make a successful picture. Further, a deliberate effort to create a body of work that seems at first glance to be third rate, may infuse the pictures with a quality that will cause a revision of aesthetic concerns. Robert Frank's "The Americans" is an example of such a change occurring in the 1950's. Friedlander, Winogrand and Freed may be part of another such event.

Considering that this is a difficult and confusing topic the following thesis is presented without any further apologies.

## DEFINITION

"DUMB.. adj. dumber dumbest, 1. Lacking the power or faculty of speech; mute. 2. Temporarily speechless with shock or fear. 3. Unwilling to speak. 4. Not producing or accompanied by speech or sound. 5. 'Nautical'. Not self-propelling. 6. 'Informal'. Ignorant or stupid."

This definition from The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language<sup>2</sup> does not suggest an obvious connection between "dumb" and pictures, but the definition from another dictionary, A New English Dictionary of Historical Principles,<sup>3</sup> is more helpful.

"DUMB.. 3. That does not or will not speak; that remains persistently silent; little addicted to speech, taciturn, reticent.

7. Saying nothing to the understanding; inexpressive, meaningless; stupid, senseless.

8. Lacking some property, quality or accompaniment, normally belonging to things of the name."

Pictures, or other objects that are meaningless, stupid and senseless can be called dumb, as can pictures that lack some property, quality or accompaniment normally belonging to things of the name. While this is helpful it is still vague.

The Dictionary of American Slang<sup>4</sup> adds other words, and extends the definition.

"DUMB.. adj. 1. stupid, foolish. colloq. since 1820 From Pa. Dutch 'dumm'. 1925: 'you think I'm pretty dumb don't you?' F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby."

"DUMBO N. 1. a stupid person. 1951 'Edison was a dumbo in school' Radio Station WHK, Cleveland, Jan. 27. 2. a stupid mistake, a boner."

This adds the idea of something dumb being a mistake, a boner, and being related to a stupid person's actions.

The Macmillan Dictionary of Historical Slang<sup>5</sup> adds:

"DUMBFOUND.. to perplex; to put to confusion; silence".

Synonyms for some of the definitions further expand the circle. From

Roget's International Thesaurus:<sup>6</sup>

"STUPID; dumb, dullard, doltish, blockish, chumpish, unteachable, unlearnable, dead from the neck up, dead above or between the ears, muscle bound between the eyes (all slang).

"FOOLISH; fool, foolheaded, stupid, dumb, asinine, silly, dizzy, inane, senseless, witless, thoughtless, brainless, idiotic, crazy, mad, daft, cockeyed, screwy, nutty, wacky, goofy, daffy, loony, batty.

"IGNORANCE; unknowing, uncomprehending, simple, dumb, uninformed, unenlightened, unacquainted, unconversant, uninitiated, unfamiliar, a stranger to, inexperienced.

"ASTONISH; amaze, astound, surprise, startle, stagger, bewilder, flabbergast, confound, overwhelm, awe, awe-struck, strike with wonder, bedazzle, daze, stun.

The list of synonyms and definitions can be divided into three categories that describe "picture makers," "pictures," and "viewer response."

Picture makers:	The picture:	Viewer response:
Ignorant or stupid. Senseless, foolish, dullard, silly, uncomprehending, uninformed, unfamiliar, unenlightened, inexperienced, uninitiated.	Lacking some property or quality usually belonging to things of the name. Taciturn, reticent, not producing speech or sound. Meaningless, senseless. Silly, simple, wacky.	Temporarily speechless, amaze, astound, awe, awe-struck, stagger, flabbergast, daze, stun.

This suggests that the picture maker is naive, uninitiated, uneducated, inexperienced and uninformed, making pictures that lack some property normally expected, or resulting in pictures that are meaningless, senseless, simple or wacky. This causes the viewer to be amazed, astounded, awe-struck, staggered, flabbergasted, dazed or stunned, thus labeling the picture to be "dumb."

Other causes may lead to the same label, such as misunderstanding, or a picture being out of context, and thus being meaningless, or a picture being too sophisticated for a viewer instead of too simple.

Dumb pictures may be the result of a naive attempt to make a picture that proves to be unsuccessful. The result is a snapshot that is blurred or has the subject too small or too large, or blending into the background, or in some other way is not a clear picture of the person, place or event. These pictures usually cause the picture maker to decide that the result was a blunder, and that the picture is worthless.

Other pictures that produce the same reaction may be a photographer's early pictures that at one time were thought to be artistic. These pictures often change for the photographer into embarrassingly simple or derivative pictures that are no longer shown to anyone. There may still be some alternative value to these pictures, but due to the sensitivity of the photographer they are very difficult to appreciate. They are usually discarded, or at least left undisturbed in attics, basements or garages, hence are seldom seen.

Another kind of dumb picture, which has lost its original meaning or context, is from an out-of-fashion period. The styles have changed and the old style may seem comical now. The references are vague and unimportant, and the pictures may look funny and contrived, or they may be cliches.

Commercial photography or photojournalism, pictures done for particular reasons that may not be clear to the viewer, are another source for dumb pictures. These pictures are intended to sell a

product, or promote a cause, or convey some information, and often the viewer is not interested or not sympathetic.

Once some of the variety of dumb pictures is appreciated others can be discovered. Among the most difficult to find is the dull, or mediocre, or the just uninteresting. Certainly no one, or at least not very many people, deliberately make pictures that are just dull, or lacking in everything including the accidental values that even other dumb pictures might have. Technical pictures or documentary pictures might fall into this category, or perhaps pictures from an automatic camera that captures nothing at all. Actually these "pictures" usually don't get printed, but exist only as negatives, although they may be found in very uninteresting magazines or inside pages of local newspapers.

Postcards are an unusually rich source of dumb pictures. While most cards are of places that tourists want to remember or to boast about having visited, there are exceptions that are the result of either an odd sense of humor, changing fashions, incompetence or undecipherable intentions. There are particular kinds of images that could not exist as anything other than postcards such as the Jackalope or Giant Iowa Corn, or the fish that got away.

The most difficult kind of dumb picture to discuss is the picture by a sophisticated photographer that imitates the other kinds of dumb pictures. These photographers have become sensitive to certain aspects of snapshots, to the accidental or unpredictable events, to optical distortions and other results that would normally be described as flaws. Further, they deliberately present situations or events that are perplexing and unflattering. Like the other dumb pictures described here these pictures

make the viewer gasp, and wonder if the picture was intentional, what the photographer could have had in mind. They can be difficult to justify as serious when a skeptic questions them.

Because these pictures are made deliberately they can be considered to be art, and in the context of art something that has no value can be worth something. Art is free of the normal economic necessity of value created for effort produced. Only an artist can deliberately create something worthless that if successful will sell for a lot of money. Only those photographers who are using common images as their reference can make pictures that seem to have flaws and distortions, lack subject matter, contain confusion, and still be wonderful. In fact, they depend on their second rate appearance for their first class success.

While dumb pictures may have some things in common, it is also clear that there are several categories or kinds of dumb pictures distinct enough to require individual treatment. Those categories are:

- DUMB<sup>1</sup> Naive pictures by naive photographers.
- DUMB<sup>2</sup> Old, derivative, embarrassingly simple pictures.
- DUMB<sup>3</sup> Pictures from an out of fashion period.
- DUMB<sup>4</sup> Commercial journalistic or other pictures with a purpose.
- DUMB<sup>5</sup> The really dumb or just mediocre.
- DUMB<sup>6</sup> Selected postcards; incredible 15¢ images.
- DUMB<sup>7</sup> Sophisticated pictures imitating DUMB 1-6.

There will still be differences of opinion regarding which pictures are dumb and which are meaningful, but that is a matter of value judgement that each person has to make. There may also be changes of



opinion from one viewing to the next, as well as changes that are the result of shifting styles and opinions over a matter of time, so the categories are not permanent labels that can be indelibly applied, but are tentative descriptions that are constantly subject to reconsideration.

The important factor regarding dumb pictures is that they seem to have no reason to exist. The viewer is mostly amazed to see them. They may be one's own pictures or old pictures, or advertising pictures, or postcards or pictures that are by serious photographers, but whatever they are the viewer response is that the picture is a waste of time.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

DUMB<sup>1</sup> (Naive Pictures by Naive Photographers) is the largest category of dumb pictures. In fact, a majority of all pictures taken may fall into this category, at one time or another, depending on who is judging. These are ordinary pictures by ordinary people who are "taking pictures" for any of the reasons that people have for doing such things. Certainly very few of those pictures will ever mean anything to anyone other than the person taking them or the people pictured, and a small group of relatives. Thus, if dumb is the result of meaningless activity then nearly all pictures are dumb. But that is too broad a category to be of much use.

DUMB<sup>1</sup> will be applied to those pictures that have remarkable blunders, or colossal imperfections, or common errors. Often this requires that the viewer speculate about the intent of the picture taker and compare that intent to the result. While this may seem difficult, in practice it is not. Most pictures of people should be informational with details recorded in a pleasing manner. A picture of someone's out-of-focus nose would indicate that the picture did not turn out as hoped for, and such pictures will, with few exceptions, be discarded immediately. Likewise, a picture of an object should not obscure the subject with an irrelevant distraction, or make it so large or so small as to lose its informational value. Pictures of events should preserve enough data to help the viewer recall the occasion. The problems illustrated by Lisette Model suggest how a snapshot may become a dumb picture.

"Snapshots can be made with any camera--old cameras, new cameras, box cameras, Instamatics and Nikons. But what really makes them occur is a specific state of mind. A snapshot is not a performance. It has no pretence or ambition. It is something that happens to the taker rather than his performing it. Innocence is the quintessence of the snapshot. I wish to distinguish between innocence and ignorance. Innocence is one of the highest forms of being and ignorance is one of the lowest. The professional photographer, in spite of the instantaneous and spontaneous means at his disposal, can never achieve that degree of innocence. He may try to imitate the snapshot. He may wait on purpose for the loose, unconventional moment. The moment may be unstructured, but the photographer is not. He may make a masterpiece by selecting the moment but he can never make a snapshot.

We should remember that much of the power of snapshots comes from their centering on basic everyday experience; images of children at their birth and later stages of growth, pictures of families, friends, relatives and old people about to die, of the house, ceremonial occasions, meals, trips, landscapes, vacations, beloved animals. And sometimes taking snapshots is purely conventional. One has a child, one takes snapshots. One has parents, one takes snapshots. One has an album because others have albums. The snapshot also confers status. People dress up to have their pictures taken, they give themselves to the snapshot with pride. They photograph their new car, their new possessions, anything that they want to be remembered.

But what the eye sees is different from what the camera records. Whereas the eye sees in three dimensions, images are projected on a surface of two dimensions, which for every image-maker is a great problem. The snapshotter disregards this problem, and the result is that his pictures have an apparent disorder and imperfection, which is exactly their appeal and their style. The picture isn't straight. It isn't done well. It isn't composed. It isn't thought out. And out of this imbalance, and out of this not knowing, and out of this real innocence toward the medium comes an enormous vitality and expression of life. The look of a snapshot is so similar around the world that it amounts to a universal style. What makes it so recognizable as a style is not only its unpretentious visual aspects but the elemental life from which it springs." 7

Example #-1 is a common snapshot, of the DUMB<sup>1</sup> type.<sup>8</sup> It shows no concern for the background, or composition or any of the subtleties. This is a confrontation although that is too strong a word, between the camera and the subject. It is a grabbing of the likeness; a taking of the picture; like reaching out and catching a fly in one's fist. No skill, just a quick snatch.

Example #1-2, a picture of a lake freighter,<sup>9</sup> is a perfectly dumb naive photograph. It combines the ignorance of photographic results with an attempt to create a souvenir or memento. It must be obvious that there is no reason to deliberately create a picture that looks like this. The imagined objective was probably an ideal picture of a freighter, such as those used in newspaper or magazine advertisements for United States Steel, or Gulf Oil.

Example #1-3 is dumb because it is meaningless.<sup>10</sup> It has the form of a family snapshot, a picture of a loved one, but is apparently a picture of a store mannequin. In order to make any sense out of this we need more information than is available. Without that information we speculate on what it is and why it might be important, with no possible solution. This is a dumb picture because it creates confusion needlessly; or is it deliberately?

Example #1-4 is dumb because it is obviously a simple attempt to capture a token of an event that someone thought worth preserving.<sup>11</sup> Further the mild incongruity of the caged lion bringing some sort of pleasure to the spectators of a football game is like the idea of the snapshot bringing pleasure to the viewer of the picture. This is a picture of an event, a ceremony, or ritual, and also portrays others involved in the ritual of taking pictures. The subject of this picture could be 1. a lion, 2. half-time entertainment, 3. people taking pictures, 4. a particular person in the picture, 5. the band marching 6. the record-breaking crowd, 7. any combination of the above.

Example #1-5 is interesting because it is a playful attempt at creating a fictitious or theatrical picture.<sup>12</sup> It is difficult to imagine

the original response to this picture, and to wonder if it was appreciated as the wonderful narrative magical image that it now seems to be. This is dumb because it is a simple attempt at a picture that is well beyond the ability of the photographer and participants, and shows it, and yet because of that it is a fresh honest picture. But it is still DUMB<sup>1</sup>.

Example #1-6 is one of those pictures that while of a particular subject at a specific time, is represented in virtually every family album.<sup>12</sup> This picture shows very little except a dog sitting on a chair. And yet there is more information than would have been originally recognized. An anthropologist would analyse the objects and arrangement and make observations about the style in which the inhabitants lived. Certainly this is speculation but it seems reasonable to suppose that the purpose was to "get a picture of the dog" and not to create a picture of a corner of a room filled with objects suggesting a particular style of life.

Example #1-7 is a copy of a picture.<sup>13</sup> It is a color snapshot that shows a pastel portrait. While most pictures of people verify that the person existed and is a likeness of that person, this is a picture of the likeness, without an indication that the person existed, or that they looked like this. There seems to be no reason for this snapshot to have been made, except to record the pastel portrait. That does not seem enough reason to make and save the photo.

Example #1-8 is a personal souvenir of an important event.<sup>14</sup> A comrade probably took this picture of a hunter with his trophy. Now that the picture is unidentified and no longer in the possession of the hunter or family or friend it becomes subject to other uses such as

this exploration. This picture is dumb because it offers so much information but leaves the interpretation up to the viewer. The same aspects that probably made the hunter appreciate the picture, the show of pride and manliness, the display of the rifle, the attractively posed trophy can all be perceived as a picture of an anonymous executioner with a victim, head propped up on a rock while the "killer" shows off for the photographic proof. This picture can be used to prove the joy or pleasure of hunting, as well as the cruelty of it. Thus the picture is dumb because of the discrepancy between the original intent as perceived by the viewer, and the viewer's potential revulsion by the picture.

DUMB<sup>2</sup> (Old, derivative, embarrassingly simple pictures) are the old embarrassingly simple pictures done early in a photographer's career. Included in this category are most "student" pictures, and nearly all of the pictures that while necessary to the aesthetic or technical development of the photographer have either been discarded or relegated to a box in the attic. These pictures are notable because of the pretense, the striving, the obvious imitation of a popular style, combined with shallowness. They operate on one level only and do not contain the multilevel appeal that more mature pictures possess.

Making these pictures was not a worthless procedure to the photographer because it is necessary to experiment with a wide variety of approaches and techniques in order to decide what has meaning and how to accomplish it. But the attempts and the early successes, as well as the failures, are usually not as interesting as the later work that springs from them. These are pictures that the photographer will always remember

because of the relative importance that they had. These are the pictures that were shown to everyone, and prompted the first thoughts about entering contests and winning prizes. But, if the photographer continued to grow and develop, those pictures are now only stepping stones and not the monuments that they were thought to be. Now they are dumb because they are so simple, so derivative, so obvious, and embarrassing.

DUMB<sup>2</sup> is always pictures that the individual made, and are not discovered in someone else's portfolio or in a publication, so they are always personal choices. The only way to illustrate the category is to use pictures that I made early in my photographic career.

Example #2-1, of Niagara Falls has several things to recommend it.<sup>16</sup> It has a huge flaw that because of its prominence could be considered to be the subject, except that it is not. This is a very ordinary picture of an exceptional place, so the picture fails from the standpoint of intention.

It is difficult to say that this is undeniably a dumb picture, because depending on the context it could be used for some purpose. But it has not, so there was no reason for it to have been taken. The only chance this picture ever had of being seen, or existing, is as an example of a picture that has no justification for existing. If this or any of the others contributed measurably to my photographic development they would not have been chosen, but looking back they did not.

Example #2-2 may be a self portrait, or an accidental exposure made while advancing the film, or perhaps was made by someone else.<sup>17</sup> This negative was found on an old roll of film while I was looking for pictures to illustrate this section. It had never been printed before, I do not

like it now, except as an example of a picture that I think is dumb.

Example #2-3 is of someone very badly imitating a Giacometti sculpture.<sup>18</sup> While rhythm, repetition, and pattern are important picture elements this particular picture is just dumb because it's such a silly comparison.

Example #2-4 is a picture of a picture.<sup>19</sup> It is not a copy print because too much of the background is included making it a picture of a wall with a picture included. It is not a very good copy because the light is so uneven, and the original is not very interesting making the viewer wonder why it was important enough to copy, and yet not important enough to copy well. Because of the military nature of the people and the possible discomfort of the non-uniformed person in the middle, the picture is a candidate for an illustration of a spy story. But no, this was not taken by a spy, nor copied by a spy, but was taken and copied for some now forgotten reason by the author. It is now relegated to a box of unloved and soon to be forgotten pictures from my early photojournalism period.

Example #2-5 is different from the others because it is quite a nice picture that was found, as a negative, among my ten year old negatives.<sup>20</sup> It was on a strip of images with people and college scenes and seemed to be accidental. It does not relate to anything else that I was doing at the time, and it was not printed until now. It illustrates that there are hidden treasures waiting to be discovered, but it is still dumb because even after being discovered it is still meaningless. Individual unrelated pictures that do not support or explain each other are not usually very



interesting. The body of work, the group that is interrelated, that shows some development or continuing idea is infinitely more interesting than individual pictures no matter how "good" they are. So this is dumb even though it is good.

Example #2-6 is a Kodalith posterization done in 1964 or 1965.<sup>21</sup> This process involves converting a normal original negative to high contrast lines that are supposed to infuse the picture with an "artiness" that the original non-manipulated picture was lacking. Often this was done to a picture that was not quite good enough to be used straight. This picture represents a great deal of time making negatives and positives and seeking posterization effects that I now consider to be a waste of time.

This category, DUMB<sup>2</sup>, consists of pictures that are dumb because of my involvement with them. If someone else had done them I would not feel the same embarrassment or regret the amount of time wasted pursuing futile interests. Any of these pictures, if presented with other related images, could be redeemed. These are not dumb because they do not make sense, but because they are deadends.

DUMB<sup>3</sup> (Pictures from an out of fashion period) is a constantly changing category that includes pictures that are out of date but have not yet been rediscovered. These pictures are victims of changing taste, their fate is not yet certain. They may become classics, camp, kitch, nostalgic or any of the other kinds that offer redemption, or they may remain unloved. At any time there will always be pictures that are in this stage of their existence. While the examples may change the pictures will be of a recent but unfashionable period, often about ten

to twenty years old, and easily dated. In the 1970's these pictures will be of the 1950's, showing clothing styles, advertising, events or other features that have lost their appeal. "Time" is the important factor in DUMB<sup>3</sup>. Susan Sontag discussed how "Time" affects Camp. The effects are very similar.

31. This is why so many of the objects prized by Camp taste are old-fashioned, out-of-date, demode. It's not a love of the old as such. It's simply that the process of aging or deterioration provides the necessary detachment--or arouses a necessary sympathy. When the theme is important, and contemporary, the failure of a work of art may make us indignant. Time can change that. Time liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it over to the Camp sensibility.... Another effect: time contracts the sphere of banality. (Banality is, strictly speaking, always a category of the contemporary.) What was banal can, with the passage of time, become fantastic. Many people who listen with delight to the style of Rudy Vallee revived by the English pop group, The Temperance Seven, would have been driven up the wall by Rudy Vallee in his heyday.

