

**THE SURROGATE FIGURE** by JULIA BALLERINI

*What I see [in the Photograph] has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (operator or spectator); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred.—Roland Barthes, 1980<sup>1</sup>*

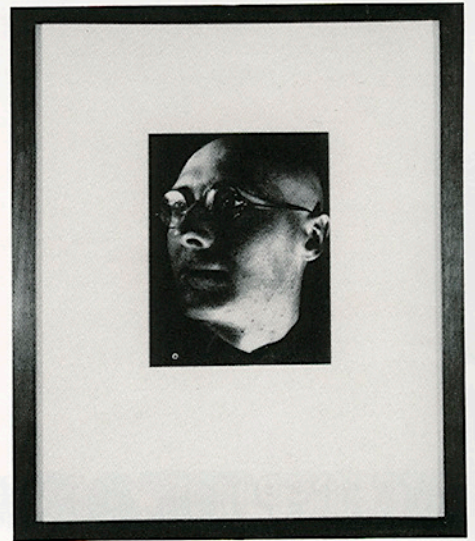
*We cannot open our eyes to things without distancing ourselves from what we seek. Separation is the price of vision. It is based on an absence from what it looks at but is made possible by its presence in the world in which that division takes place. . . . This paradox organizes vision. It is its first madness.—Michel de Certeau, 1983<sup>2</sup>*

*Its fascination founded on a separation from what is seen, the field of vision is also the field of desire.—Mary Kelly, 1984<sup>3</sup>*

The return of figuration to the forefront of the visual arts in Europe and the United States over the past two decades has seen a resurgence of the human figure in photography as well as in other media. Many photographs are straightforward, following a documentary tradition, and many are deliberately manipulated to *subvert* photography's direct contact with a living human figure. These work to distort or detour the direct traces of a human presence in front of the camera. They seem to operate against what has been considered the main source of the photograph's power to affect the viewer: "that tiny spark of accident, the here and now. . . [that has] burned through the person in the image with reality."<sup>4</sup> In such photographs the link between a body's surface and its image—the path of light from a subject to its representation—has been deflected, blocked, and/or distorted, and/or the living subject has been displaced by an inanimate substitute. It is these repositionings of the human subject/object, these surrogate/intercepted figures in photography, that are the focus of this exhibition.

The selected images are by six artists who, despite differences in formal technique, aesthetic, gender, race, social and personal histories, and ideologies, all make use of photographs to manufacture a distance from, or a break with, the animate body. Each of the works presented here can be viewed according to many intersecting formations. Any type of figuration takes place within a network of sociopolitical constructs, race and gender distinctions, perceptual concepts, and the many shapes of fantasy. This essay describes some of the ways these images intercept the viewer's access to a representation of the living figure in terms of the paradoxical and intimate *resistance* to alienation proposed by these strategies. Works by contemporary artists not in the exhibition are illustrated throughout the catalogue to give an idea of a range of variations on this theme and to suggest associations beyond the scope of this project.

Photographs that place the animate human body at a remove from the camera received much critical attention in the early 1980s.<sup>5</sup> In the New York critical mainstream were the *mise en scènes* incorporating dolls, manikins, and other figurines, as well as human actors in deliberately artificial poses, all arranged specifically to be photographed. Following the impetus of the sixties, in particular such influential works as Andy Warhol's photo silkscreens and Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* ("photography turns people into things and their images into a mass consumer product"<sup>6</sup>), the staged photographic scenarios of the early eighties were understood as working to identify and isolate (and implicitly criticize) the cultural clichés of conventional representation, as well as to unsettle a belief in the transparent "realism" of the photograph. The blatantly artificial photographic formations of the human figure that appeared more and more frequently in galleries and museums were seen as one aspect of a broader questioning of the conventions of representation. The artists who produced such images were described as "clinical diagnosticians [who] are content to more or less coolly dissect and interrogate the ways in which reality is constructed as representation," their strategies "those of intervention, enabling us to see our own complicity with the mythologies that oppress us."<sup>7</sup>



