

letters

D.C. decade

To the editor:

Marguerite Welch's account of "Washington Photography in the Seventies: A Different Light" (April) was primarily an attack on the credibility of the exhibition as an overview of Washington photography sandwiched between a patronizing introduction and a more patronizing conclusion. It contained the classic ingredients of a hatchet job: argument by suggestion and innuendo; and confusion, contradictions, and distortions growing out of an attempt to make a case.

Welch was especially taken with whether or not the exhibition was "representative." We are informed that since taste was involved in the curatorial process, the exhibit was therefore "suspect." Questions of how taste was involved, how it was involved to the possible exclusion of other curatorial requirements such as intelligence, commitment to historical accuracy, respect for the artists' work and intentions, and how it necessarily followed that the exhibit was "suspect" are never answered, however. Instead, we are offered the outrageous and sophomoric notion that it "does seem curious that in a city such as Washington, which is over 50% black, there were only one or two photographs of black people in the show." I don't want to make it worse than Welch already thinks it is, but Washington is over 75% black, and there were only five photographs of black people in the show. Two were taken in Washington.

The reader may only assume Welch thinks the curator saw other photographs of black people and elected not to include them. If so, I invite her to name the photog-

raphers and the photographs. But to speak to Welch's "curiosity": blacks were not the subjects of white artists' cameras in the '70s, a situation I find neither curious nor necessarily lamentable.

Welch's next statement is more ludicrous than the first. "Nor were there any images reflecting political or social issues of any kind (with the possible exception of Arnold Kramer's photographs of old people in a local residential hotel)." She continues that only Linda Wheeler's and perhaps Paul Kennedy's pictures "made any reference to Washington geography." These are potentially interesting observations. Does she speculate on the meaning of these omissions in Washington photography? No. Such omissions are entered as evidence of a "suspiciously one-sided aesthetic." Aesthetics is here introduced into a discussion of subject matter, further confusing what is to become even more confused. The catalogued omissions are laid at the feet of guess who: The CURATOR. Again, I invite Welch to name the photographs omitted which dealt with the city or with what Welch would call a social and political issue. The occurrence of the latter is in doubt, however, since she apparently wouldn't recognize a social and political issue of she saw one. Which she did: feminism, self-transformation, and self-definition in the work of several women artists, a major political and social issue of the '70s. Welch calls it "feminist imagery," does not deal with its content, and uses it as the next prop in her charge of a "suspiciously one-sided aesthetic."

Having concluded her musings on subject matter, she moves on to the installation as evidence of a curatorial plot to have viewers believe Washington photography in the '70s was "primarily about feminist issues": the "first thing one confronted... was a towering group of nude self portraits by Mary Beth Edelson."

The Welch description of the location of the work of Mary Beth Edelson, Joyce Ten-neson, Este Gardner, and myself is grossly

distorted and self-serving. From the entrance to the gallery, the work of 15 artists was immediately visible—148 photographs in all. The visibility of the Edelson piece derived from its size, assertive attitude, and strong graphic tonalities. Any "confrontation" resulted from its power and the viewer's propensity to engage with it. It neither had nor needed the help of curatorial favoritism.

My own work was not "around the corner," but, in fact, in another room, in the gallery Welch later refers to as "one of the side galleries," which included "the strongest and most important work in the show." Her list of artists in that gallery included everyone except me. With all due respect to the critical problem Welch faced in not wanting to include my work with her assessment of the strongest and most important work, her distorted account of how the show was installed lays again at the feet of the curator responsibility which she herself should take as a writer.

Welch is perceptive and lucid in her descriptions of the work of Mark Power, Joe Cameron, and Steve Szabo, as she also is in describing the work of Arnold Kramer. But her attempt to make a point leads her immediately astray again when she suggests that Kramer's move from a "strongly introspective kind of vision reflects a possible emerging new attitude." Este Gardner's video series of herself and her mother cited earlier as part of the aforementioned curatorial plot and Patricia Molella's series of people wearing masks are now invoked as evidence of this emerging new trend. Welch declines to report that all three pieces were done in 1974, six years ago.

Writers reviewing regional exhibitions for a national audience have a special obligation to be honest and fair, since their readers will not have an opportunity to see the exhibition and judge for themselves. Honesty is not only a matter of accurate reporting, but of not presenting one's personal responses and opinions as fact and fact as opinion. Fairness is largely a matter

of stating one's assumptions and biases. Then we know who the writer is, and that makes all the difference. —Shirley True (Tacoma Park, Md.)

Marguerite Welch replies:

The fundamental issue in the role of the critic and the role of the curator is one of objectivity—to separate out one's own personal prejudices from the validity of the work itself. It is often a difficult task since we all come to artworks from our own unique context and point of view resulting from our cultural and personal experience. That is, in fact, why both curating and participating in the same exhibit may present special hazards. It is crucial to the advancement of art as a meaningful and significant human pursuit that these roles be performed with discipline, clarity, and openmindedness.

Media independents

To the editor:

In the April issue of *Afterimage* Marita Sturken misleadingly quoted me in the first column of her article "Media independents push for access." She begins by citing my final words, a rhetorical flourish—which was dramatic and not wholly fair. But, that's OK; I understand her wish to start the piece with a high note. But Sturken or your typesetter then changed my word "Republic" to merely "public," thus enervating the whole line. Did no one notice how strange it sounds for anyone, even one such as I, to declare that "if independents do not receive support, the public will crumble."

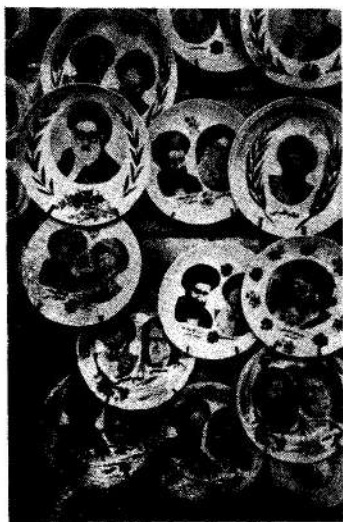
On a more positive note, I recently relocated to New York City to become the Executive Director of Anthology Film Archives. We have just purchased a building where we are going to build a museum of the cinema. This expansion of Anthology Film Archives will have, no doubt, substantial repercussions for all of the media community.

—Robert A. Haller
(Exec. director,
Anthology Film Archives)

CORRECTIONS

We neglected to say, in writing the captions for Ulrich Keller's article, "Ugo Mulas: Verifications," which appeared in the May issue of *Afterimage*, that the photographs were provided courtesy of Nina Mulas and Heribert Burkert.

Cover:



Gilles Peress, *Souvenir shop—Qom*, 1980, from "Iran: another view," p.16.

2 Letters

3 Eastman House approves new building, will expand board by Charles Hagen

4 Discovering pure cinema: avant-garde film in the '20s by Jan-Christopher Horak

8 'The Americans' and the Americans by John Brumfield

16 Iran: another view by Gilles Peress

26 Tourist photography by Richard Chalfen

30 Change and exchange: generative systems in education by Peter Thompson

34 REVIEWS

Abstracting artifacts
by Judith Gerber

Mass. art by Sandi Brayman

Exquisite corpse by Peter Mitchell

Received and noted

41 More stars in your summer

42 NEWS NOTES

SOURCES

43 Index to Afterimage, Volume 7

46 NOTICES

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