Thus, things are campy, not when they become old--but when we become less involved in them, and can enjoy, instead of be frustrated by, the failure of the attempt. But the effect of time is unpredictable. Maybe "method" acting (James Dean, Rod Steiger, Warren Beatty) will seem as Camp some day as Ruby Keeler's does now--or as Sarah Bernhardt's does, in the films she made at the end of her career. And maybe not.

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"Banal" as described above could be substituted for "dumb" particularly as it is related to the changing judgements as affected by the time factor. Stylish images of one decade may become the DUMB<sup>3</sup> of the next decade, then to be rediscovered and cherished as the camp of the third decade.

Camp and kitch are related to dumb pictures but only as distant relatives, maybe cousins. A picture may be dumb when it is out of fashion, but as soon as it is elevated to the level of camp or anything else, it stops being dumb.

Example #3-1 "Playing at the Beach"<sup>23</sup> shows what was probably everybody's dream: frolicking at the beach, carefree, happy, in the company of other such people in the 1940's and 1950's. It is a corny set up picture that is so ideal that it could last only for a 125th of a second, if it existed at all. This picture is dumb because it was intended for those who wanted to make their friends who were not so slim, not so young, and not so lucky, jealous. Further, it shows the red accessories so common in older commercial pictures. This was supposed to compensate for the lack of red in nature and make the picture rich and full, but now signals that this was set up by a professional who may have had a bag of red accessories.

Example #3-2 is of another form of entertainment of the fifties, miniature golf.<sup>24</sup> (What ever happened to pedalpushers?) This picture used to be ordinary and unexceptional, and now is dumb because it suggests so much that we, the 1970 viewers, would rather not recall. This picture is dumb because that is the best we can say about it.

These pictures fall into the DUMB<sup>3</sup> category even though they are postcards and are eligible for DUMB<sup>6</sup>. These are notable primarily because of the time factor changing our perception of the people and events.

Example #3-3 shows a couple waiting at a bus stop in the rain about twenty years ago.<sup>25</sup> This is a typical advertising or editorial picture that may have appeared in LIFE or LOOK magazine, but is now regarded just as old fashioned. This was not a bad picture then, in fact is quite typical of the type of picture that was used particularly in advertising of that period. This is labeled dumb now because it is a

cliche and has lost its meaning. Reading Keppler's description of how the "shot" was created certainly leads to the conclusion that it is a lot of trouble for such an ordinary picture.<sup>26</sup>

Example #3-4 also by Keppler is an advertising illustration that is stylistically dated.<sup>27</sup> Again it was a successful picture for its time as indicated by inclusion in Keppler's book Man & Camera but our perception now is affected by the time factor.

It is possible that these pictures will be rescued from dumbness when they advance into a rediscovered category. There is a tendency for nearly anything that is old enough to be considered "art" and at that point be studied and explained by historians and curators. For a long period before that common objects or those items that are not appreciated are considered to be worthless, or dumb. There are countless examples of people casting aside their old furniture, dishes, pictures, clothes, and later being sorry when they see similar objects in antique shops with high price tags. Dumb applies to many objects in the time period in which they are discarded but not yet rediscovered.

DUMB<sup>4</sup> (Commercial, journalistic or other pictures with a purpose) describes pictures done for a commercial purpose, and presented to the public with a particular goal in mind. Usually they are accompanied, or explained, by captions, thus making them the original "dumb picture," since without the words they do not communicate. Among DUMB<sup>4</sup> are many technical pictures that record objects, details, relationships, processes, surfaces, functions, effects, flaws, positions, controls, installations, applications, and complications. All of these pictures illustrate or document something, or are intended to serve a function, but when presented

out of context, may be meaningless. They do not need the pictorial qualities that we normally expect in a photograph that is complete in itself, and they may contain other irregularities that make them mysterious and meaningless.

Pictures used as "art" for newspapers or magazines, like commercial photographs, may have unusual qualities. Again they are intended to be supported by words and may require the words to explain or justify their presence. They may be used to attract attention or to sell the issue, thus encouraging all sorts of popular imagery, such as a cute child with a butterfly on its nose, or puppy dogs, or pretty girls sitting on fences. When this practical purpose is combined with second-rate photography and third-rate editing, the results may be less than inspired. Unless attracted to something of local interest or other specific appeal, many people ignore the pictures, but they may be useful to illustrate what should be avoided by the first-rate publications. Thus these pics are subject to clipping and saving, and maybe sharing by a select audience that appreciates them for their negative qualities.

Example #4-1 "Easter Bunny - Ms. Nancy Gilmore poses as Playboy-type bunny at Finger Lakes Race Track," from WE<sup>28</sup> magazine is a perfect example of DUMB<sup>4</sup>. The picture is difficult to look at because it is so silly. The costume with ears is obviously referring to a Playboy bunny, but why sitting on a newspaper on a wood fence at a race track, and why is she slouching? Further, in the context of rapes and murders and screams and prostitution this vaguely suggestive picture seems out of place. The caption gives no clue as to why the picture was taken, much less why it was used. The viewer is forced to solve the puzzle and make some

connection between the picture and the rest of the page. While the picture is dumb, in this case the context makes it dumber (if that is possible).

Example #4-2 of a comely model, again on the cover of WE,<sup>29</sup> is as confusing and out of place as the last example. The picture and caption begins to take on a conceptual art quality since it seems to be deliberately suggestive, second rate and unlikely, all at the same time.

Example #4-3, again from WE<sup>30</sup> is even better than the others. This actual Playboy bunny is holding a picture that is described as having incited a man to have thrown an egg in her face. It is apparent that WE uses pictures of scantily clad women to attract buyers for the magazine that presents items of a seamy nature from the Rochester police blotter. This combination of cheesecake and news items is so incongruous as to be humorous. Notice that the bunny is holding a picture which is described as having been censored, and she also has a pen. The viewer must decide if she is censoring her own picture.

Example #4-4 is dumb because it is an obvious failure from a technical viewpoint because the dark clothes blend into the dark background.<sup>31</sup> It is a public relations attempt at getting publicity for an event of some sort, which means that it is intended for publication in newspapers, but the picture is too dark with large areas blending into the background. Without the supporting caption it makes no sense. It is apparently narrative, probably with a cute jingle or slogan that might tie it all together, but since we do not have that cute jingle it is dumb. It tells us nothing and it is a failure.

Example #4-5 is another picture actually printed by a professional lab for a commercial account,<sup>32</sup> and is another example of an editorial or narrative picture that needs a caption to work. Perhaps this is an example of racial interaction at a local company office, but the picture is not well composed, the background is confusing and the relationship between the people is awkward. While the intention was probably to suggest friendly interaction, it could be misunderstood to portray suspicion and distrust.

Example #4-6 also was professionally printed for a commercial account<sup>33</sup> but this one is especially confusing and therefore dumb. The picture is fairly symmetrical with two pairs of men, two large columns, and a somewhat off-center pedestal. There seems to be two pictures combined because the two men on the right are so much more involved with the camera or photographer and the other two, on the left, are unaware of the photographer and yet they occupy a larger portion of the area. The viewer can get quite involved and still not understand how or why this occurred.

Example #4-7 shows a photographic stereotype, the gadgeteer.<sup>34</sup> This picture was used as an illustration for an announcement of photography workshops open to the community. It is a dumb picture because the emphasis is on the unattractive qualities of photography, and because it is unclear whether this is the result of the workshop, or if this is the type of person who the workshops are intended to educate. This is the kind of person who ruins events by using a flash during a performance, by trampling flowers in order to get a better shot, who leaves film wrappings scattered in his wake.

Example #4-8 is from an instruction book for cheerleaders,<sup>35</sup> but it looks like a Muybridge plate illustrating human locomotion. The resemblance is striking and that is what makes this picture dumb. The gestures of the man are humorous and mysterious and that lends to the effect.

DUMB<sup>5</sup> (the really dumb or just mediocre) are the mediocre pictures that are found everywhere, but just have no reason to exist. They are filler, second rate illustrations, throwaways, failures and blunders that we are somehow surrounded with constantly, but through selectivity learn to ignore. They are visual static that we just tune out. They might be compared to DUMB<sup>2</sup> if it were decided that they are the result of another photographer's early pictures that will in time prove to be embarrassing to him like ours are to us.

These pictures are difficult to identify because there is nothing outstanding about them. They have no positive values, but they also have no obvious faults that would make them worthwhile from an educational standpoint. These pictures are difficult to recall even if you have just seen them. In fact, they may be difficult to describe even while you are looking at them.

There are some standard categories for DUMB<sup>5</sup> such as the newspaper sports pictures. They are nearly always the same kind of picture that could be used year after year to accompany the articles. A newspaper could set up a file and reuse the same sequence of baseball, basketball, football pictures year after year, and very few people would notice, and even less would care.<sup>36</sup> Example #5-1 is such a picture.<sup>37</sup>

The New York Times is not immune to dumb pictures as the next example will show. #5-2 is confusing.<sup>38</sup> It is difficult to tell what



all of the clutter in the picture is or what the significance of the people and their relationship to the Landrover and the water might be. That is why it is dumb. It is just filler.

Example #5-3 is from Photone<sup>ews</sup>,<sup>39</sup> a camera club publication catering to Xerox and Kodak employees. This picture of an attractive model squeezing the Lilacs should have been in color because then it would have had more appeal. Presented this way, in black and white, and including the technical data which seems to suggest that the reader can combine the same ingredients and achieve the same results, the picture is barely noticeable. It will be clipped and saved only by the photographer and the model and their families. Very few other people will even remember it.

Example #5-4 represents several types of DUMB<sup>5</sup>.<sup>40</sup> This picture could be a throwaway, thus deserving not to be remembered, or it could just look like one while actually containing some information for someone somewhere. This might be a picture that recorded a construction technique, or materials used, or relationships between the parts, and then might have some specific value to someone, but for all other people this picture would not be noticed.

DUMB<sup>6</sup> (selected postcards) is the only category that describes a group that is primarily a format. These pictures are all in the form of postcards. Although they do not include all postcards, they do include about half of them. There is a whole group of pictures that although photographic could only exist as postcards. These are the slightly corny pictures that have no real information, no beauty, no message. Instead,

they are isolated, usually color pictures, that are meaningless enough to be suitable for anyone to be able to write "Wish you were here" and send them to people who will never get there. The following excerpt describes the kind of postcards that make up the category of DUMB<sup>6</sup>.

"The frequent bizarreness of decision embodied in cards, coupled with their evident deliberateness, often makes it irresistible to view them as analogous to works of art. Ludicrous discrepancies between carefully chosen captions and what is actually depicted inevitably recall Magritte, Huebler, Broodthaers, Boltanski, to name a few. A card sets up a compelling structure in time and space between what it actually presents to view, the possible meanings of the caption, the ostensible subject of the caption-which has its own reality quite independent of the card-and the experience and predispositions of the person perceiving the card. Banality by itself is banal. But to take something originally banal and use separate banal means to cast it into a new form can give the ensuing product a poetry and an imaginative potential that are far from banal in effect. The mystery that belongs to the factuality of time and space is accentuated, and by isolation the mundane is transformed. The independent reality of the card-its ravishing factures, hues, abstract shapes-elides with the strange fact (which artifice paradoxically accentuated) of the existence of an object, a posture, a conjunction of people or things, a moment, in history in the world. Thus seen, the world of the picture postcard is not so much that of Surrealist dream, which it so richly serves, as that of a third world somewhere between the reality we can vouch for in our daily life and a world of unrestricted fantasy. It is not unlike the world experienced by Alice when she had passed through the looking glass but not yet beyond the reflection of her own familiar drawing room. Everything familiar is a surprise yet not unreal. The past is available to us in cards with the vividness it had when it was the present, yet we also see it with our hindsight intact. In a card, the light, the colors, the distances, two-and-three-dimensionality, all are "wrong"; they are a lyrical scenery arranged with infinite care, a care so deliberate that on any logical view it appears as an almost magical originality. But postcards do not often inhabit a world of logic. Simultaneously accentuating and denying the real-time-and-place reality of some past moment that is their ostensibly factual subject, they create an independent reality, a strange other world, of their own." 41

Example #6-1 titled "Clam Digging"<sup>42</sup> is a simple picture showing what for some people is a commonplace scene, but it is a confusing picture. The "action" is out of sight of the camera, and the woman is in an awkward pose, forming a strange shape. The pile of clams, some coming out of their shells as though trying to get away, are obscene and humorous. This picture, like many dumb pictures will be overlooked by most people, but once selected may be appreciated for its special qualities.

Example #6-2 of donkeys<sup>43</sup> looking for a handout from the occupants of a Rambler is, like #6-1, an ambiguous situation, involving some humor combined with blandness. These pictures did not have to exist, and would not be missed if they had not been made. This card is funny, but is also a picture of what must have been an unusual situation for those people involved, thus allowing the viewer to enjoy or experience the situation from several points of view.

Example #6-3 of Mt. Rushmore<sup>44</sup> is an example of unusual scale that is dumb because of what it does to our perception. The first impression is that the large face is human, but then the maintenance man is discovered thus causing the viewer to reassess the human scale. But then looking back to the large face it looks like a person with a fly on its nose.

Example #6-4 is of South Town Plaza<sup>45</sup> according to the card, but seems to be of the sky and parking lot instead. Because of the length of the buildings and the perspective there is very little of the actual subject in the picture and much more of the accidental material.

Example #6-5 is a picture pun.<sup>46</sup> While the viewer is translating pitcher to picture there is an involuntary chuckle that may be more like a groan. There are probably cards like this available in many cities since the line "Greetings from Rochester" is in a different style from

"Pitcher Post Card, and is printed in different ink, suggesting that the city was added later.

"Dead Indians Wounded Knee Battle Field In 1890 S. Dak", #6-6 is a tasteless card that is, until recently at least, still available in roadside souvenir shops in South Dakota.<sup>47</sup> It is an unusual card to be found, as would be an atrocity card from My Lai, or dead students at KSU. One wonders who would want to send such a greeting. The original picture is a black and white photograph, since it was taken in 1890, and was hand-colored to make it more saleable. There are at least two dead horses, disproving the television inspired myth that the horses were always somehow protected. The caption describes most of the dead as women, children and defenseless old men. It is difficult to understand why this picture would be chosen, by whom, and who would appreciate it.

Example #6-7 is a composite photo illustrating a local, Iowa, fantasy --a giant ear of corn.<sup>48</sup> This relates to cards of Maine potatoes, Ohio fish, and other giant products. #6-8, a similar card,<sup>49</sup> is a straight color photograph of a normal sized ear of corn pulled by a miniature or model tractor with what looks like an out-of-focus photographic background. Comparing the two cards suggests that 6-4 looks realistic while 6-5 may be a deliberate attempt at "imitating" 6-4 rather than illustrating the fable.

"Flying Jackalope" - example #6-9 - is a very special card.<sup>50</sup> There are about a dozen variations, most of them showing the more common jackalopes, while a few cards picture giant rabbits used by cowboys instead of horses. It illustrates a midwestern myth that has been taken a step further through "creative taxidermy," and is actually available for purchase at Wall Drug, in South Dakota. There are at least three variations available.

For about \$20.00 a souvenir hunter can have a head and horns, for \$50.00 a complete common horned jackalope, while the rare and expensive flying jackalope costs \$90.00. (It is interesting to wonder if research has ever been done into the field of "dumb taxidermy").

Postcards are the most dependable source for dumb pictures. All other categories depend on careful selection and on the viewer attitude being susceptible to or sympathetic with dumbness. But anytime, anyplace, just walk up to the postcard rack and there is no denying that dumb pictures exist.

DUMB<sup>7</sup> (Sophisticated pictures imitating DUMB 1-6) is different from the other categories because it is a deliberate result of an aesthetic that employs what would normally be called flaws in order to create formal photographs. These pictures may look like they could have been made by anyone, but they are beyond the ability and the appreciation of the typical snapshooter because they are made on a regular basis and are not accidental.

A group of photographers are now making pictures that use snapshots as the source for their ideas. Janet Malcolm described the results in this way:

"... the central focus of this group's researches, and the starting point, model, and guide of its artistic endeavors, is the most inartistic (and presumably most purely photographic) form of all - the home snapshot. The attributes previously sought by photographers - strong design, orderly composition, control over tonal values, lucidity of content, good print quality - have been stood on their heads, and the qualities now courted are formlessness, rawness, clutter, accident, and other manifestations of the camera's formidable capacity for imposing disorder on reality - for transforming, say, a serene gathering of nice-looking people in pleasant surroundings (as one head perceived it) into a chaotic mess of lamp cords, rumpled Kleenexes, ugly food, ill-fitting clothes, grotesque gestures, and vapid expressions."

Lee Friedlander is the best example of a photographer that is making these photographs. He has had several books published, so there is easy access to his work, and there are many articles and reviews. "If Lee Friedlander didn't exist John Szarkowski would have had to invent him."<sup>52</sup> "Szarkowski looks for silly and irrelevant content which he can virtually ignore in favor of formal properties, charming accidents and visual quirks. It's a way of looking at photography as visual rhetoric, seeing well is more important than what is seen."<sup>53</sup> But while these are regarded as successful works of art by the curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, they still look like the kind of picture that anyone not only could take, but the kind that everyone has taken and would rather forget.

"The pictures of Friedlander have obvious antecedents in the work of Atget, Walker Evans, and Robert Frank. However, he broke new ground by incorporating in some of them the kind of accidents that all but the rankest amateurs usually manage to avoid. He deliberately included his own shadow or reflection or part of his foot in his pictures. He deliberately aimed his camera not at the obvious subject but at something that got in the way of the obvious subject or at nothing special at all."<sup>54</sup> This enlightened statement by Gene Thornton contrasts with the following much earlier view.

"The operator generally becomes so engrossed in his work, that he forgets to consider the position of his double. Should his shadow not come within the limits of the picture to be taken, it would not interfere with the success of the photograph; but when it encroaches upon the view he is about to represent, as in plate No. 10, the picture is spoiled."<sup>55</sup>

<sup>56</sup>

Example #7-1 is Mr. Taylor's spoiled photograph. Example #7-2 is by Lee Friedlander, from his book Self Portrait and shows a picture that

was based on the shadow of the operator instead of spoiled by it.<sup>57</sup> It should be noted that Mr. Taylor, writing in 1902, is referring to an accidental inclusion but from the tone of the commands for successful pictures he would not have been able to appreciate deliberate violations either.

Photographs are difficult to criticize because they serve so many purposes and are subject to so many different criteria. It is important to appreciate the distinction between photographs that are "art" and those that are "craft". Craft can be judged with objective standards of accuracy, clarity, and predictability while "accuracy is the bane of art".<sup>58</sup> "Modern art, in its best examples, is the very antithesis of accuracy. Look at a Sargent or Boldini. What an apparent waste of accidental lights, passing shimmers, speckles, flashes, and other local impossibilities appear in all their pictures!"<sup>59</sup> It may be due to the requirement that most pictures be "accurate" that the general public expects that all pictures should be "accurate", thus eliminating the possibility of any of them being "art."

#7-3 again from Self Portrait is this time a picture of the artist himself in a less than elegant pose.<sup>60</sup> It is to his credit that Friedlander can debase himself to this extent for his art. This picture is unflattering enough to justify immediate disposal, and yet he presents it voluntarily in his own book. This is dumb because it resembles the kind of picture taken of an unaware parent by a child with a new camera who does not yet know that people do not want to preserve these conditions.

Gene Thornton says that--

"Lee Friedlander is a brilliant exponent of what has come to be called the 'snapshot esthetic.' In his book Self Portrait he made what seemed to be a random collection of amateurish mistakes add up to a work of art. Form and content meld perfectly in this fascinating and impressive picture of a modern Everyman's journey through the slob-like environment he has allowed to be made for himself."