Sherrie Levine, (After Alexander Rodchenko II), 1987  
Photograph, 20x16"  
Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, NYC

Andy Warhol, Marilyn, 1964  
Acrylic and silkscreen enamel on canvas, 40x40"  
Courtesy Leo Castelli, NYC

The use of a heightened artificiality to distance the figure in photography was seen primarily as a ploy to destabilize existing imagery, revealing its contradictions, putting it off balance, and disturbing old positions. The work of Laurie Simmons, included here, has been written about extensively in such a context, often grouped with that of artists such as Ellen Brooks, Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince, Sarah Charlesworth, and Eileen Cowin.<sup>8</sup>

If much of the post-modernist photography that used strategies to distance the image of the human body was intended, or at least understood, as a commentary on the conventional workings of representation, an unsettling disturbance of the didactic was also sensed, although for the most part unexplored. While the writer Abigail Solomon-Godeau emphasized the role of the artist as “diagnostician,” she also noted “a palpable mood of menace and mystery, yearning and desire” in his/her photographs.<sup>9</sup> Critics such as Charles Hagen also commented on a “mood of sentimental yearning—the stereotypes are accepted, longed for, rather than challenged. Often these artists are not ‘clinical diagnosticians’ so much as unrequited lovers.”<sup>10</sup>

While differing in other respects, both these writers touched upon aspects of deconstructive, figurative photography that suggest the complexities of its otherwise obvious and often repetitious didacticism. The pictures prompted commentaries that suggested that the problem was not one of imagistic misrepresentation that could be resolved by simply removing the (patriarchal) facade. We all know that a photograph is not the “real thing” and that advertising is “false,” but such knowledge does not diminish the appeal of either. As early as 1944 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer commented on the peculiar logic of the triumph of advertising in the culture industry whereby “consumers feel compelled to buy and use products even though they see through them.”<sup>11</sup> Referring to this observation, Stuart Culver, in an essay on *The Wizard of Oz* (whose author, Frank Baum, was a window dresser), reminds us that when the dog Toto knocks down the Wizard’s screen, exposing and discrediting his ineffectual trickery, “one would expect the enlightened Ozites to take off their spectacles, to see things as they really are and to restore the agrarian distinction between real and projected values. Yet the green spectacles remain in place. . . . It seems that their power is perfected and not compromised by the scene of exposure and enlightenment.”<sup>12</sup>

Much like the Ozian scene of “exposure and enlightenment,” that of the deconstructive photography of the early eighties resulted in a realization of the seduction of “false” images as much as an educated dismantling of them. It is the maintaining of the green spectacles—the seduction of the relayed, mediated view—that has come to the forefront in much subsequent work. If our post-modern world can be known only through the representations that surround us (language as well as images, architecture, etc.) and can never be measured against a “real” because this real is itself constituted through the agency of representations—if the medium itself has become “intangible, diffuse and diffracted in the real”<sup>13</sup>—one response has been to give an apparently undifferentiated image/real world its full play.

By the mid-eighties many of the same artists whose agenda, at least as declared by their critics and supporters, had been primarily deconstructive began to picture openly distorted, grotesque, and sometimes violent subjects, outrageously exaggerated forms of the un-real. The change did not necessarily signal an abandonment of old positions nor a development of them in a linear sense, but more of a circular move away from a specific genre of representation (mass-media imagery) and a reaction to the allure of their fine-meshed networks through other forms. Also, work by artists who were previously little known have increasingly been exhibited; many of these artists’ manipulated photographic images have no direct reference to the workings of consumerism but rather an indirect one, in that all forms of desire are entangled and mobile.



