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INTRODUCTION

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This exhibition brings together six groups of photographs by the Californian Anthony Hernandez, made between 1970 and 1984. These works have been exhibited infrequently over the past 30 years and this many of them have not previously been brought together.

Hernandez was born in Los Angeles in 1947, the child of Mexican immigrants. He has lived in that city most of his life, though since 1991 he and his wife, Judith Freeman, spend part of each year in Idaho. He took up photography in the late 1960s out of a spontaneous artistic interest in the medium. He had no artistic training. He and his work have developed in dialogue with other photographers who have paid close attention to the city of Los Angeles and its surroundings — Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz and Garry Winogrand, as well as Ed Ruscha and, somewhat later, James Welling. Hernandez' earliest printed and exhibited pictures show the influence of Winogrand, who lived and worked in LA in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Hernandez had met him in New York in 1970 and they became friendly.

Though Winogrand, a native New Yorker, photographed many things, his approach is almost a definition of the mature æsthetic of street photography. He worked very quickly, very spontaneously, frequenting crowded thoroughfares like New York's Fifth Avenue, making hundreds of negatives in a session. When he photographed a press conference or people at a zoo, or other subjects not related to the street, he did it in a way informed by the need to react quickly to a barely-sensed pictorial possibility thrown up by a random configuration of people, objects, light, perspective and event.

Winogrand in turn was inspired by the examples of both Walker Evans and Robert Frank, whose *The Americans*, published in the United States in 1959, defined the look and the themes of street photography for the next thirty years. Winogrand extended Frank's approach, continuing his interest in marginal people, undistinguished places and random occurrences. Using wide-angle lenses, he developed a more extreme camera technique, one

Los Angeles Downtown #4, 1970 (detail)

that emphasized unstable angles, exaggerated tilts and fractured compositions. Compared to Winogrand's work, the pictures in *The Americans* look calm, measured and rectilinear.

The photographs in *The Americans* were made mostly during automobile trips across the United States in 1955 and 1956. Frank, who immigrated to America in 1947, was something of an outsider and photographed his encounters with people he didn't know in the places where he was able to encounter them — streets, parks, cafés, offices and at various public events. There are no pictures of private interiors in the book. Street photography confines itself to recording encounters and events as they appear in the public spaces that strangers share with each other. The strangers are citizens, for the most part, and therefore all have equal right to be present at the place in question. These spaces are occasionally organized in terms of a ceremony or special, structured event, like a convention or a funeral, but most often they are simply open for the various and unpredictable uses the citizenry can make of them. The street, as a corridor that permits movement between more closed areas, is the exemplary model of such spaces. In that corridor, with its often swiftly changing population, where encounters are exceedingly brief, combinations of people and objects form and dissolve in an instant, and that process of forming and dissolving, repeating endlessly but never the same twice, seemed to two or three generations of photographers to echo the nature of the medium as no other subject could.

Winogrand was heir to the achievements of Evans and Frank and can be said to have brought the trajectory of street photography to a turning point. In light of his work, it was difficult by around 1980 to imagine a way of continuing with the rapid-fire, off-kilter, rock n' roll style and the pointed ironies of his themes. By the time of his death in 1984, street photography had to find a way to become something else.

Hernandez' street photographs of the late 1960s and early 1970s are an erudite and accomplished version of the genre. A selection is included in the exhibition. Had Hernandez continued in this vein, these pictures would distinguish him as one of the most original of the photographers working in the Frank-Winogrand tradition.

However, in 1978, Hernandez went out into the streets of Los Angeles once more to make photographs, but he did so not with the standard 35mm Leica. This time, he used a Deardorff 5 x 7" field camera and tripod. He first made photographs at city bus stops for the group of pictures he calls *Public Transit Areas*.

Public transit in America is often identified with slowness and waiting. While there are fine public transit systems in many cities, the emphasis on the automobile has had its effect on both planning and public finance, with the result that bus services tend to be used by those who are unable or unwilling to travel by private car. In a city as committed

to the automobile as Los Angeles, users of city buses are commonly profiled as the poor, the elderly and the disadvantaged, and it is they who populate *Public Transit Areas*.

Hernandez deliberately slowed his movement down in making these pictures. Henri Cartier-Bresson, Lee Friedlander, as well as Winogrand — the whole corps of leading street photographers — emphasized their quickness, the agility with which they moved through spaces and crowds, and the cunning manœuvres that permitted them to capture their subjects by surprise. They tended to see themselves as predators, hunters, with an animal sense of their own practice.