Example #7-4,<sup>62</sup> 7-5,<sup>63</sup> 7-6<sup>64</sup> are from The American Monument, Friedlander's latest book. These pictures may look like documentary photographs that record the object in a context of the city and the things that affect the perception of it, like telephone booths, pigeons, utility wires, bushes and people, but there could also be another explanation. "One of the latest trends in photography is to produce pictures which look like documentary photographs, but which contain a minimum of information and a maximum of soul."<sup>65</sup> These examples of Friedlander's monuments are, like his other photographs, more complicated than just documents. Because of the careful juxtaposition of the monument and the utility wires (#7-4) which could be read as traces of shots being fired at the soldier, and noticing that in order to place the soldier in that position Friedlander had to be standing in the street, it is clear that this is consistent with an interest in form instead of content. Further, because the picture "seems" to have been taken carelessly there is a reference to snapshots. This is the type of picture that could have come from a family photo album, having been made from a moving car because someone wanted the souvenir, but not enough to invest more time or energy. "It is no small accomplishment to take pictures which could have come from the pages of a middle class family album, yet which simultaneously reveal the hallucinatory absurdity of normalcy with such cheerful and merciless accuracy."<sup>66</sup> The other examples, #7-5, and 7-6 also are carefully



composed to include the monument in what might be an accidental way into the surrounding context. These could be examples of those special treasures occasionally found in family albums, that are better, from an artistic than an informational point of view.

From a statistical basis there are very few people who can appreciate these photographs as a work of art, as Szarkowski does, because according to their aesthetic purpose, DUMB<sup>7</sup> imitates the pictures that the majority of people take. Fortunately it is the opinion of experts that verify the accomplishments of these photographers and not majority opinion.

Dumb pictures are not just real good snapshots, but are the result of a sophisticated photographer deliberately making pictures that are better than, but similar to family snapshots. Many of the photographers do commercial photography, teach photography, or have advanced degrees in photography or art and therefore can easily be distinguished from the typical snapshotter, no matter how proficient, or lucky that snapshotter may be. One of the distinctions between these photographers and the lucky snapshotter is that while everyone seems to have a few pictures that are as good (or bad) as Friedlanders, there is less chance involved in Friedlander's and the others. They do not just keep shooting and hoping, but have learned to create fairly predictable results.

While it is difficult to describe adequately the distinction between DUMB<sup>7</sup> and the snapshots, the examples to follow will help. #7-7, by Arthur Freed,<sup>67</sup> of a nude woman standing in the woods is a perfect example. He cut off her head! The most important element in the picture is that he obscured her head behind a branch. She is clutching her hands as though distressed by having lost her head, and the viewer is forced to wonder if

it was intentional, and if so why. This picture is a good example of DUMB<sup>7</sup> imitating mistakes frequently made in snapshots, although Freed is a competent photographer and this is not an accident. There is no coy hiding of her identity while exposing her charms, although that is one of the references, because it looks more like a mistake, as though the branch suddenly moved just as the picture was being taken.

Example #7-8 is also by Freed<sup>68</sup> of a woman, also centered in the frame, although this time so small that she is unrecognizable. This picture looks as though he tried to make the "subject" as small as possible, although since she is centered perfectly she is quite prominent, thereby assuring the viewer that she is indeed the subject. The relationship of the sky and the earth is changed, probably by using the roof of an automobile in the foreground to reflect the sky. It seems clear that Freed is not intending to take the kind of a picture of this person that her parents would carry in their wallets, or could be framed and set on the television. Instead he is again making a picture that uses a common fault of snapshots, being too far from the subject, and taking it to an extreme, thus making a strong and compelling picture.

Example #7-9 is a landscape<sup>69</sup> with a severed arm holding a stick that seems, like a whip, about to snap. Like the other examples by Freed the picture is not easily described. The arm and curved stick are used to create a picture that otherwise would have been an interesting, conventional, but intriguing landscape. The addition of the arm and stick confuse the viewer by presenting another element that competes with the landscape for attention.

Les Krims is another of the photographers that produce DUMB<sup>7</sup> photographs. Example 7-10 is of a very pregnant woman in underwear and a mask producing an impressive soap bubble.<sup>70</sup> A. D. Coleman described Krim's pictures as being like snapshots<sup>71</sup> but goes on to say that "There is nothing in the least amateurish in these photographs, though; their ease and spontaneity is the ultimate in artifice."<sup>72</sup>

Example #7-11 is of an attractive nude woman sitting on a bed holding a plucked chicken that seems intent on exploring her breast.<sup>73</sup> Like the last picture, Krims is intent on picturing unique, unlikely situations that seem to have symbolic meanings. These pictures are printed in a rich brown color that is reminiscent of past times. But they are contemporary photographs that, like Freidlander and others, look dumb, but are deliberate and consistent.

Example #7-12 is another situation to which Krims is subjecting his viewers. This shows a man spraying an aerosol chemical at a nude woman's crotch.<sup>74</sup> There are all sorts of sexual, psychological and humorous suggestions, but again this is a dumb picture and not an illustration of anything from the world of reality. It is, like the other Krims' images, surreal. But because they are photographs there is a conflict between what is expected and what is pictured.

Example #7-13 is from Robert Cumming's book Picture Fictions,<sup>75</sup> It seems to show a slice of bread imbedded in the side of a watermelon, a highly unlikely situation. Nearly any of Cumming's pictures could be used to illustrate DUMB<sup>7</sup>.

Cumming's other pictures combine photography with unlikely text that refers to, but does not explain the picture.<sup>76</sup> There is a mismatch of some sort that leaves the reader wondering what was intended. Since this is deliberate on Cumming's part these are good examples of dumb.

Example 7-14 by Paul Diamond is a silly picture of a finger sticking in a dessert of some sort.<sup>77</sup> This is the kind of clowning around that might be done just for the picture, and lots of pictures like this may have been taken, but they are not usually treated seriously. This one, however, because it is in the collection of the George Eastman House, has more significance than might be recognized.

Garry Winogrand's book The Animals provides another approach. Example 7-15 shows a pool of water with a pair of mysterious flippers, a building under construction, a pair of cranes and a bird, amongst other details, all of which combine to create a meaningless picture.<sup>78</sup> Example 7-16 includes two people under a box looking at a pair of elephants.<sup>79</sup> That even sounds like a dumb picture.

Example 7-17 shows a Llama and a woman looking at each other.<sup>80</sup> They seem to have a lot in common since they both appear to be looking slyly at the other, and they are both wearing the same eye makeup. The similarity of the two is the important element making this a humorous picture.

William DeLappa has produced a series of photographs that resemble 1940 snapshots. They were deliberately, and recently, posed in the style of old family album snaps. Example 7-18 titled Portraits of Violet and Al #4 is of a couple about to depart, he smiling--she rather pensive.<sup>81</sup> It looks like a poignant event. The idea of such a project is loaded with potential for dumbness. The deliberateness of the details is important and the seemingly accidental inclusion of the wine bottle and glasses in the lower right corner is a reference to the kind of inattention to extraneous elements that is exhibited in many snapshots.

Sharp focus is one of the normally accepted rules of all photographs, but dumb pictures may violate any of those rules. Example 7-19 by Sam Wernick, from the "Less Than Sharp Show," is out of focus. Because it deliberately violates our expectations, it is dumb.<sup>82</sup>

Mike Mandel deserves a special place in the history of dumb pictures. He has produced a series of publications that all involve photographs that surprise the viewer with their originality and humor and whimsey. He has published pictures of people who coincidentally share the name of one of the most important photographers, Edward Weston.<sup>83</sup> He has also published a series of pictures of himself standing with various groups of people.<sup>84</sup> Sometimes on street corners and sometimes joining a family having its picture taken, or a group on an elevator, he has presented the viewer with more pictures of himself than anyone other than his family would want to see.

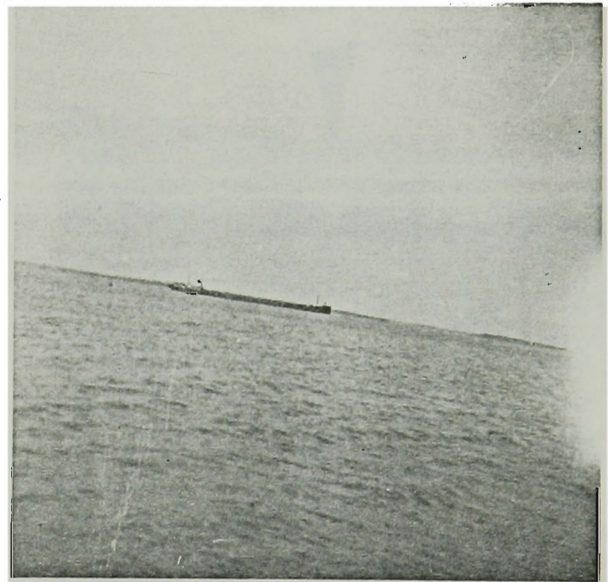
Mandel has also produced a series of Photographer Baseball Cards 7-20 which show 134 photographers in baseball poses.<sup>85</sup> This serves as a who's who in contemporary photography and does have value as a visual reference to those pictured but makes no sense to laymen. The idea of posing such a group in that way is dumb, and the pictures themselves are dumb.

Ed Ruscha is an artist who sometimes uses photography to produce conceptual art. His books contain pictures of such things as parking lots,<sup>86</sup> swimming pools,<sup>87</sup> small fires,<sup>88</sup> gas stations,<sup>89</sup> and colored people.<sup>90</sup> Example 7-21 is from Colored People.<sup>91</sup> There is no mistake involved here; this did come from that book. But there is no explanation and no text except his title and copyright information. Similar things happen in his other books and they could all be called dumb.

The final example, #7-22, by Bill McKenzie,<sup>92</sup> is a satire of a picture by Les Krims from his Deerslayer series.<sup>93</sup> McKenzie has made a picture that depends for its appreciation on the viewer's knowledge of another photographer's work. While this may not seem like much to ask, in the context of photography there are very few other such examples. The Krims' picture shows a hunter with a deer tied across his car. The picture, taken with a flash, is dark and rather unpleasant for many people. McKenzie on the other hand has taken that idea but substituted someone in an obviously fake deer costume and sprawled the "trophy" across a car, and then printed it cleanly to make a beautiful print. There is none of the grotesqueness of the Krims picture, and the viewer reaction, if they recognize the reference, is laughter.