Cindy Sherman, *untitled*, 1981  
Color photograph, 24x48"  
Courtesy Metro Pictures, NYC

Cindy Sherman, *untitled*, 1990  
Color photograph, 65x40"  
Courtesy Metro Pictures, NYC

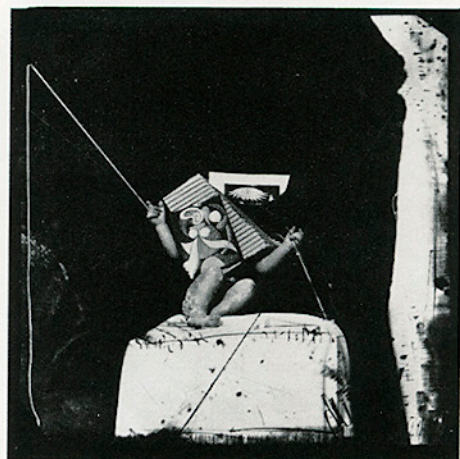
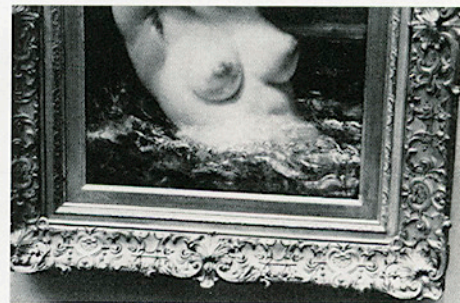
the longed-for but unobtainable goddess Aphrodite) came to life is a story of an overreaching of the boundaries between an image and the real and, in this respect, similar to the story of Narcissus as figured in Barrette's photographs.<sup>36</sup> This theme of transgression, of man's continued attempts to hold and to reanimate an inert illusion, runs throughout Ross's *Museology* series. The project began in museums of natural history and their storerooms, and in taxidermy workshops. Photographs of moth-eaten stuffed animals in storage spaces and unattended museums show them in various states of dusty decompose: modern-day *vanitas*. Other photographs of art museum storerooms show jumbled objects heaped in lifeless disorder, no longer on display. A recent series of photographs are of back-lot Hollywood warehouses where a stuffed horse, a gorilla suit, old hats, miniature airplanes, and other illusionistic accessories decompose in silent neglect, long past their roles as the furnishings of film spectacle.<sup>37</sup> Discarded cinema props, broken statues, embalmed animals and birds layered with ineffective bits of plastic and brown paper against an accumulated strata of dust, all speak of the ultimate impossibility of Pygmalion's gesture and of the disintegration of all display and spectacle that would make such a gesture.

Ross's work has suggested to at least one critic "the recent fashion for appropriating existing art as a way of expressing discouragement about the possibility of originality."<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the photographs that take us behind the scenes reveal the shabby ineffectiveness of all wizards' trickery. The Pygmalion myth of origin, according to which the artist (photographer) who produces an accurate likeness is not just a mere imitator but a creator in his own right, is revealed as, after all, only a sham. Ross shines a bright light on nature's undoings of man's attempts at originality, illuminating his ineffectiveness as a godlike figure who would bring inert matter to life. But the triptychs from the series exhibited here assert the continuation of Pygmalion's impossible desire. As he holds the child's camera, his positions and movements obscuring and reanimating the figures on the canvases in the dusky museums, Ross again performs the transgressive act in a series of images bracketed by his own displays of its futility.

*The Wizard of Oz* suggests that the artist of the window display never quite manages to domesticate the desire he provokes.<sup>39</sup> Ross's triptychs indicate this undomesticated longing for a display that can never be possessed, a longing that will not be tamed, however mediated, re-mediated, reconstructed, deconstructed, and reconfigured.

Since 1984 **SUSAN WIDES** has been photographing in all kinds of wax museums throughout the world. Her camera tilted at careening angles, its focus softened, she often intrudes inside the displays as well as remaining outside them. She retrieves for our attention figures from an antiquated medium, figures that inhabit the outposts of a public curiosity sated by electronic technologies of representation. As with all the work exhibited here, Wides's detour around a direct photographic representation of an animate figure brings to the work its particular history.