Hernandez' method in making these pictures was to arrive at a bus stop, either by alighting from the bus stopping there or arriving on foot. He carried his equipment openly and set up his tripod without any attempt at concealment. Despite the large camera, he worked quickly, often making his photograph in a minute or two. Like most good photographers, he has some method of making himself nearly invisible, or at least not very interesting to others. This is a version of the idea of hiding something in plain view of those who might be looking for it. It is possible that one of the photographer's greatest advantages is the fact that taking a picture is such an uninteresting-looking activity. Almost anyone will stop to watch someone paint a sign or a mural; many people will stop and watch someone simply paint a wall a different colour. If someone is sawing a board, he will attract some attention. But someone taking a photograph will attract far less. Perhaps it is because the photographer always appears to be doing so little, just touching the shutter button or winding a little knob, that passersby tend to blank him out. Perhaps it is also because people who can clearly observe the photographer taking a picture cannot be sure that the photographer is taking their picture and most people are too inhibited or too preoccupied to ask about it. So, for some combination of these reasons, the photographer tends to fade away in public places unless he does something unusual or provocative.

Hernandez, who had been well-schooled in the classic street photographer's methods of making himself invisible, simply applied them again but in the slightly different situation created by the larger camera and tripod. The result is a new version of the photograph of the street — no longer strictly speaking a "street photograph." The effect of the large negative and the resulting larger print, with its precision and sharpness of detail, is to open out the space of the street. Classic street photography tends to concentrate on the figures, either individuals or clusters, and so the surrounding architecture and the sudden voids of space between large objects, like buildings, are less prominent. It is to a certain extent in the nature of the large negative to give a greater sense of grasping the voids between things and the relations between planes, for example, between the almost alarmingly white vertical

plane of the building to the right of *Public Transit Areas #12: Studio City?* and the horizontal of the street upon which the tripod has been placed. The human figures do not dominate these pictures, the way they do in 35mm street photography. Hernandez has developed a more studied, or rather, a more studious approach to the subject and space of the street.

This stark confrontation between the large camera, normally used for leisurely, stable practice, and the unpredictable, mobile situation into which Hernandez has placed it was a unique response to the normative status of the quick and oddly-balanced, or unbalanced, street photo æsthetic. It could be said that the confrontation was overdue, that by 1980 the entire generic structure of reportage-based art photography had aged and become routinized, and that a reworking of its fundamentals was in order. The work of fellow Americans Stephen Shore and Robert Adams, as well as the emergence of the students of Bernd and Hilla Becher in Europe, such as Thomas Struth or Andreas Gursky, occurred almost simultaneously with Hernandez' making of these pictures. The large-format camera transformed the approach to reportage, breaking away from the dominant interpretation that identified the art of photography with speed and the obsessive hunting for the spontaneous composition. This new reportage is closer to landscape or urbanscape photography, and derives from the 8 x 10" work of Walker Evans in the 1930s and, beyond that, to the example of Eugène Atget in the 1910s and 1920s.

After elaborating this approach and technique with the *Public Transit Areas* pictures, Hernandez soon developed other topics or, more accurately, extensions of the same topic, into other domains. He continues the use of the term "public area" to designate two of them — *Public Use Areas* and *Public Fishing Areas*. The third group of pictures is called *Automotive Landscapes*. The consistent naming of the series, or sub-series, of what appears to be a sustained project again relates his work to the methods of Atget, Evans or even August Sander. All three photographers were quite explicit about organizing their picture-making according to a set of categories. For Atget, it was "Old Paris," "Modern Times" or his other rubrics; for Sander, his taxonomic breakdown of the German people; for Evans it was the Baudelairean lists of motifs, for example, the one he outlined in his well-known (but unfinished) letter to a friend in 1934:

> *Architecture, American urban taste, commerce, small scale, large scale, the city atmosphere, the street smell, the hateful stuff, women's clubs, fake culture, bad education, religion in decay.*

This categorizing intent — the act of writing down in advance what might be meaningful to photograph, the organization of the daily activity of photography in order to realize a compendium of interrelated themes — is the fundamental means by which individual

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Public Use Areas #12: Studio City?, 1980

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photographs, all of which have to be considered as fragments, attain the level of meaning of some larger statement. This is one of the fundamental axes of the relationship between photography and literature.