1-1

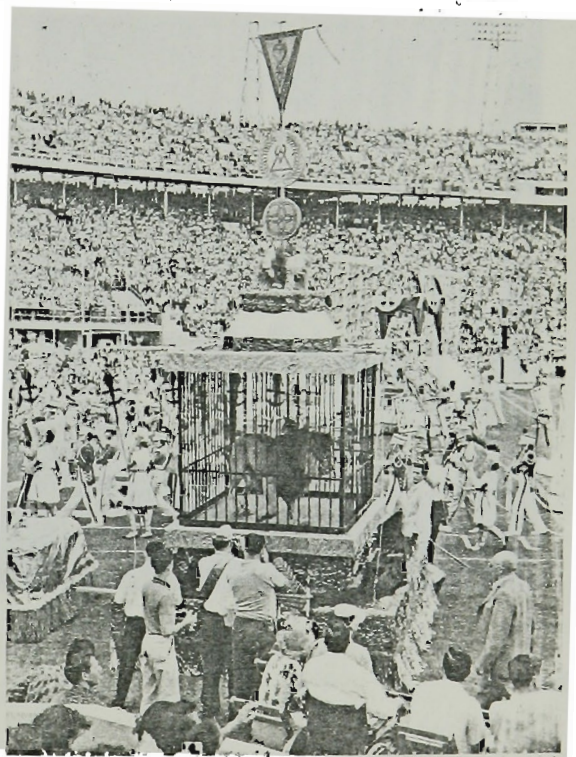


1-2





1-3



1-4

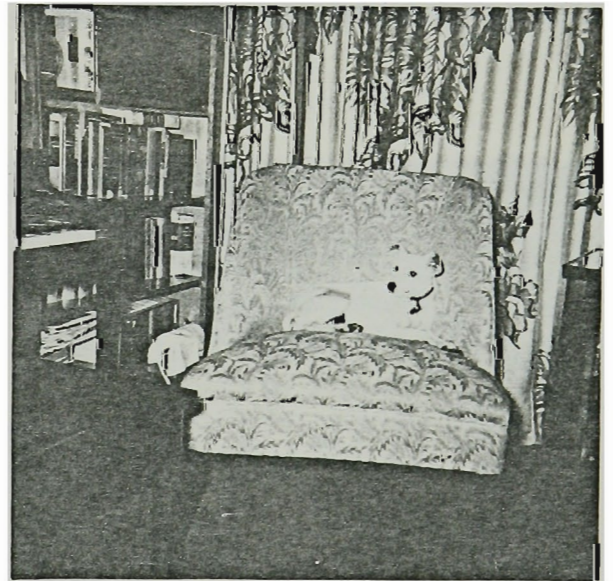


FLORIDA - JAN. 1956



1-5

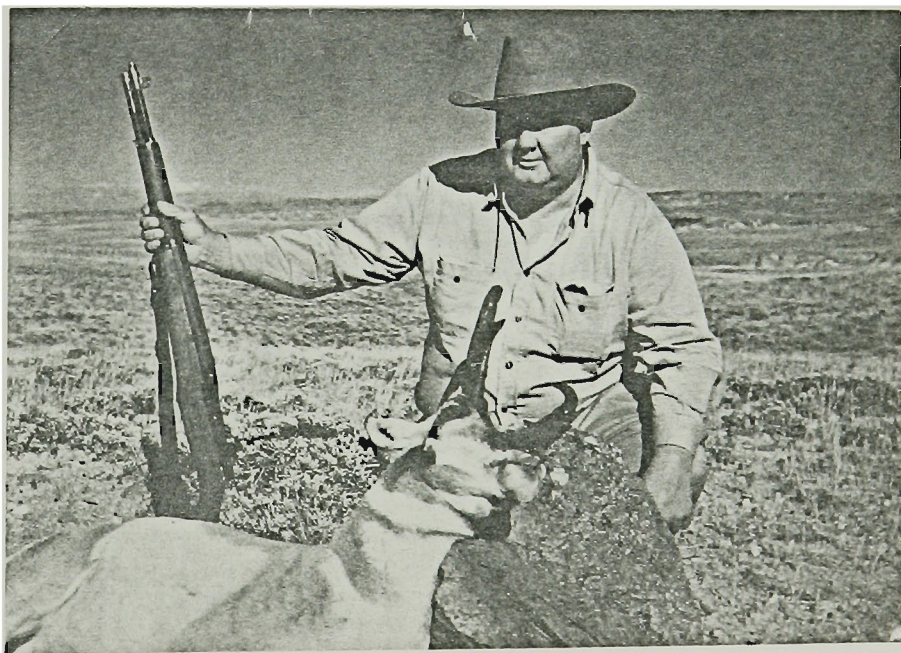
FLORIDA - JAN. 1956



1-6



1-7



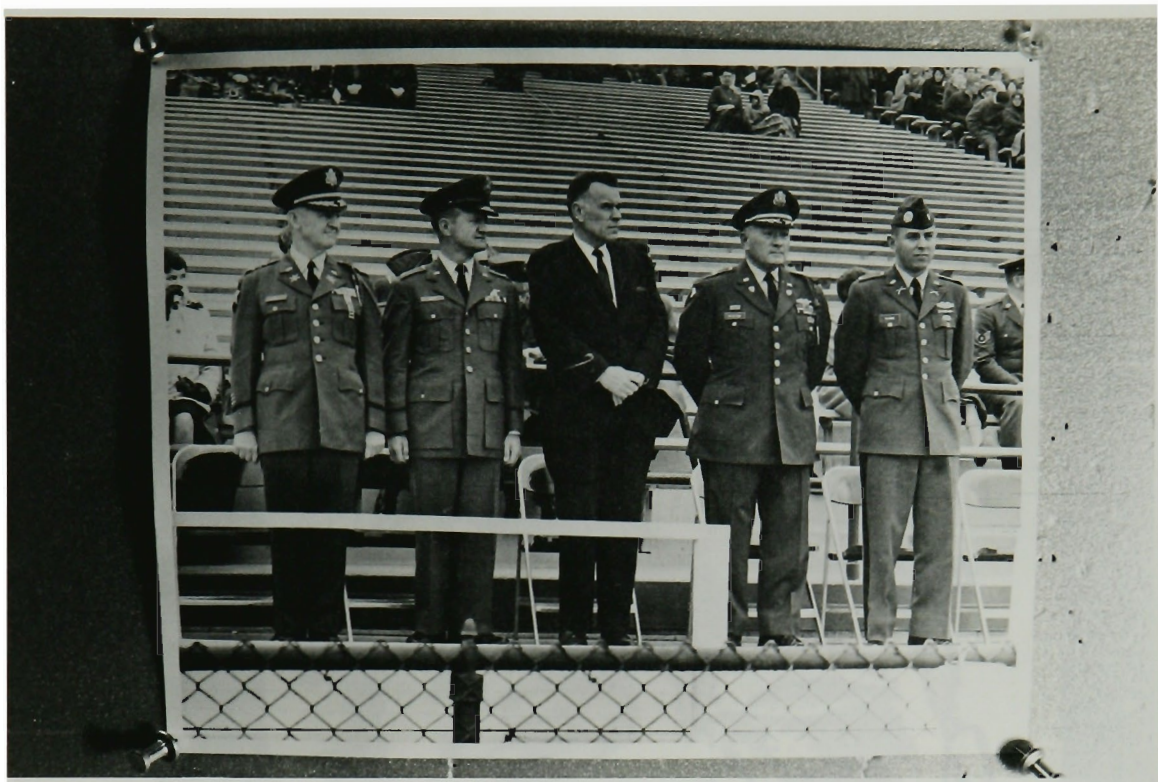
1-8



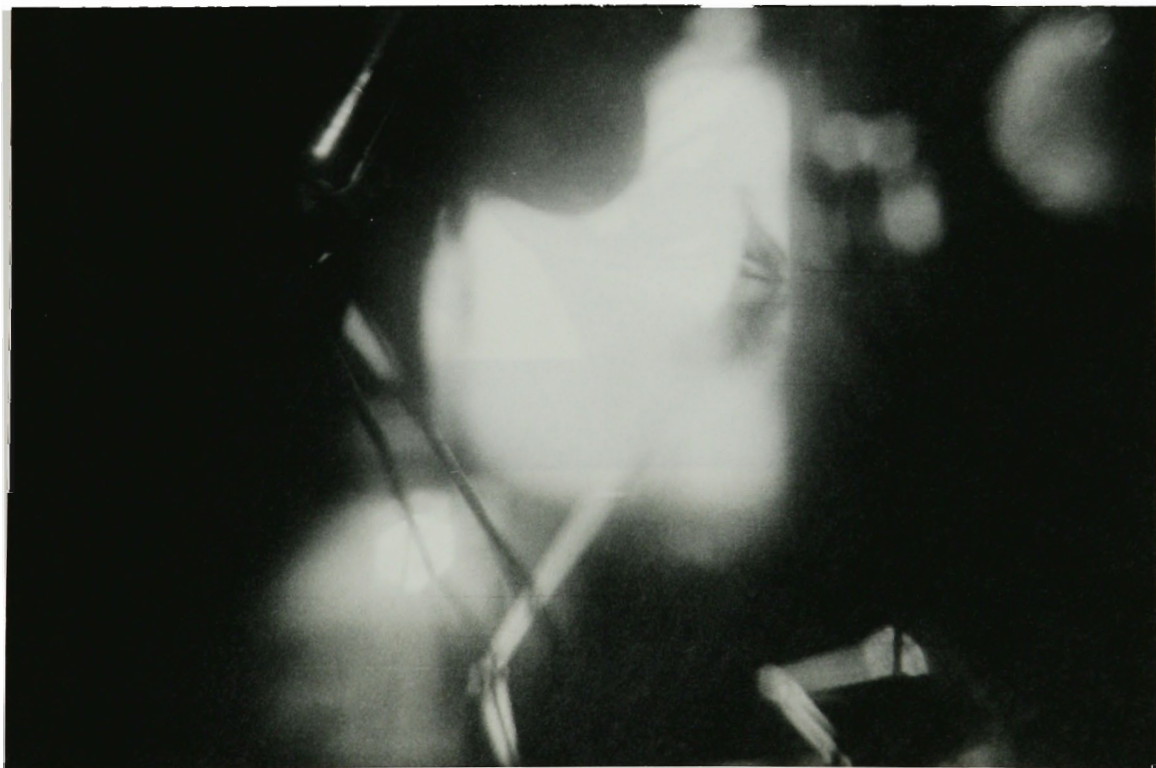








2-4



2-5







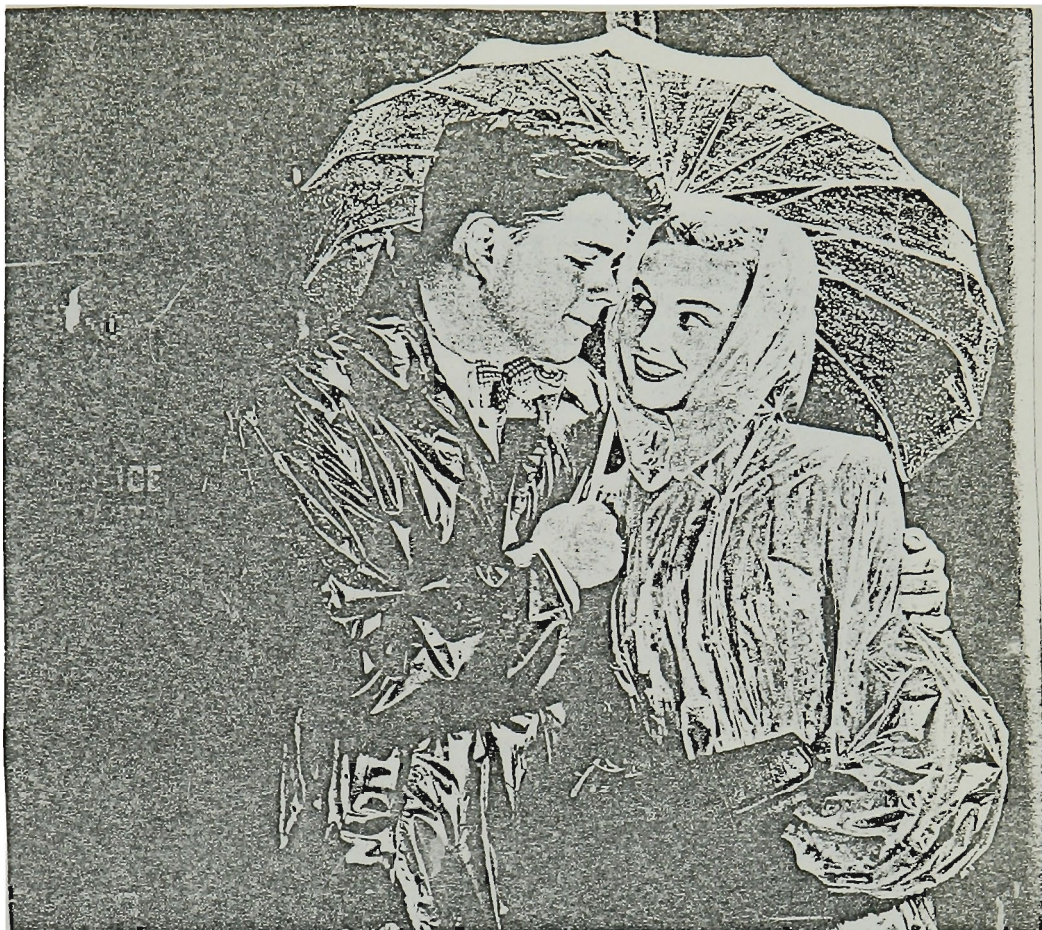


3-1



3-2











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**Girl, 16, Forced Into Prostitution  
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**Throttles Girl, Slams Head On Bathtub,  
Forces Head Into Toilet, Then Kicked**

( STORY ON PAGE 4 )

**Man Slashed With Broken Bottle,  
Robbed In Midtown Lounge Restroom**

( STORY ON PAGE 3 )

## Ignores Sister's Screams For Help As Friend Rapes Her In Next Room

( TURN TO PAGE 6 )



**Easter Bunny — Ms. Nancy Gilmore poses as Play-boy-type bunny at Finger Lakes Race Track.**

### OTHER SHOCKERS!

**\$300 TAKEN FROM GIRL'S  
PANTIES IN HOTEL ROOM**

( 1 )

**FEMALE POLICE CADETS  
TRAP UNWARY MALES**

( 2 )

**SUFFERS 7-INCH FACE  
SLASH IN MUGGING**

( 3 )

**GIRL SHOT IN THIGH  
IN RESTAURANT**

( 7 )

**U of R COED FINDS MAN  
SLEEPING UNDER BED  
CLUTCHING KNIFE**

( 5 )



# WE

ROCHESTER'S ONLY NEWSMAGAZINE

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

Price — 35¢

JUNE 29-1976

3 Youths Rape Girl Repeatedly — Flung  
From Car Clad Only In Blouse, Panties

( STORY ON PAGE 1 )

Monroe Coed Accosted In Basement —  
Abused, Chased, Cut With Razor

( STORY ON PAGE 1 )

Bus Driver Spat Upon, Beaten By  
Six Youths In Bus Pass Dispute

( STORY ON PAGE 3 )

## Stewardesses Brawl In Plane Over Airport—Slam Into Pilot, Cause Sudden Dive

( SEE PAGE 6 )



Comely Model Displays Footwear to Child Who  
Seems Disinterested in Her Charms

### OTHER SHOCKERS!

NAKED MAN SPRINGS  
FROM BUSHES

( 4 )

GIRL SHOT IN LEG  
AT OAK ST. BAR

( 7 )

FORCED TO PARADE  
NUDE BY 4 GIRLS

( 4 )

THROWS BOILING WATER  
ON LOVER

( 6 )

CATCHES HUBBY WITH  
GO-GO DANCER —  
BEATEN, THROWN OUT

( 1 )



# WE

ROCHESTER'S ONLY NEWSMAGAZINE

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

Price — 35¢

JULY 13-1976

**Bare-Breasted Girl, 17, Flees House  
After Sex Violator Steals Clothes**

( STORY ON PAGE 4 )

**Masked Man Springs From Bushes At  
Penfield Drive-In — Attacks Girl**

( STORY ON PAGE 5 )

**Lured Into Church Lot By Pick-Up —  
Lurking Thugs Pummel, Rob Him**

( STORY ON PAGE 3 )

**SQUIRTS LIGHTER FLUID ON  
MISTRESS—SETS HER AFIRE** ( SEE PAGE 1 )

**RAPES OWN SISTER—SUBJECTS  
HER TO VILE, FILTHY ACTS** ( TURN TO PAGE 7 )



Playboy's First Full-Front Nude — Marilyn Cole  
had egg thrown in face by man. Holds picture  
(censored) which caused trouble.

## OTHER SHOCKERS!

**MASHES ICE CREAM CONE  
IN WOMAN'S FACE** ( 1 )

**DRAGS GIRL TO SHED —  
SPEND NIGHT THERE** ( 4 )

**WIFE JUMPS FROM CAR,  
BREAKS LEG** ( 2 )

**BEATEN ABOUT BODY  
WITH HAMMER** ( 3 )

**WOMAN WALKING DOG  
SEX-ABUSED IN  
DURAND-EASTMAN PK.** ( 6 )





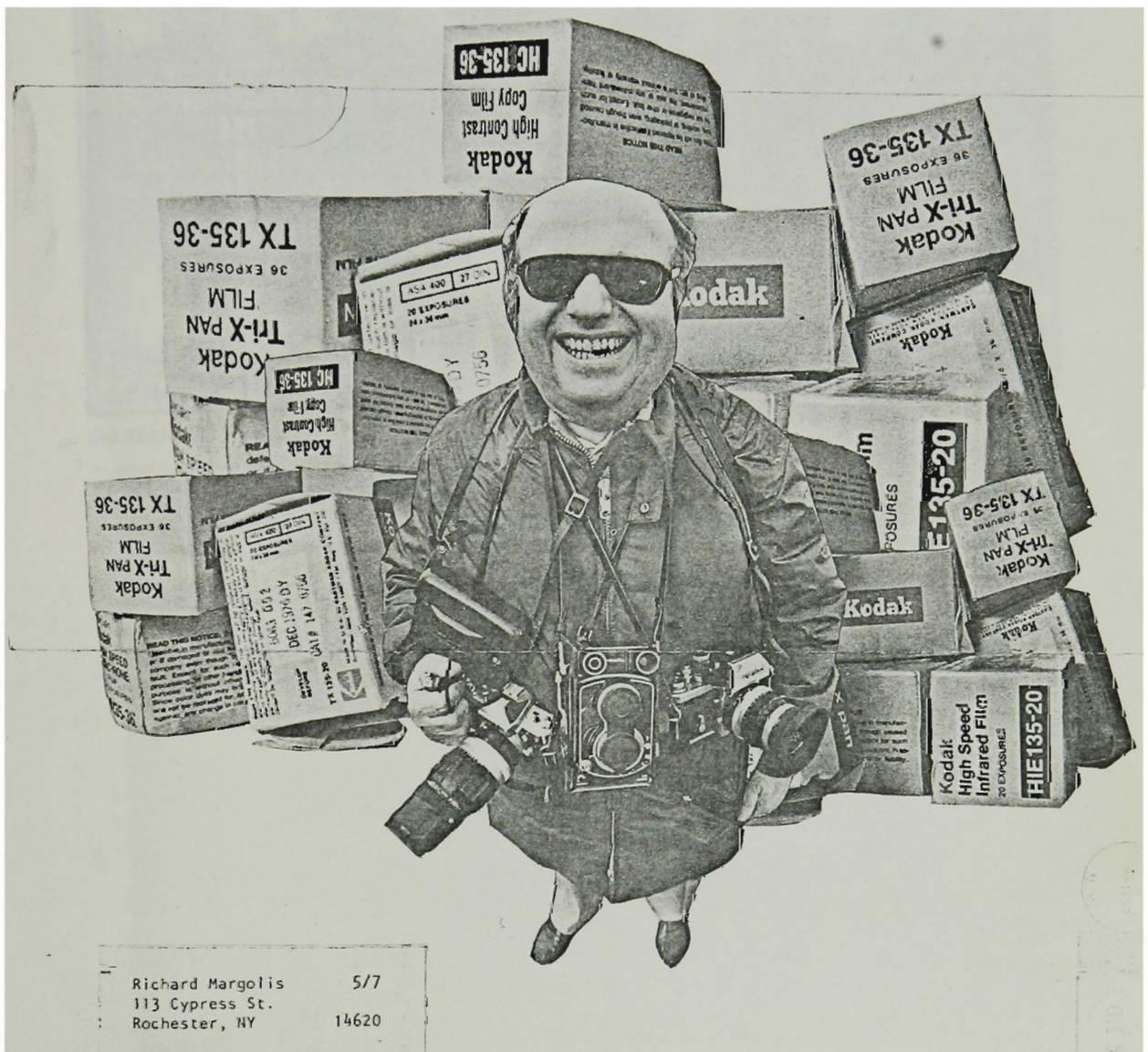






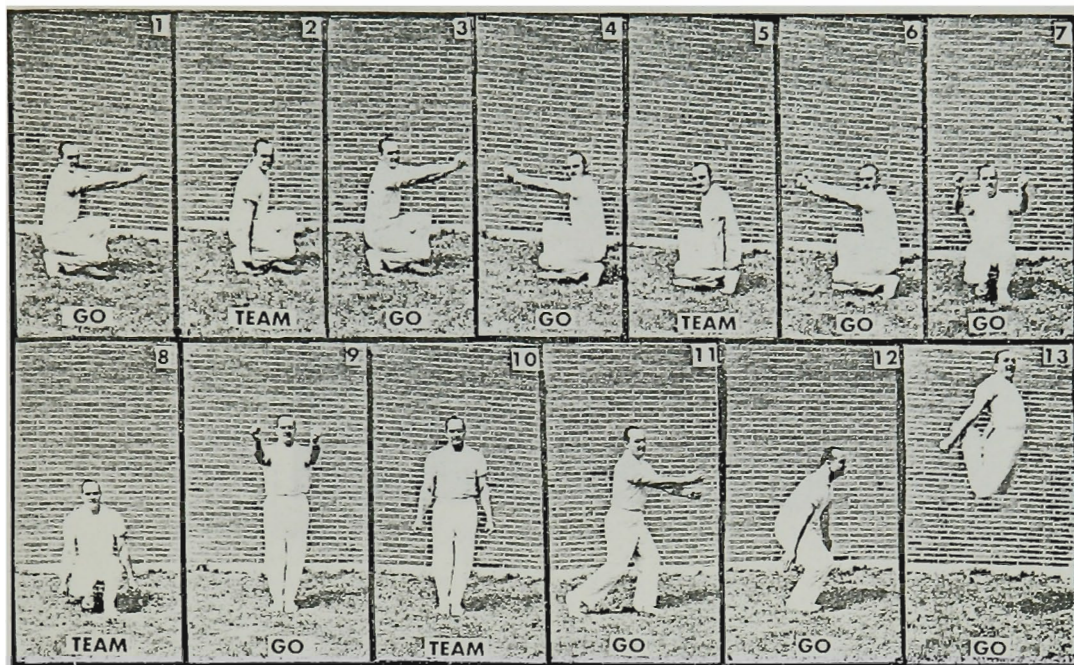


# VISUAL STUDIES WORKSHOP COMMUNITY PROGRAM - SPRING 1977



YELL No. 4

GO TEAM GO

**GO TEAM GO**

These motions can be used for several different yells: Some uses are: Go Team Go; FIGHT TEAM FIGHT; WIN TEAM WIN; or Beat 'EM TEAM, BEAT 'EM.

The motions illustrated above are very simple to do and they are easy for the audience to follow. They should all be done with closed fists, hitting the beat of the yell at the end of each outstretched motion. Note that arms are completely straight at the end of each motion. For the jump (Figs. 11, 12, 13) two steps (11) and a hurdle (12), then the back arch jump is done by throwing both arms up into the air and then circling them back as the feet come up.

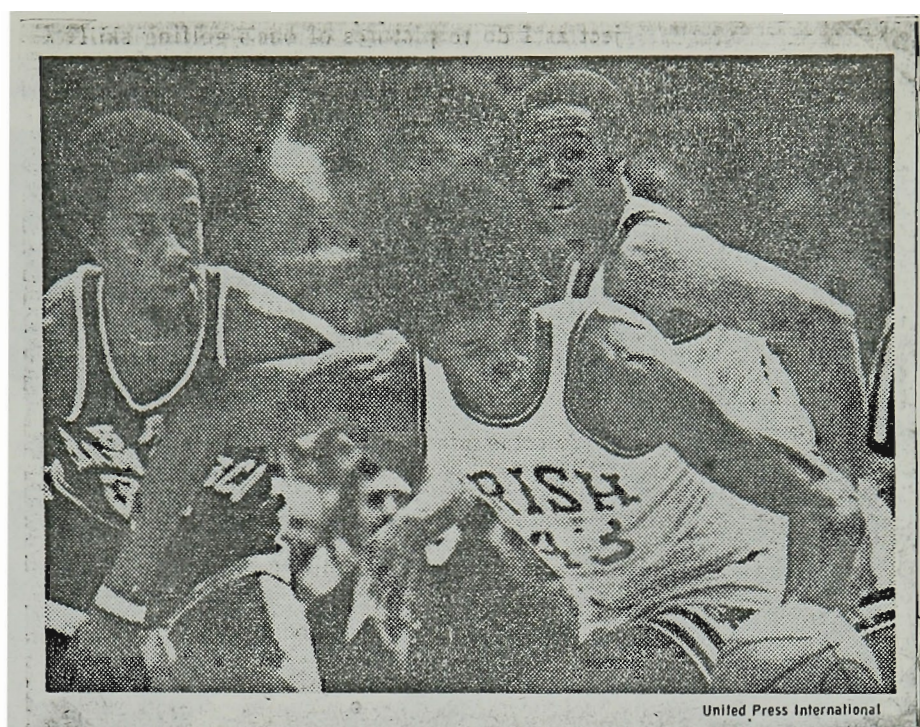
Suggested yells for this same series of motions.

GO TEAM GO, GO TEAM GO  
GO TEAM, GO TEAM  
GO, GO, GO

BEAT 'EM TEAM BEAT 'EM  
BEAT 'EM TEAM BEAT 'EM  
BEAT 'EM FAIR, BEAT 'EM SQUARE  
BUT BEAT 'EM TEAM BEAT 'EM

FIGHT TEAM FIGHT, FIGHT TEAM FIGHT  
FIGHT, TEAM, FIGHT TEAM,  
FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT  
(SAME for WIN TEAM WIN)