In the tradition of ancestor portraiture, wax figures functioned as quasi-equivalents, as stand-ins in lieu of the deceased. When cast directly from the human figure, waxworks bore the immediate imprints of their models, traces like those of a photograph. Their historical function was one of substitution, unlike painted or sculpted figures that are primarily representational. With the beginnings of public museums of waxworks in the eighteenth century, the earlier function of these figures as surrogate images of honored forefathers was modified. Waxworks became objects of curiosity, and their ranks were expanded to include well-known criminals and courtesans, freaks and fictional characters, as well as historical figures, both famous and infamous.



Diane Neumaier, *Metropolitan Tits* series, 1986-88  
Chromogenic color print, 20x26"  
Courtesy the artist

Joel-Peter Witkin, *Pygmalion*, 1982  
Gelatin silver print, ns, courtesy Pace/Mac Gill Gallery,  
NYC and Frankel Gallery, San Francisco

In the display cases of today's wax museums we find a seemingly unlimited range of characters congealed in their appropriate scenarios. In Wides's photographs here, we see Little Red Riding Hood turning her back on a grinning wolf. Shirley Temple smiles and curtsseys among a toy giraffe, a badger, and a llama. We identify Walt Disney and Pablo Picasso. Some of the characters resist identification, but because they are on display, we know they must be somebody who, for at least a brief moment, was set aside to be looked at—perhaps a movie star, a pope or bishop, a vanished American Indian, or even (in many museums) Jesus Christ himself, along with the celebrities, toys, freaks, and sinners.

History, culture, and ideology are presented as a conglomeration of disparate idols and curiosities. Myth, historical account, and tales from modern media are collapsed in the halls of the wax museum. In this immixture, absolute unreality is offered as real presence, and the “completely real” becomes identified with the “completely fake.”<sup>40</sup>

Such a collapse is not dependent on any extraordinary imitative powers of the figures themselves. As Wides notes, “even at their best, the wax works were never terribly convincing.”<sup>41</sup> For the most part, in fact, they are blatantly artificial, but their roles of substitution do not demand a faithful resemblance to the figures they replace. While the substitute must be manageable and “congruent,”<sup>42</sup> the act of substitution is one that often



bypasses resemblance. (If a child wishes to play “horse,” a stick will do.<sup>43</sup>) One of the conditions that defines the substitute as what it is or as something else is its context and, in the case of wax figures, its mode of display. Taken out of the spaces of display—as in one museum where a wax figure of a tourist leans on a guard rail—they become disturbing, uncanny figures. It is not that “we fear the lifelike because the dead substance of which the object is made may yet come alive,” as David Freedberg has suggested,<sup>44</sup> but rather that, out of their display cases, we cannot immediately distinguish them from ourselves. This eerie collapse of boundaries suggests the Baudrillardian nightmare that mediated, “unreal” figures will (or have already) become so “intangible, diffuse and diffracted in the real” that they no longer even distort the real.<sup>45</sup> The unease is that of not being able to spot the difference, not seeing the separations between them and us, not knowing where the trickery begins and ends.

Wides focuses on these conditions of substitutional display, on the blurring between the real and the fake that threatens their potential collapse. She avoids photographing most of the obvious artifacts of a museum setting, such as labels, lighting, barriers, and other viewers. Her odd croppings, disruptive angles, filmic lighting, and selective focus animate even the crudest, most artificial figures. Simultaneously Wides continually reminds us of

Susan Wides, *Hidden Agenda* from *Strange Love*, 1986  
Chromogenic color print, 30x30"  
Courtesy the artist

Susan Wides, *Masterpiece Theater* from *Model Citizens*,  
1987, chromogenic color print, 19x19"  
Courtesy the artist

Susan Wides, *Cry Wolf* from *Emerald City*, 1987  
Chromogenic color print, 30x30"  
Courtesy the artist

their status as incomplete copies, as replicas, as mere reflections of something else.