The three other sets of Hernandez' pictures continue and extend the study of the daily lives of working and poor people. The very terms "public area" or "public facility" have come to suggest a place that is to be endured rather than enjoyed, like an uncomfortable waiting room or a lobby in which people have to line up for something. Those without some sort of private access, some kind of "in," without a private entrance to somewhere better, are those who are left to have this experience of the public domain.

Public Use Areas are mostly pictures of employees on their lunch breaks or other free moments in corporate plazas or other outdoor zones of what are evidently office buildings, many of them located along Wilshire Boulevard. The often solitary figures in Hernandez' plaza pictures have all had to improvise a shred of comfort and dignity in a setting that has not been designed to provide that. The pictures disclose the hardness of an unmodulated functional, commercial environment, a hardness that seems to reach into the depths of the American creed.

Public Fishing Areas can be seen as Hernandez' attempt at a pastoral mode, a contemplation of the persistent attempt to find a calming and healing dimension in whatever fragments of the natural environment might be left lying open. People do some afternoon fishing in a little creek that runs adjacent to huge overhead powerlines or hemmed in by other forms of construction. There is no irony in the serene absorption of the fisherfolk and their relaxed postures of calm enjoyment. What we see is their ability to recognize and engage in an apparent aimless gratification, in a context where that value has dropped to the bottom of the list of priorities. We see this calming dimension in the *Public Use Areas* pictures as well, where the office functionaries tend to gravitate to the scrap of concrete that provides the vestige of a seated comfort, or to the margin of a planted area meant primarily to be a barrier. There are almost no gestures of objection or rebellion in any of these series. Hernandez looks for and finds the ways in which people patiently scratch through the crust of their own social order.

The *Automotive Landscapes* show us life in the slow lane. By "landscape," Hernandez suggests that, by moving his camera somewhat away from the repair shops in this group, he is setting the whole phenomenon under a wide horizon. Some of the pictures are made from slightly high vantage points, likely the roof of a vehicle. We have the sense of peering into a rather secluded zone occupied by a particular group of people. These are the customers who have come to have an older vehicle repaired or who are looking to find an

inexpensive car to purchase, as well as the repairmen or salesmen who are doing business with them. The thematic relation of the *Automotive Landscapes* to the three sets of *Public Areas* pictures is almost too obvious, but it remains to be noted that, like the *Public Areas*, these are places of delay, waiting and stasis. There is nothing heavier and more static than a vehicle that will not run and nothing more useless for transport than a car you do not possess. These pictures show us the intervals when we do not have the power to move freely, when we have to come to a halt and wait for something to be resolved: a purchase, a repair, a rental. "Car culture" is at the heart of the North American economy and ethos. Most photography tends to deal with its seduction, force and speed or with its catastrophes and acres of detritus. The *Automotive Landscapes* discover an in-between space that has escaped many other observers — the nether zone where nearly worn-out and no-longer-desirable veteran vehicles come to find perhaps that last owner, the one who will, with the exemplary care and attention rooted in sheer need, extend the life of the car by another year or two, or five.

These four series of pictures occupied Hernandez almost exclusively for the first half of the 1980s. After 1985, he moved in other directions. In 1984, however, he returned to the street with his small format camera to make a series on Rodeo Drive, the street of expensive stores in Beverly Hills. Working in colour for the first time, he concentrated on wealthy, or apparently-wealthy, or momentarily-wealthy people as they drift between the palazzi of fashion designers and jewellers. It is not surprising that the pictures reveal the complacency, self-centeredness and possessiveness of the well-off, nor is it surprising that they show at the same time and often in the same picture, traces of unacknowledged doubt, dread, guilt and shame. By coincidence, Garry Winogrand was photographing in the same part of Los Angeles during the period Hernandez was shooting on Rodeo Drive, and the two photographers renewed their friendship. Sadly, Winogrand passed away, the victim of cancer, not many months later.

The *Rodeo Drive* pictures are the last sustained work Hernandez made in the classic small camera mode and they seem to stand once again in the cohort of Winogrand and the sensibility of the 1960s. They are a diffident, reticent group of pictures and hint that the photographer's vital interests are already elsewhere. And, indeed, Hernandez has become quite a different sort of photographer over the past twenty-four years. But, taken together with the other series, they are part of a body of work that is one of the most complex and substantial examples of the transformation of the relations between art photography and the process of reportage — a transformation that is at the centre of the development of the medium after 1970.