5-1



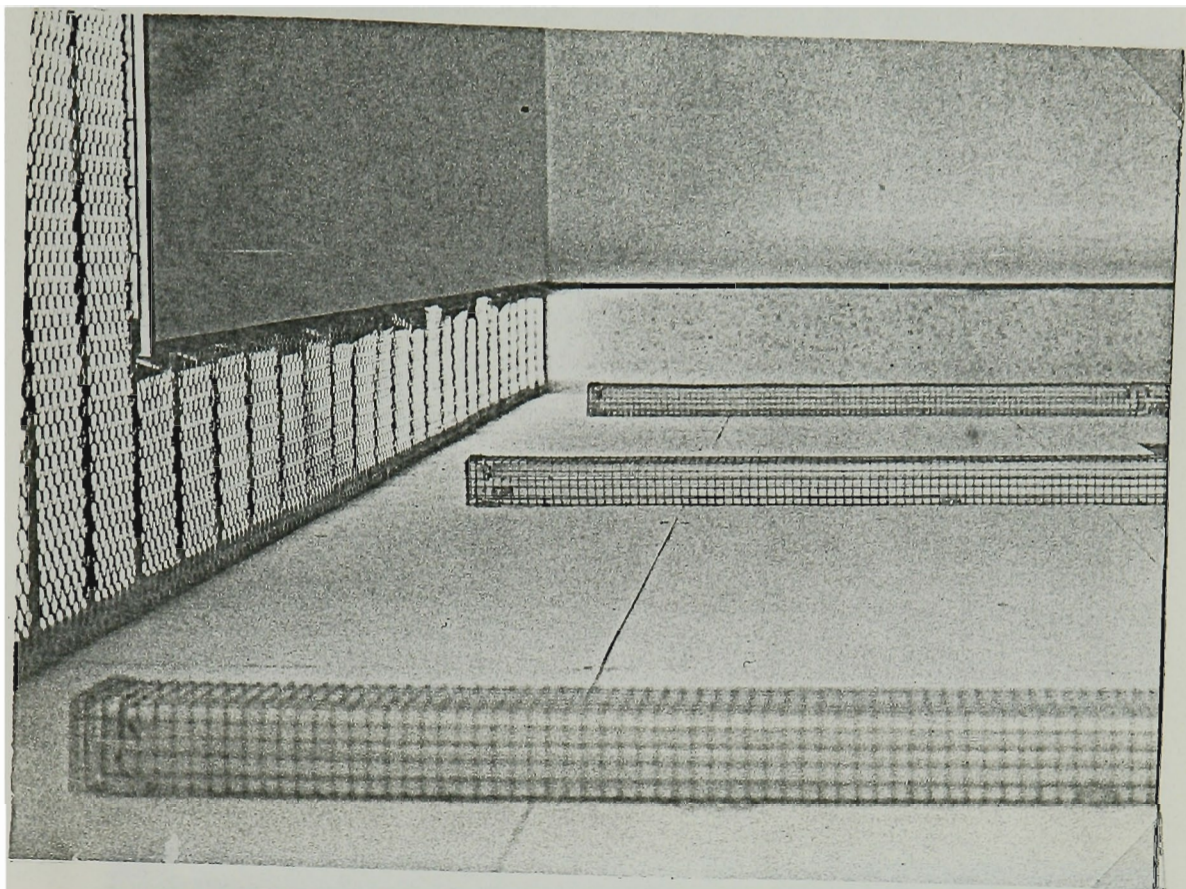
5-2



PHOTONEWS Friday, March 4, 1977 -8









*Clam Digging*

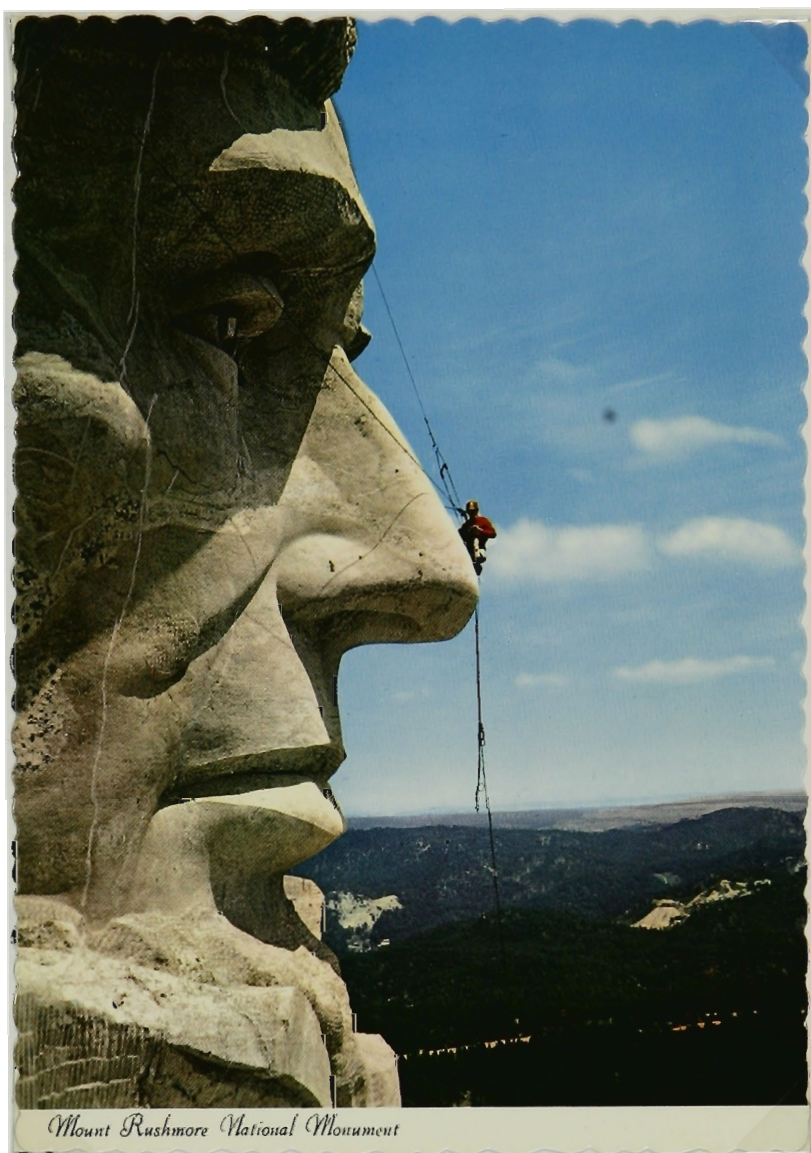
*Photo: Morton Luman*

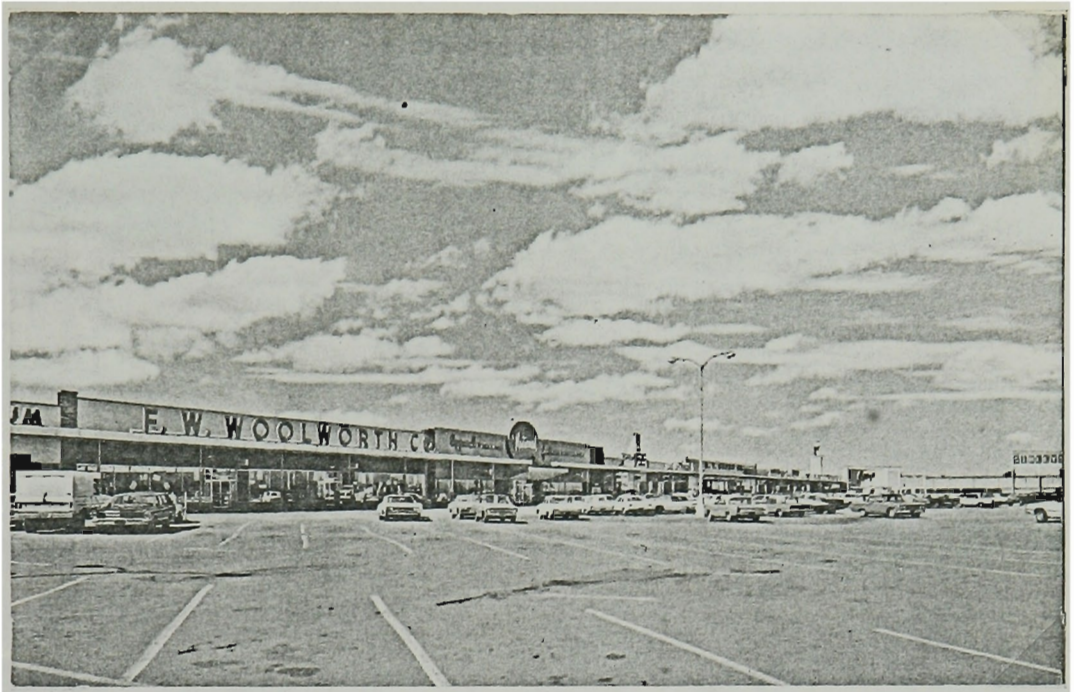
6-1



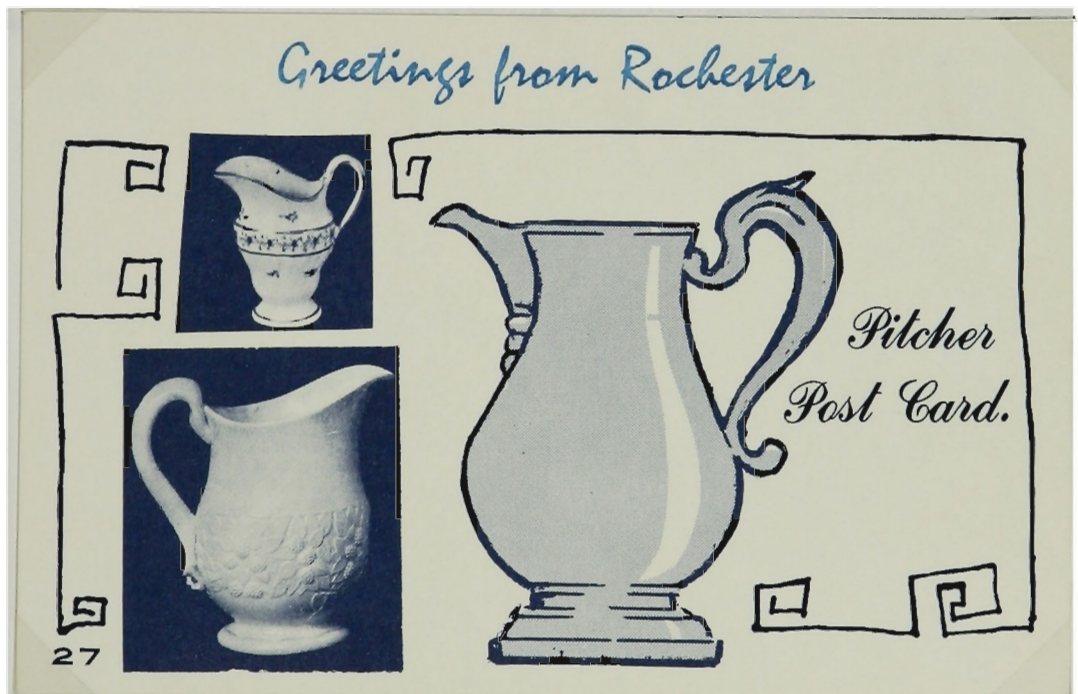
6-2







6-4



6-5





DEAD INDIANS WOUNDED KNEE BATTLE FIELD IN 1890 S.DAK.



6-7

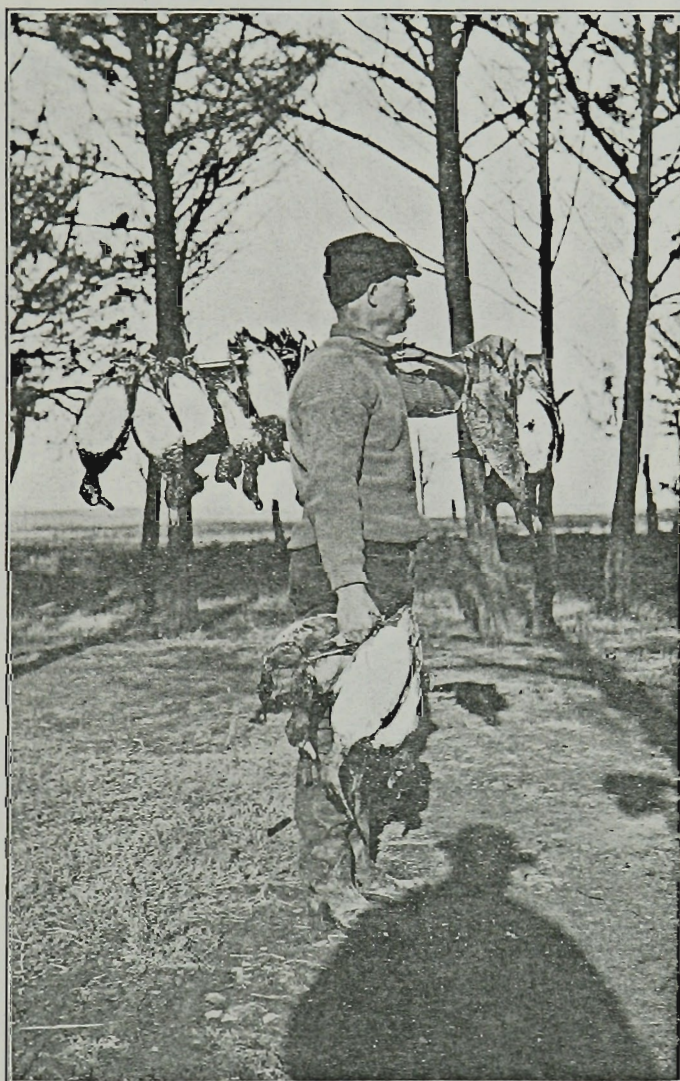


6-8

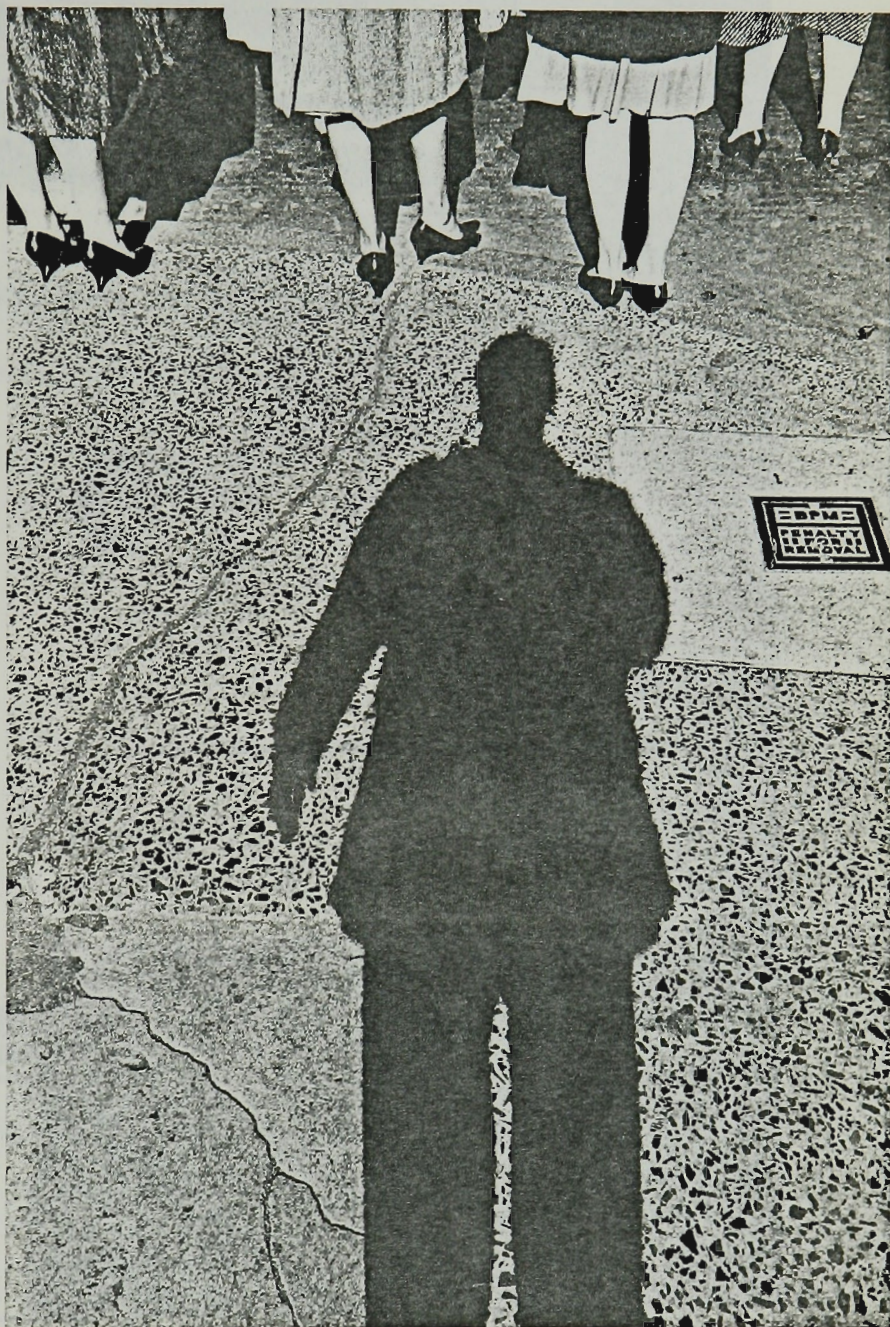




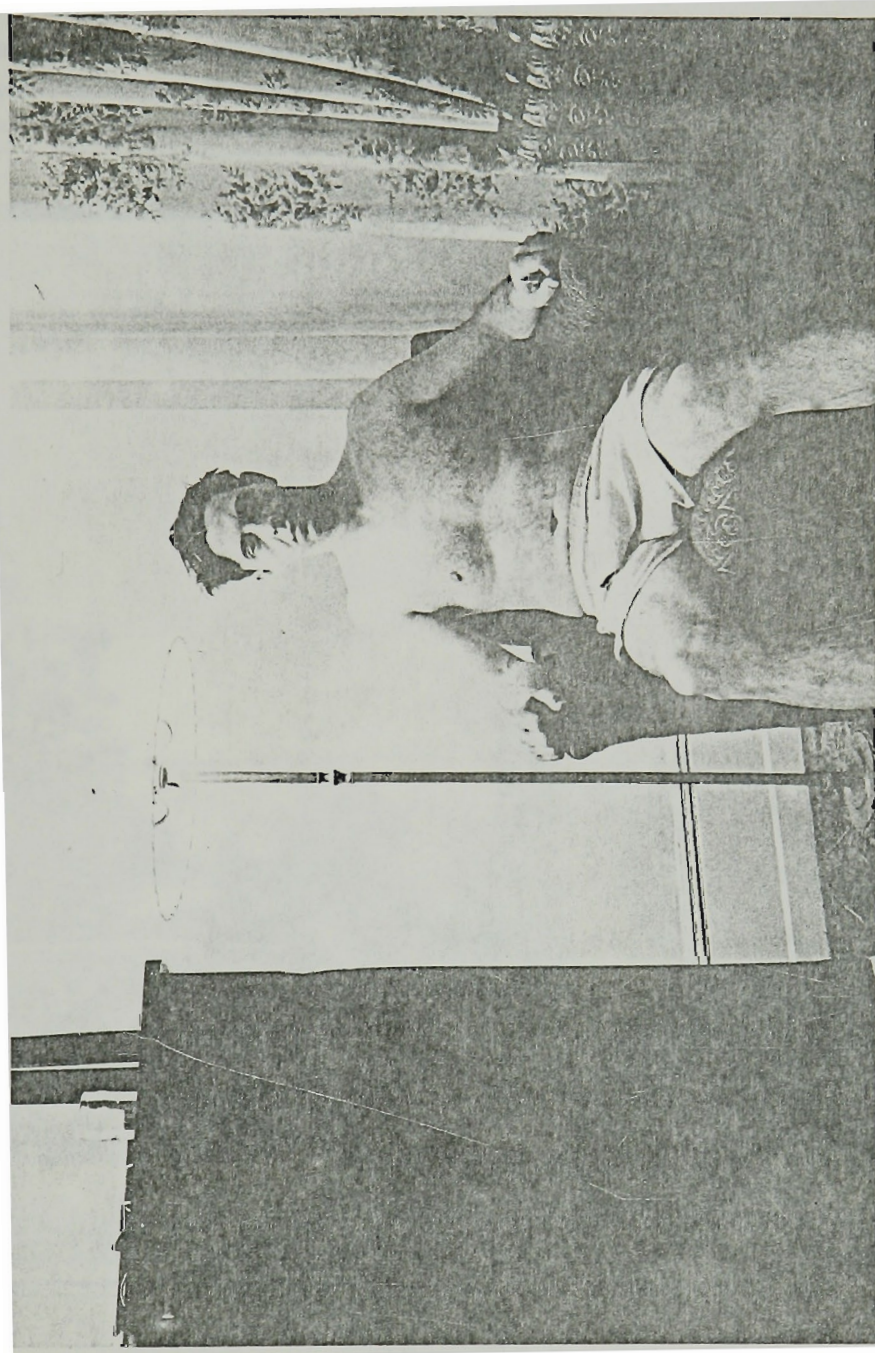
















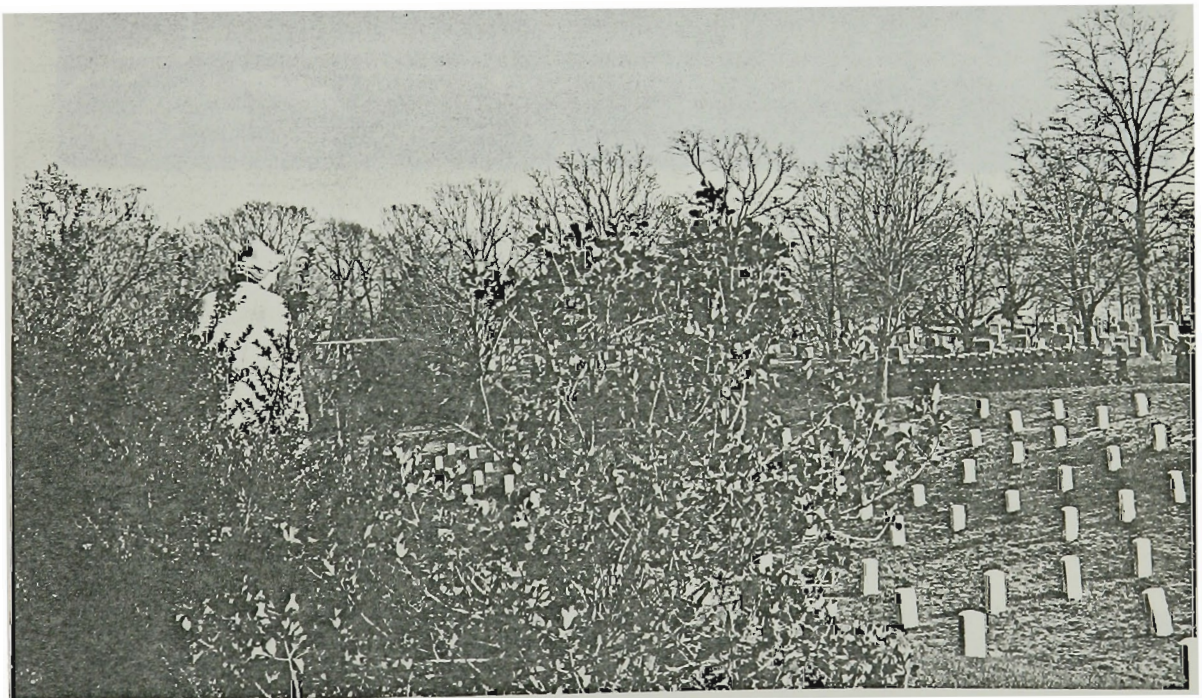
140. To the Loyal Sons of Griswold and Vicinity. Jewett City, Connecticut