Much as hands form patterns of desired attachments throughout Ross's triptychs, in Wides's photographs reflections break up, detach, and reattach the figures from and to one another and from and to us. The brightly colored and illuminated effigies are faceted and multiplied by actual mirrors, by reflections from the mirrorlike plexiglass separating the displays, and, in her most recent work, by the mirroring effects of multiple exposures. The image in the large, ghostly mirror of *Who's The Fairest?* is ambivalent and illogical. It both reflects and contains the face of a woman who seems, at the same time, to emerge from the mirror. She holds yet another mirror. The photograph pictures the conditions of a skewered and alien reflexivity. In *Hidden Agenda* a large mirror reflects an otherwise unseen couple from the other side of the display, placing them where we might be, outside of the territory of the exhibit. But the mirror reflects the setting within the display as well, thus also repositioning the figures (and us) on the side of the objects to be viewed.

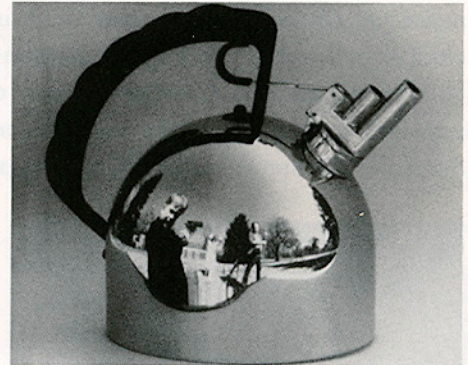
Wides never represents these wax figures as stable, upright totalities. They are never quite in the state of either objecthood or illusion. She continually performs multiple breaks in their integrity as either one or the other, often by implied as well as actual reflections. For example, Walt Disney is pictured surrounded by replicas of other multiple heads. The sculpted bust of Lincoln and its mirror reflection, the profile of a horse on the wall, and the half-drawn Mickey Mouse all compete with the materiality of Disney's wax effigy—which casts its own "real" shadow. Wides situates Disney and other surrogate figures according to a series of attachments and separations, setting them oscillating between illusion and obvious artifice. She takes away the distance between them and us and then doubles it back in the very same gesture.

The mirror in *Screwdriver* reflects the scene of a murder. Photographing inside the display, Wides has angled her camera in such a way that the head of the victim becomes attached to its reflection, a two-headed freak reminding us that the wax museum is also a *topoi* of horror. Within the distances allowed by the outdated medium of the wax copy, Wides plays and replays our attachments to, and separations from, the allure of the replica.

**Laurie Simmons's** pictures in this exhibition are of ventriloquists' dolls that she photographed at "Venthaven," a museum of ventriloquism in Kentucky. Like wax figures, ventriloquists' dummies are an outdated species. Many of those at Venthaven, in fact, date from before World War II, from a time of vaudeville, stage magicians, and sideshow freaks. They belong to a genre of popular entertainment that all but disappeared with the advent of color TV in the early '60s and the sensibility of a bygone era informs their faces and costumes. Photographed in heightened Cibachrome color, bright lighting further emphasizes their large heads atop their small, floppy bodies. Their eyes opened wide under raised brows, their cheeks rouged, and their grinning lips painted a deep red, theirs are the faces of an intensely alert—at times startled—lifelessness. They seem almost surprised by their inanimate condition.

The dummies are set against equally paradoxical backgrounds established by rear projections. Disjunctive, incongruous in scale, and unrelated, these backdrops are both shallow and distant, both impalpably near and illusionistically far. Their planes tilt, recede, and advance in nowhere spaces as alive and lifeless as the various characters they foreground.

*Doug and Eddy/Black and White Room* (1986) is one of the earliest images in this series. It



Mac Adams, *Post Modern Trilogy: Kettle*, 1987  
Photograph, 30x40"  
Courtesy the artist

Orshi Drozdik, *The Black Mirror*, 1988  
Photograph, anthracite, and wood, 102x64x13"  
Courtesy Tom Cuglilani Gallery, NYC