141. Admiral Raphael Semmes of the Confederate States Navy. Mobile, Alabama

7-5



142. Army and Navy Nurses. Arlington Cemetery, Arlington, Virginia

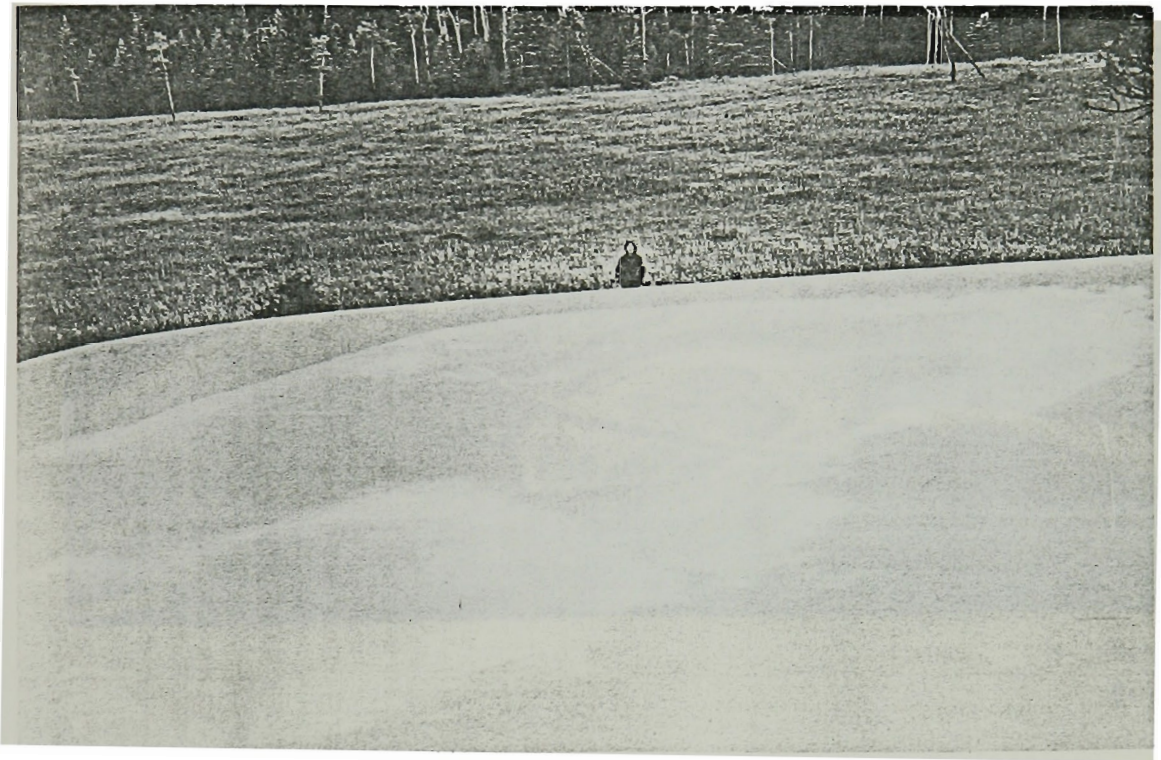
7-6





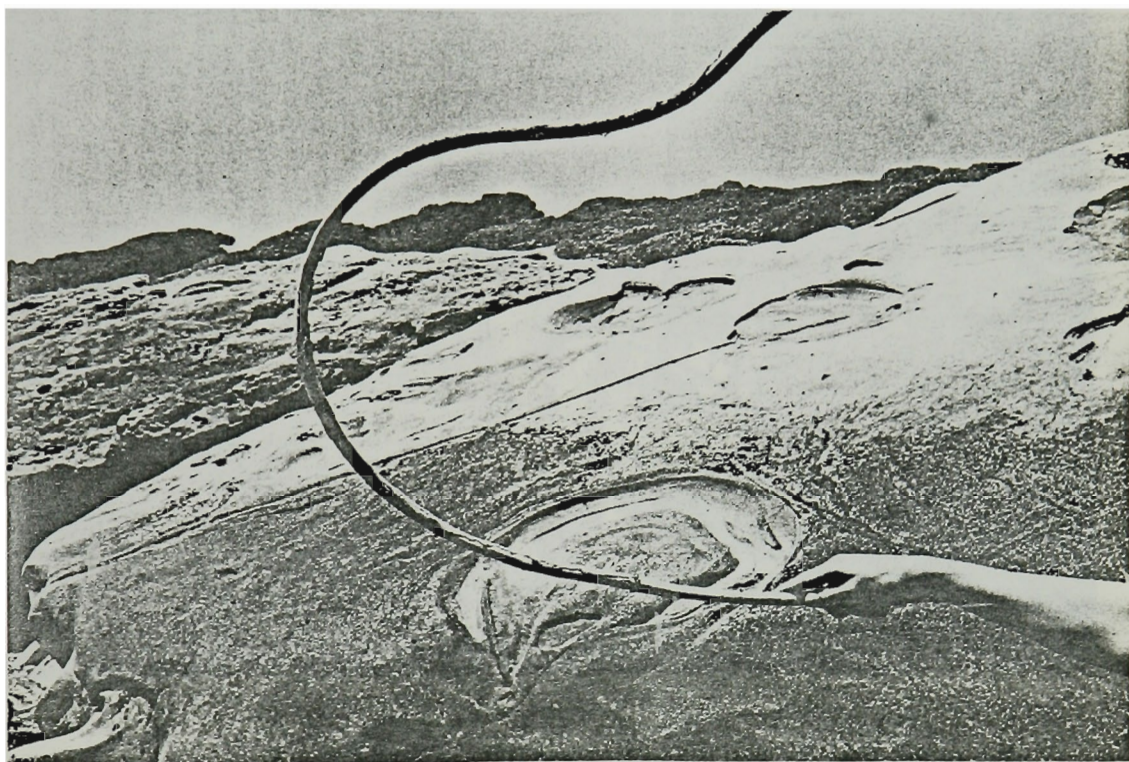
Arthur Freed

7-7



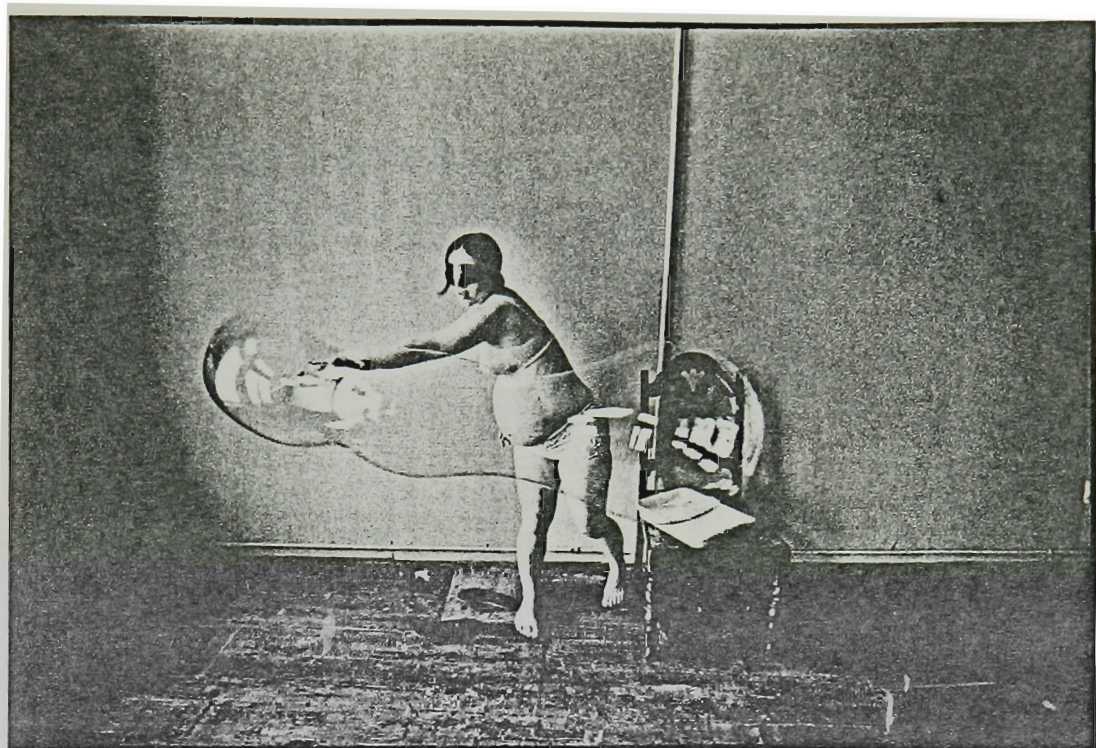
Arthur Freed  
7-8





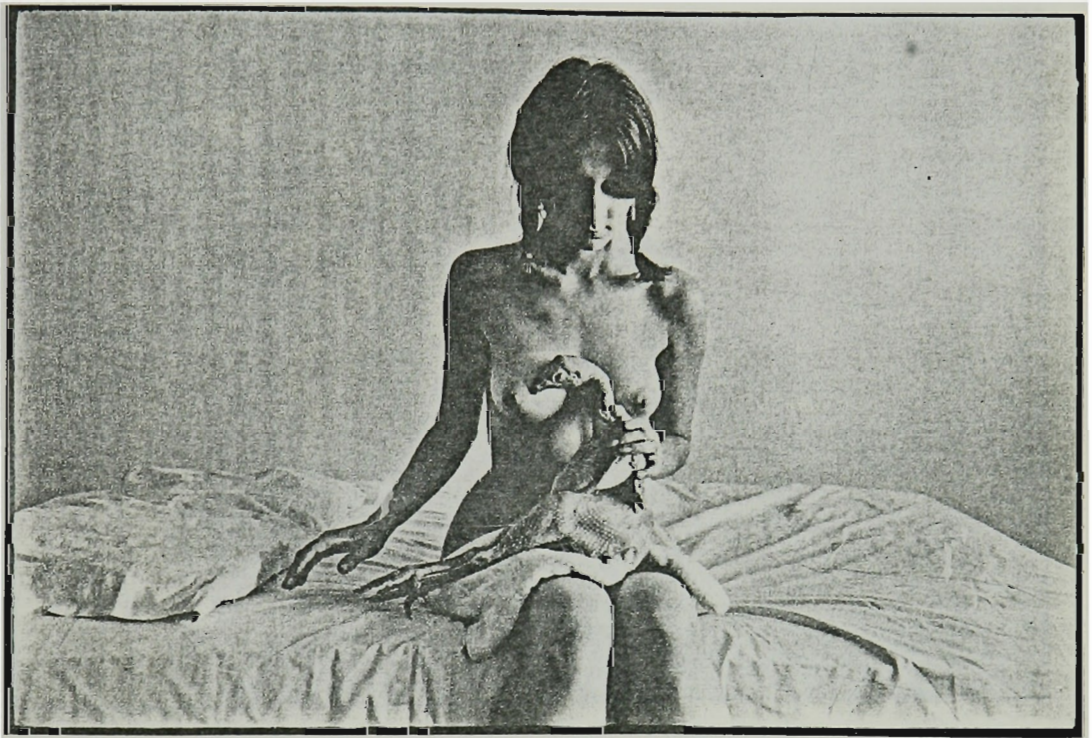
Arthur Freed

7-9



7-10

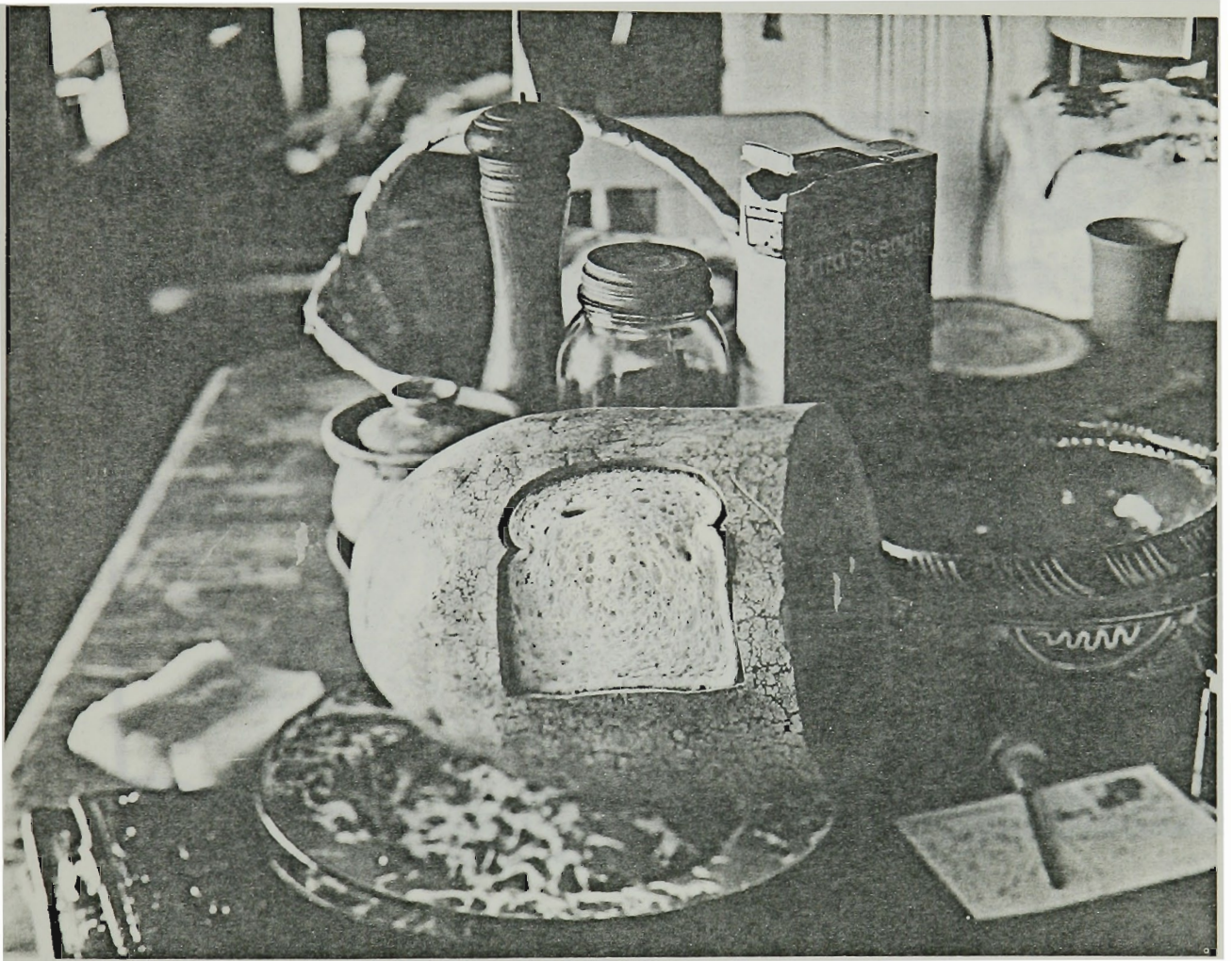




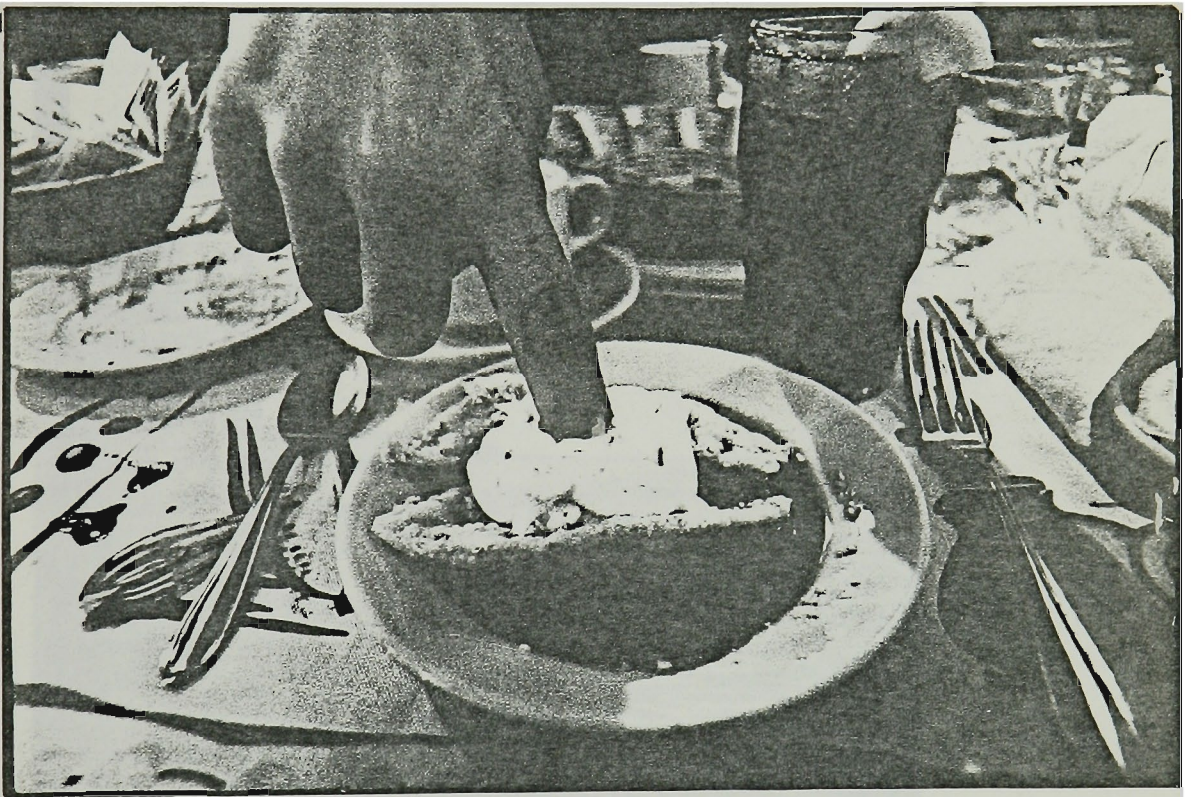


7-12

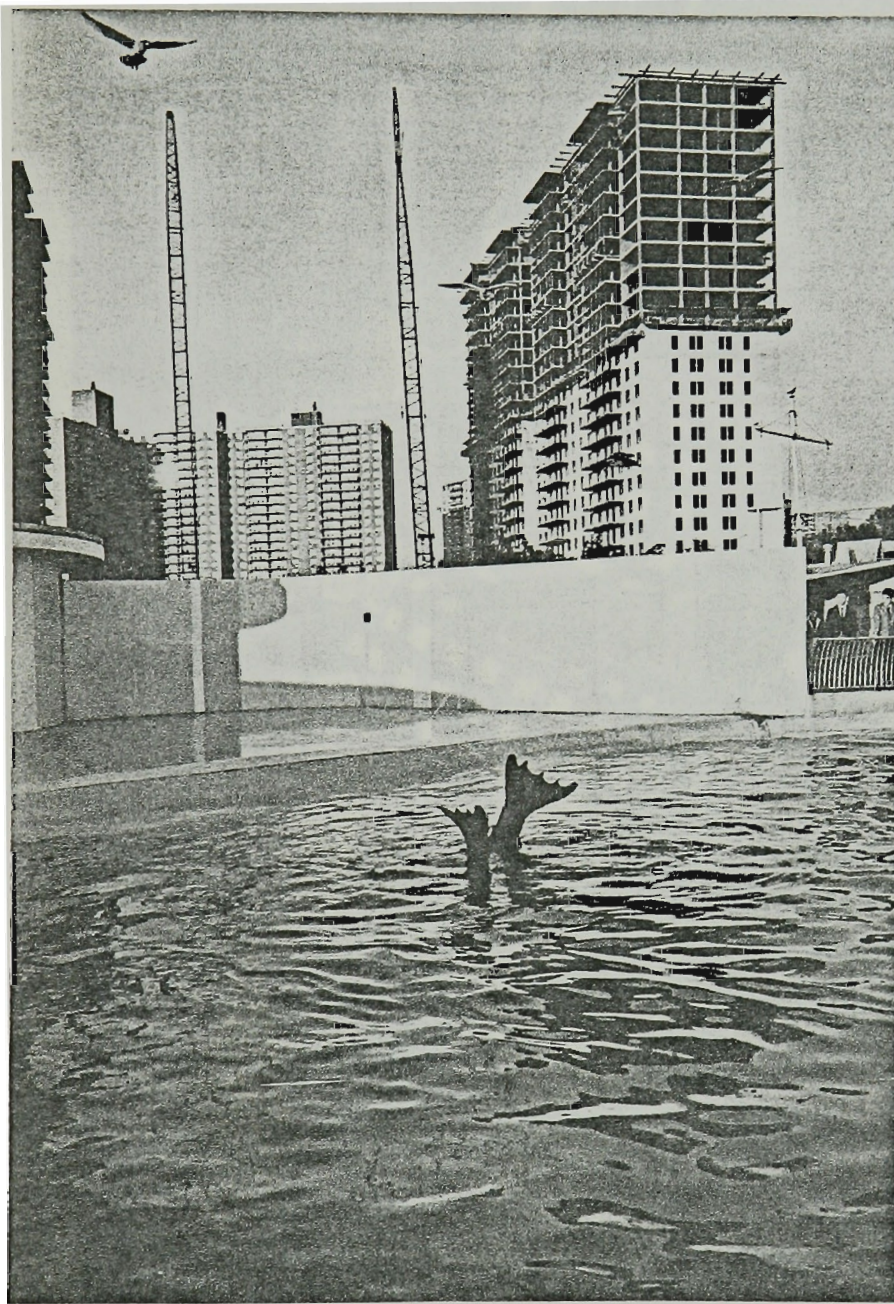




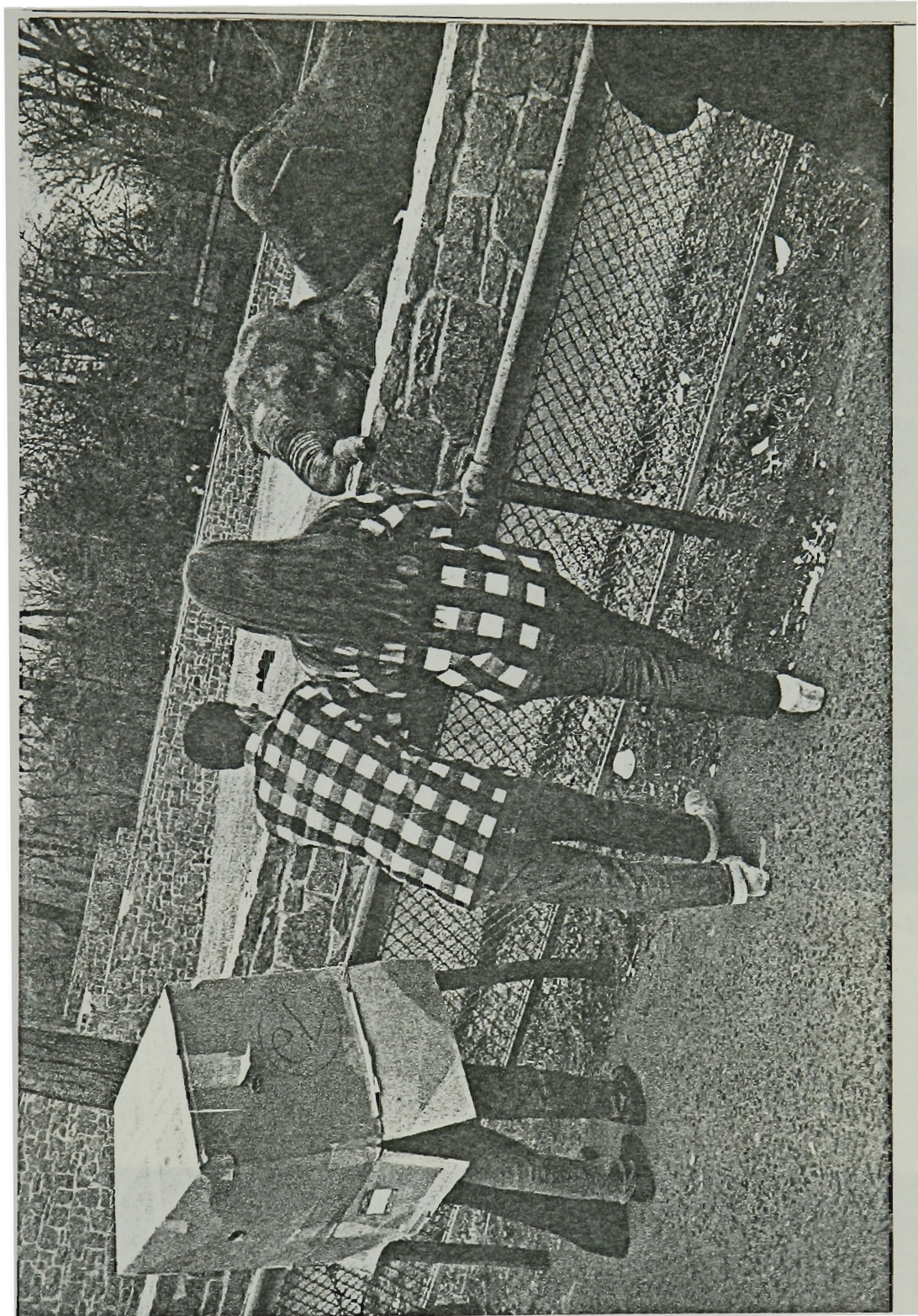




7-14











7-17





*DeLappa Portraits of Violet and Al, No. 4.*

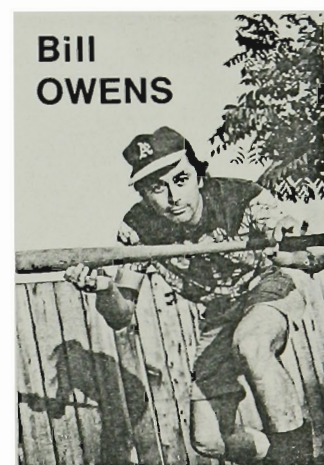
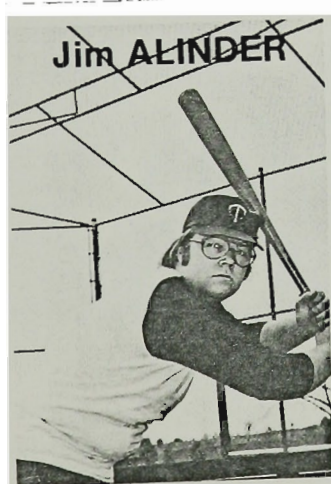
7-18

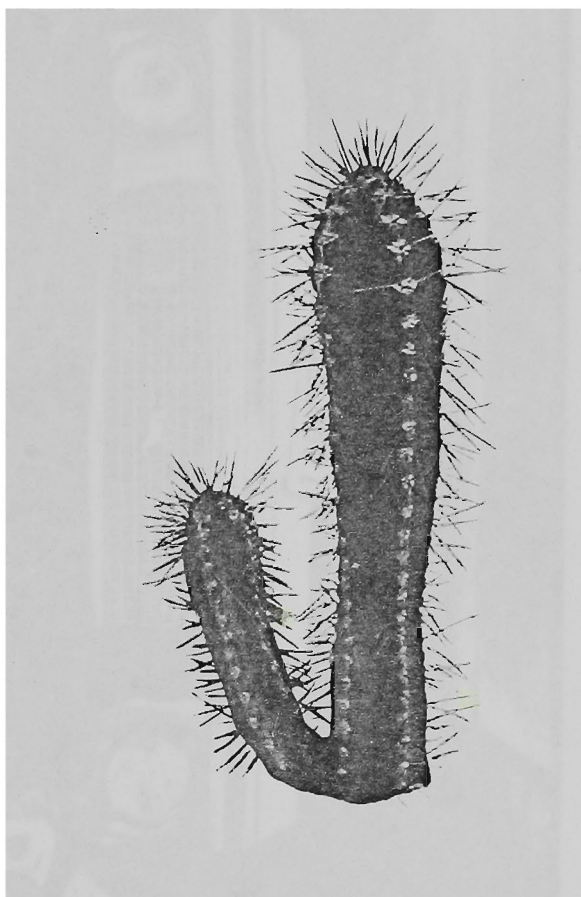


Untitled, n.d.

7-19













## CONCLUSION.

The purpose of this thesis is to define and describe a kind of picture that seems to exist as a distinguishable category and yet has not been treated formally. The label "dumb" was used because it fit, although it is a colloquialism not easily applied to pictures.

Starting with the common usage of dumb and a vague impression of the pictures that it applied to, and using the dictionary, a series of related terms were collected. This allowed more discussion. After dividing the terms into groups that describe the picture, the picture-maker, and the viewer response, the next step was to begin collecting examples.

Pictures were hard to find that would clearly demonstrate those principles. It was easier to describe a theoretical picture using possibly slanted language than to find a picture that would be convincing on its own merits. In order to organize the search six categories were established. They seemed to encompass most sources of dumb pictures.

Newspapers, because of their dynamics, are prone to use dumb pictures to attract readers/buyers. They are often "human interest" pictures that, while employing photography, are illustrations far below the level of serious photography. They merely attract attention, not satisfy deep personal needs. Snapshots also offer a rich source for odd juxtapositions and charming accidents that are often more obvious to the selective viewer than to the families. Post cards are the best source for dumb pictures, often being collected for their "unusual" qualities.

The most sensitive area to explore was my own old pictures. Lots of them seemed dumb to me, but not to other people. The response that they

produced in me was the same as what I have described as indicating dumbness, so they had to be included. The "just mediocre" picture was included because it fit theoretically, and yet the examples, by their nature, were the least noticeable. But it is still an important category. Pictures from an out of fashion period explained another aspect of why pictures are called dumb.

The distinction between "art" and "craft" seems significant to the understanding of dumb pictures, but it is not well established. If more material had been available this might have been the key to understanding the whole topic. It is still helpful to appreciate that there are many uses for pictures and to apply the wrong criteria in judging a particular image will confuse the issue.

Discussing "fine art" pictures in terms of exposure data is inappropriate because it reduces them to the level of craft. Sadakichi Hartmann, writing under the name Sidney Allen, describes control of the medium as an important formative stage in artistic development, but he cautions against confusing the two areas.<sup>94</sup> Treating Friedlander's pictures as though they were snapshots is an example of the application of inappropriate criteria.

Dumb<sup>7</sup> is the only category that is art, while all others are craft. These pictures are the result of a deliberate aesthetic decision by photographers that are recognized for their skill. The decision is to employ the superficial appearance of snapshots and other common pictures in the creation of a cohesive body of work. This could be thought of as a negative style, but that is because they seem to be less than what they are. They look like easy pictures that anyone could take, and that puts them into the same position as much of modern art. Even children could do that.

The difficulty in discussing dumb pictures, or Friedlander's pictures, or contemporary snapshot photography, is that the language is imprecise and the critics who ought to educate the public and the photographers, are not doing their jobs, according to A. D. Coleman.<sup>95</sup>



## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A. D. Coleman, "Art Critics: Our Weakest Link" (N.Y. Times, October 6, 1974), pg. 33.
- <sup>2</sup> American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, (New York, American Heritage Co., Inc., 1975).
- <sup>3</sup> A New English Dictionary of Historical Principles (edited by James A. H. Murray, University of Oxford, England, 1897).
- <sup>4</sup> The Dictionary of American Slang (compiled by Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner, 2nd supplemented edition Thomas Y. Crowell Co., New York, 1975).
- <sup>5</sup> Eric Partridge, The Macmillan Dictionary of Historical Slang, (New York, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974).
- <sup>6</sup> Rogert's International Thesaurus (3rd Edition, Thomas Y. Crowell Co., New York, 1962).
- <sup>7</sup> Lisette Model (Untitled Essay from:) The Snapshot, Aperture, Vol. 19, No. 1, (edited with intro. by Jonathan Greene, Millerton, N.Y. 1974).
- <sup>8</sup> (1-1) Margolis Family Snapshot, Date: unknown, Location: Lorain, O. Subject: Harold & Nathan Margolis.
- <sup>9</sup> (1-2) Margolis Family Snapshot, Date: unknown, Location: Lake Erie.
- <sup>10</sup> (1-3) Margolis Family Snapshot, Date: unknown, Place: unknown.
- <sup>11</sup> (1-4) Margolis Family Snapshot, Date and Subject unknown.
- <sup>12</sup> (1-5) Margolis Family Snapshot, Subject: Robert Margolis, Date: unknown.
- <sup>13</sup> (1-6) Margolis Family Snapshot, Subject: "Lady", Date: unknown.
- <sup>14</sup> (1-7) Margolis Family Snapshot, Subject: Portrait drawn by Harold Margolis, date: 1975.
- <sup>15</sup> (1-8) Snapshot, Collection of the author. Subject & Date: unknown.
- <sup>16</sup> (2-1) Photograph by Richard Margolis, Date: unknown.
- <sup>17</sup> (2-2) Photograph by R. Margolis, Date: unknown, Subject:
- <sup>18</sup> (2-3) Photographer: unknown, Subject: R. Margolis, Date: unknown.

- 19 (2-4) Photograph by R. Margolis, Subject: Spectators at a Football Game, Date: unknown.
- 20 (2-5) Photograph by R. Margolis, Date: unknown, Subject: unknown.
- 21 Photographic Posterization, by R. Margolis, Date: 1966.
- 22 Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation, "Notes on Camp", (New York, Dell Publishing Co., Inc. 1961), pg. 286-287.
- 23 (3-1) Post Card "Playing at the Beach", Photo by Free Lance Photographer's Guild, Collection of the author.
- 24 (3-2) Post Card "Miniature Golf at Roseland Park", Collection of the author.
- 25 (3-3) Victor Keppler, Man and Camera (New York, Hastings House Publishers, 1970), p. 142.
- 26 Man and Camera, *ibid.*, p. 143.
- 27 (3-4) Man and Camera, *ibid.*, p. 133.
- 28 (4-1) The Newsmagazine We, (Rochester, N.Y., April 20, 1976), pg. 1.
- 29 (4-2) The Newsmagazine We, (Rochester, N.Y., June 29, 1976), pg. 1.
- 30 (4-3) The Newsmagazine We, (Rochester, N.Y., July 13, 1976), pg. 1.
- 31 (4-4) Photographer: unknown, Date: unknown, Collection of the author.
- 32 (4-5) Photographer: unknown, Date: unknown, Collection of the author.
- 33 (4-6) Photographer: unknown, Date: unknown, Collection of the author.
- 34 (4-7) Illustration for Community Service Program - 1977, Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, N.Y., Collection of the author.
- 35 (4-8) Lawrence R. Herkimer, Photographically Illustrated Cheer Routines #4 (Dallas, Texas, National Cheerleaders Assn., 1961).
- 36 John Szarkowski, ed., From the Picture Press, Introduction, pg. 4, (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1973).
- 37 (5-1) New York Times, March 6, 1977.
- 38 (5-2) New York Times, March 6, 1977.
- 39 (5-3) Photo News, March 4, 1977. Rochester, N.Y.

- 40 (5-4) Photographer and Date: unknown, Collection of the author.
- 41 Richard Morphet, "Wish You Were Where?", Wish You Were Here, The History of the Picture Post Card, (Hempstead, Long Island, New York, Hofstra University, 1974).
- 42 (6-1) Post Card "Clam Digging, photo by Morton Luman, published by Smith Western Inc., Portland, Oregon, collection of the author.
- 43 (6-2) Caption: "A Favorite Pastime for the Roaming Donkeys in the Black Hills, is to Stop the Traveler for a Free Hand Out", photo by C. J. Townsley, published by Dan Grigg Enterprises, Mitchell, S. D., collection of the author.
- 44 (6-3) Post Card "Mount Rushmore", published by Barney Hanscom, Rapid City, S. D., collection of the author.
- 45 (6-4) Post Card "Southtown Plaza", published by Manson News, Rochester, N. Y., collection of the author.
- 46 (6-5) Post Card "Pitcher Post Card", Village Prints, Baldwinsville, N. Y., collection of the author.
- 47 (6-6) Post Card "Wounded Knee Massacre", published by The Goin Co., Mitchell, S. D., collection of the author.
- 48 (6-7) Post Card "You Can't Beat Iowa Corn", published by ES-N-LEN Photos, Aurora, Ill., collection of the author.
- 49 (6-8) Post Card "Iowa-Corn Capital of the World", published by Stanley J. Mouser, Wellman, Iowa, collection of the author.
- 50 (6-9) Post Card "Flying Jackalope", published by the Goin Co., Mitchell, S.D., collection of the author.
- 51 Janet Malcolm, "Photography, Diana and Nikon", The New Yorker, Vol. 52 #10, April 26, 1976, pgs. 133-137.
- 52 Robert Hellman and Marvin Hoshino, "Friedlander Now", Village Voice, Jan. 6, 1975, pg. 78.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Gene Thornton, "All of a Sudden Friedlander Seems Passe", N. Y. Times, December 15, 1974.
- 55 Charles M. Taylor Jr., Why My Photographs Are Bad, Philadelphia, Geo. W. Jacobs & Co., 19)2.
- 56 (7-1) Ibid., pg. 103.



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- 58 Sidney Allen, "The Value of the Apparently Meaningless and Inaccurate", Camera Work #3, (July 1903, pgs. 17-21).
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 (7-3) Lee Friedlander, Self Portrait, (New York City, Haywire Press, 1970).
- 61 Gene Thornton, "Sure Way to Ruin a Party", (New York Times, February 20, 1972).
- 62 (7-4) Lee Friedlander, The American Monument, Plate #140, (New York, Eakens Press Foundation, 1976).
- 63 (7-5) Ibid. plate 141.
- 64 (7-6) Ibid. plate 142.
- 65 Gene Thornton, "Photography View", (New York Times, August 3, 1975).
- 66 A. D. Coleman, "Four Photographs that Drove a Man to Crime", (New York Times, April 11, 1971).
- 67 (7-7) Eight Photographs, Arthur Freed, (New York, Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1971).
- 68 (7-8) Ibid.
- 69 (7-9) Ibid.
- 70 (7-10) Eight Photographs, Leslie Krims, (New York, Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1971).
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 (7-11) Ibid.
- 74 (7-12) Ibid.
- 75 (7-13) Robert Cumming, Picture Fictions, (Robert Cumming, 1973). p. 26
- 76 Robert Cumming, A Training in the Arts, (Toronto, Coach House Press, 1972).
- 77 (7-14) Photograph by Paul Diamond, untitled, collection IMP/GEH Rochester.

- 78 (7-15) Garry Winogrand, The Animals, plate #20, (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1969).
- 79 (7-16) Ibid., plate #27.
- 80 (7-17) Ibid., plate #32.
- 81 (7-18) Three Photographic Visions, "De Lappa: Portraits of Violet & Al #4", (Athens, Ohio, Ohio University, 1977), p. 22.
- 82 (7-19) The Less Than Sharp Show, (Chicago, Ill., The Chicago Photographic Gallery of Columbia College, 1977), p. 41.
- 83 Mike Mandel, Seven Never Before Published Portraits of Edward Weston, (M. Mandel, 1974).
- 84 Mike Mandel, Myself: Timed Exposures, M. Mandel, 1971).
- 85 (7-20) Baseball Photographer Trading Cards, (M. Mandel, 1975).
- 86 Ed Ruscha, Thirty Four Parking Lots, (Ed Ruscha, 1974).
- 87 Ed Ruscha, Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass, (Ed Ruscha, 1968).
- 88 Ed Ruscha, Various Small Fires, (Ed Ruscha, 1964).
- 89 Ed Ruscha, Twenty Six Gasoline Stations, (Ed Ruscha, 1962).
- 90 Ed Ruscha, Colored People, (Ed Ruscha, 1972).
- 91 (7-21) Ed Ruscha, Colored People, (Ed Ruscha, 1972).
- 92 (7-22) Bill McKenzie, untitled Photograph, collection of the author.
- 93 Les Krims, The Deerslayers (1972).
- 94 Sidney Allen, "The Value of the Apparently Meaningless and Inaccurate". Camera Work #3, (July 1903).
- 95 A. D. Coleman, "Art Critics: Our Weakest Link", (New York Times, October 6, 1974, pg. 33).

## APPENDIX

### Dumb Picture Survey

I abandoned the proposed survey after sending out a number of letters and questionnaires and receiving responses to about half of them finding that they were not useful. Of the responses Tom Barrow's was the most helpful, but David Haberstich's was more typical. He did not seem to have any idea what I was talking about. One form was returned without any indication of its source.

Informal discussions with Bill Jenkins, Robert Sobieszak, and others proved more helpful because I could guide the direction of the conversation, answer questions about what I was looking for, and ask further questions.

Nathan Lyons, in an intriguing response to my query, said that "Dumb pictures are those that do not deal with what they announce." While I did not use this in the text it was helpful to me in my thinking about definitions and descriptions.



I would appreciate any ideas that you can share on the topic of "Dumb Pictures". Please answer the questions and add any comments that you want to and return the survey to me in the enclosed envelope. Thank you,

Do "Dumb Pictures" interest you?

YES

Describe the characteristics that apply to "Dumb Pictures".

Not really an exact description - other than "not smart" i.e. - A. Adams cannot or has not made "dumb" pics. Winogrand has (pig swimming) etc. Lee Friedlander uses "dumb" elements but ultimately makes "smart" pictures.

Why do "Dumb Pictures" (interest/ not interest) you?

They seem to contain the "bones" of much photographic structure.

Are "Dumb Pictures" related to "Art"?

yes, but then everything is

Are they related to "Play"?

Possibly when made (originally, I mean) but not when they reach this level of discussion.

I would like any comments that you can provide about who makes

"Dumb Pictures", who likes them, what purposes they serve,

what value they might have, what they look like, etc.

Thank you.

Van D. Coke likes them, Roger Martin, Joe Deal - everyone I know has an interest in them - but then everyone has

Keep me posted!

Tom,

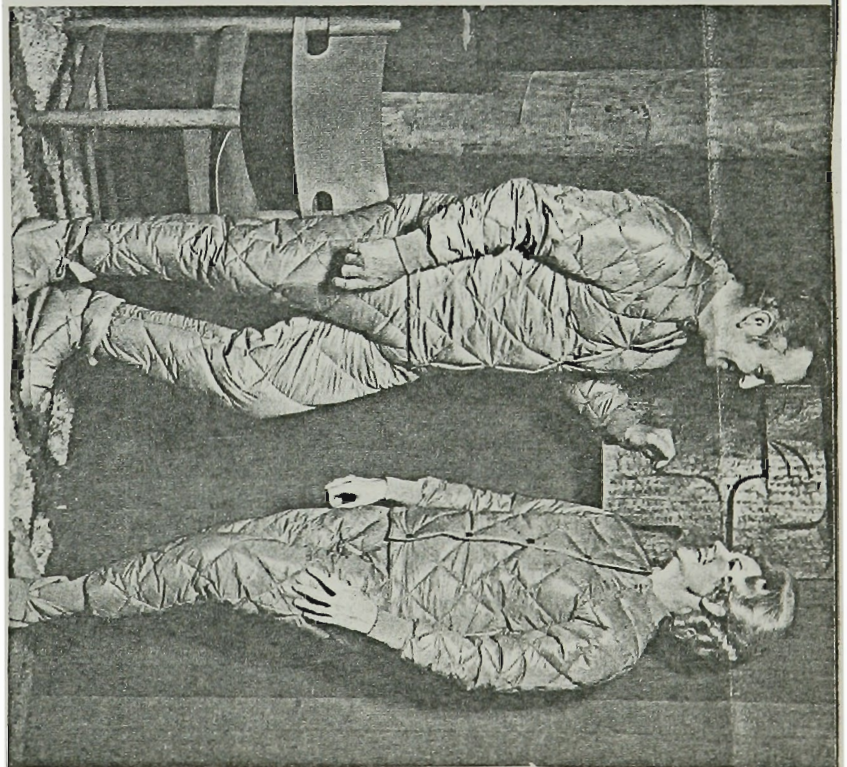
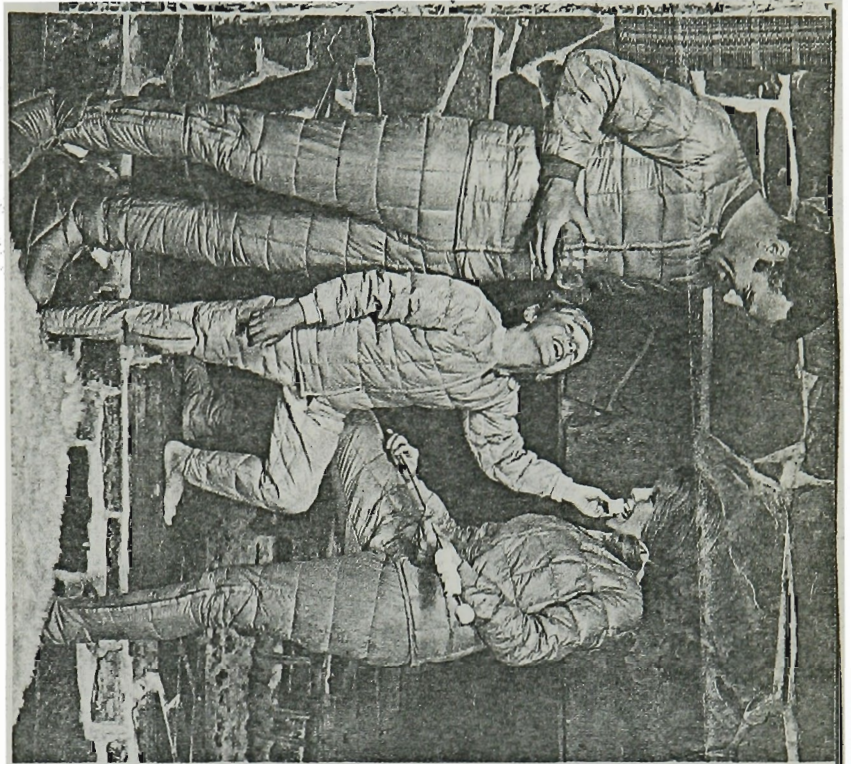
Enclosed is a survey that I would appreciate your returning to me. My thesis is coming along pretty well and should be finished this summer. So far it has been interesting. I keep finding new possibilities that force me to revise what I have done. Anyway I am enjoying it.

Thank you

Slightly different idea of what is dumb.

Enclosed find some examples of "dumb" in one genre -

also when you narrow this down a bit I'd be glad to add fuel to the fire.







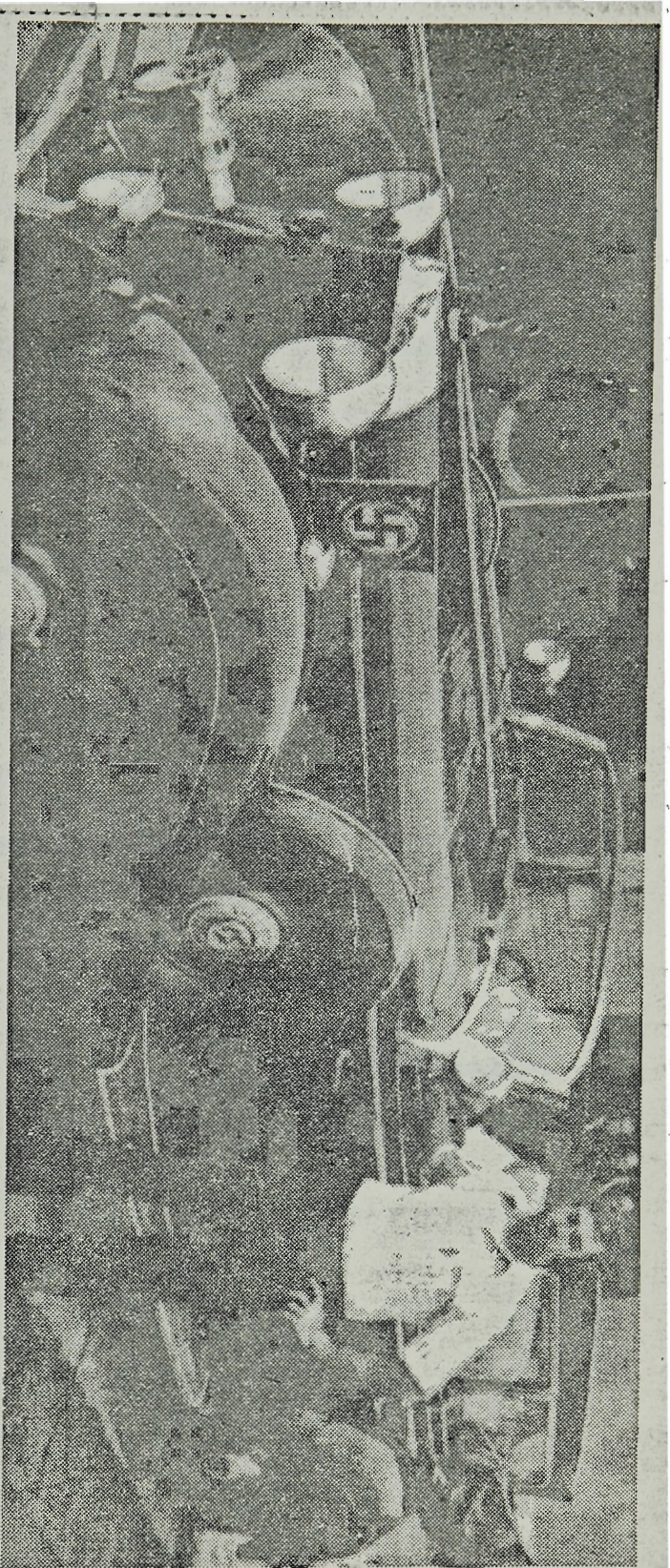
*While his subject meditates, Dr. Herbert Benson measures her oxygen consumption and takes an electrocardiograph reading.*

confident they same period of time. Each  
served, therefore,  
control."



**B-16**

The Albuquerque Tribune, Friday, November 2, 1973



(UPI telephone)

## Hitler's car to parade for Jews

Robert Pass, who is Jewish, is now half owner of the Mercedes-Benz that Adolf Hitler used in parades before his public. He and his partner in an antique car firm, Walter A. Klein, bought the 1940-41 model car for \$176,000 at a Lancaster, Pa., auction. The car took four years to build and cost

\$2,600,000. It weighs 11,000 pounds, including armor plating and two-inch-thick bullet-proof glass. The two St. Louis men plan to use the car to raise money for Jewish charities. Pass says the car is not for sale.

*Dumb, with or  
without the caption*

Dear Mr. Witkin,

I am writing in the hope that you can assist me with research that I am doing for my thesis. I am a graduate student in the MFA program at Rochester Institute of Technology and am doing for my thesis: An Exploration of Dumb Pictures.

Please answer the questions on the attached form and add any comments that you can and return it to me. I am not looking for anything in particular, but am hoping for new ideas and information.

I look forward to hearing from you and do appreciate your help,

Sincerely,





243 East 60 Street • New York, New York 10022 • Tel. (212) 355-1461

June 2, 1975

Richard Margolis

Dear Richard!

I have received your questionnaire! And I can't think of a single dumb thing to say! And neither can Lee! So I have given it to A.D. Coleman in the hope that he will say something!

Much luv,

DEAR R.M. — FEAR I AM TOO BUSY RESPONDING  
TO DUMB PICTURES MASQUERADING AS SMART ONES  
TO FIND TIME TO HELP IN YOUR RESEARCHES.

I would appreciate any ideas that you can share on the topic of "Dumb Pictures". Please answer the questions and add any comments that you want to and return the survey to me in the enclosed envelope. Thank you,

I can't be sure unless you define your term first.

Do "Dumb Pictures" interest you?

Describe the characteristics that apply to "Dumb Pictures".

I hate to seem uncooperative, but I neither use the term nor have any concept of "dumb pictures", so I cannot describe them. I suspect that this term is so ambiguous and subjective as to be almost totally useless. If you could provide some basic notion as to what you're getting at, perhaps I could be more helpful.

Why do "Dumb Pictures" (interest/ not interest) you?

Since I do not know what "Dumb Pictures" are, I do not know if they would interest me. I am interested in images and the reasons that they are perceived as good, bad, indifferent, beautiful, ugly, happy, funny, sad, weak, powerful, useful, useless, original, trite, etc., etc.

Are "Dumb Pictures" related to "Art"?

Possibly.

Are they related to "Play"?

Possibly.

I would like any comments that you can provide about who makes "Dumb Pictures", who likes them, what purposes they serve, what value they might have, what they look like, etc.

Thank you.

David Haberstich  
Assistant Curator of Photography  
Smithsonian Institution

I would appreciate any ideas that you can share on the topic of "Dumb Pictures". Please answer the questions and add any comments that you want to and return the survey to me in the enclosed envelope. Thank you,

Do "Dumb Pictures" interest you? *I don't really know, but I think so, sometimes.*

Describe the characteristics that apply to "Dumb Pictures".  
*This is my whole problem in responding, I can't really describe the subject in my mind. ~~Do to not~~ Do you mean "naive" photography?*

Why do "Dumb Pictures" (interest/ not interest) you?

?

Are "Dumb Pictures" related to "Art"?

?

Are they related to "Play"?

?

*Probably both, but again I don't know.*

I would like any comments that you can provide about who makes "Dumb Pictures", who likes them, what purposes they serve, what value they might have, what they look like, etc.

Thank you.



## Twenty Pictures.

These pictures were taken by me to illustrate the ideas that have been discussed. I could not work as I normally do, by looking through the viewfinder and composing a "picture" because what I want is the opposite of that. But not the exact opposite. Perhaps it would better be described as the contrary. All mistakes would not be included in one example because that would entail leaving the lens cap on and not exposing the film, followed by opening the back before rewinding thereby insuring no result. Only a few blunders per example would be effective.

Dumb pictures look like pictures. But they also look dumb. That depends on who is looking and who is showing. If these pictures were offered as being the first attempt by a mere child then they would be regarded as promising and could be used to point out possible improvements. If, however, they were submitted by a person claiming to be a "photographer" then they might be regarded as a good joke, or the result of a mixup with pictures by the village idiot, or they might just be discarded with the label of being dumb.



























Conclusion.



JAN • 78 •



# THESIS PROPOSAL

for the  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS DEGREE

at ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
College of Graphic Arts and Photography  
School of Photographic Arts and Science

## DUMB PICTURES an exploration

### PURPOSE:

To examine pictures that are called "dumb" to gain an understanding of their function and value, and to explore "dumb pictures" from historical, sociological and psychological perspectives.

*Dumb, a definition: adjective. 1. a general, non-technical term, involving personal taste, value, standards; 2. indicates no value, or minimal value; 3. lacking some usual property, characteristic, etc.; 4. related to kitch, absurdity, whimsy, eccentricity, humor, and puns; 5. involving ambiguity of intent. (Usually a derogatory term, but with definite positive use as an indication of rejection of current standards and styles in favor of ideas, images, or events that are outside current limits of acceptability of society in general.)*

submitted by:

April 1, 1974

Richard Margolis

### THESIS BOARD:

chief advisor	Robert Johnston, Dean, College of Fine and Applied Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology
associate advisors	John Pfahl, Assistant Professor, School of Photographic Arts and Science, Rochester Institute of Technology
	Robert Henning, Curator, Memorial Art Gallery, The University of Rochester

## SCOPE:

The thesis will be research oriented and will be written with pictures used as illustrations for the text.

I will examine dumb pictures to determine and explain why they are called dumb, who makes them and to whatever extent possible, what their intent was, how they relate to photography in general and my photography specifically.

I will develop a definition and description of dumb pictures that distinguishes between them and pictures that are not called dumb. I will present categories or groups of pictures that are dumb for various reasons and explain or describe the groups and the characteristics that apply.

The thesis will be primarily an exploration of dumb pictures, but will also include, as part of the research a review of the literature of photography, in order to locate any articles, books, or reviews that might deal with dumb pictures or other topics that relate. A bibliography will be included listing all pertinent materials.

I will discuss and correspond with people in the field of art history, criticism, photography and other areas, about how they use the term dumb, and what, for them, makes a picture dumb. Nathan Lyons has already offered a description and suggested that I write to Aaron Siskind because he uses the term often. I will contact Ralph Hattersley and ask for a description and examples of pictures that he calls dumb. Other leads will be sought and followed up with either personal contact or a letter. Notes and records will be kept and will be included as an appendix.

The recent writing in the areas of Pop Art and Conceptual Art, including that of Lawrence Alloway and Susan Sontag, should help, particularly with the problem of using normally negative terms as positive and in dealing with current trends and subject matter, and in relating it to the past. One aspect of dumb pictures that is intriguing is that some things are called dumb because they are not yet understood. Someone has described the reaction to Robert Frank's pictures at the George Eastman House, by the curatorial staff, as dismay, and the pictures were called "dumb." Changing values are very much a factor and will be explored and other examples sought.

The thesis will be 30 to 50 pages long, plus the illustrations and appendix, and will include B & W copy prints, slides and where possible, original prints.

In addition to the text and illustrations described above I will include, as another appendix, a group of 15 to 25 prints that I will do that relate to the concept of dumb pictures. The prints will be included in the bound thesis in order to broaden my involvement with the research, not to change it from the primary goal of being a statement based on research.

## PROCEDURES:

I will use the resources of the International Museum of Photography, at the George Eastman House, both as a picture source and as a source of articles and books. In addition I will discuss dumb pictures and the entire project with people who are involved in history, cataloging and collecting in order to get a professional, museum oriented approach.

Copy prints, copy slides and Xerox prints will be used to illustrate and organize the topics that I am exploring. They will be used to find groupings that have similar characteristics and as examples of the subjects that I want to discuss with those people that I interview. Original prints, postcards and photographs will be collected or borrowed, but copies will be used extensively in order to minimize the cost.

I will ask people to separate examples of dumb pictures and pictures that are not dumb in order to establish and test categories. I will look for and develop descriptions of the characteristics that distinguish dumb pictures and will also look for sub-groups that are dumb for various reasons. In this way I will be able to isolate various kinds of dumb pictures. Contact with historians and critics will be sought in order to obtain precise, or academic, or professional descriptions of dumb pictures. I will contact people who work in Rochester and will write to those who do not. When possible I will approach visiting people, such as Ralph Hattersley, and if necessary, follow up with a letter. All such notes and correspondence will be compiled and included as an appendix as an aid to further research.

The literature of photography and related criticism, art history, and other books and articles will be reviewed in order to locate articles that will be helpful or can be used as guides in organizing the project. The recent books on Kitch should be particularly helpful as an example of the organization of a similar subject. My goal is to present a statement on dumb pictures that describes and defines, and presents examples of the variations.

The inclusion of a group of my own pictures that are based on the dumb-picture research will add a dimension of depth and interaction that would otherwise be lacking. I will be reacting and responding to the research and to the people that I have contacted. The original prints that I make will be bound with the written text as an appendix.

There will not be a separate thesis report. The written thesis will include that function.



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