

FRAGMENTS FROM A COLLECTANEA: On the Recent Photography of Siegfried Halus

By William E. Parker, Published in *Aperture*, Number 82, 1979: pp. 34-53

IN MY RECENT WORK...

I photograph at night using either a 35mm rangefinder or, now, almost exclusively, a 2¼ x 2¼ twin-lens reflex camera on a tripod. I use a common constant-beam flashlight intermittently played upon nude figures who have been asked to explore with their bodies environments ranging from my own backyard in Connecticut to places in Canada, Colorado, New Mexico, and California. On occasion I may suggest locations for the figures or that certain basic movements occur, but the ultimately defined postures and actions are discovered by the models themselves. Each image is the result of one continuous exposure sometimes lasting up to six minutes or more.

I am often asked why I work this way now. The answer is another question, one I asked myself some years ago: Could it be that what I photograph is a door, an access to what my childhood visions and spiritual hungers once were?

Now . . . another door: compelling form from darkness with light, compelling natural human figures to be awakened by light —as if from a dream, as if by a dream, but most of all compelled by my belief in the promise of what might be there within the night.

S.H. (Andover, Connecticut, 1978)

SEQUENCE: THE NECESSARY TERMS

Mightlucere to shine . . . Skt rocate he shines] . . . something that makes vision possible
... a particular aspect or appearance presented to view ... a source or measure of light
considered by a person as necessary for his vision . . .

Morm ...[... fr. L forma, perh. modif. of Gk morpbe; perh. akin to Gk marmairein to flash,
sparkle ...]... a body esp. of a human being as distinguished (i) by external appearance .
.. FIGURE . . .

2epiphany . . . [Gk epiphaneia, lit., appearance, manifestation, fr. epiphanes coming to light, appearing . . .]

photography ... an art or process of producing a negative or positive image directly or indirectly on a sensitized surface by the action of light or other form of radiant energy . . .

flashlight... a flash of light or a light that flashes on and off: as ... a clear, sudden, or intermittent light used to signal . . . or illuminate ... a small battery-operated portable electric light.

continuum . . . [L, neut. of continuus, fr. continere to hold together ...]... something of which no distinction of content can be affirmed except by reference to something else (as duration and extension which are capable of supporting distinctions only by reference to . . . such relations as those of now to then, here to there, before to after) ... an identity of substance uniting discrete parts; broadly CONTINUITY . . .

Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1969)

IN MY RECENT WORK...

the use of the flashlight and a lengthy exposure offers possibilities for vision and introspection, for sight and insight, never available to me before. Yet these possibilities never force a collapse of subject identification, nor a strict determination of what might occur before the camera or appear in the final print. The splitsecond definition of reality apparent in my earlier work is no longer meaningful. Now, a new experience of reality occurs, a type of extended anticipation and realization of the subject. From the beginning, each image in the flashlight series seemed to appear like a thought I had vaguely felt many times, a thought that finally forced its way to the surface of consciousness so that I could act on it and deliver it from darkness.

S.H. (Andover, Connecticut, 1977)

ON PROCESS AS A SYMBOLIC QUEST

In Halus's photographs the most persistently celebrated subject is the human figure. The nude human form has always attracted his attention, but never so obsessively as in his flashlight photographs, begun in the spring of 1976. These recent photographs reflect the photographer's intensifying quest to realize the potentials of a symbolist pictorial dialect, a dialect declared by the processes of his camerawork.

Halus's recent images suggest ritualistic dramas in which male and female nudes literally become apparent, illuminated in time, as if nocturnal visitants within a mysteriously oneiric pictorial space. Originally, the figures are enveloped by the epidermal blackness of night. Hidden, undifferentiated, awaiting illumination before the opened lens of his camera, on signal from the photographer they begin to seek or find their own postures and movements. Over minutes of time, the figures are cumulatively or multiply reconstituted on the film plane, their varied postures, positions, traces of their movement selectively defined by the darting light from a common flashlight directed by the photographer over the surfaces of their bodies. Delivered from exact previsualization, defined by gradual evolution during extended time exposures, Halus's recent images hold the history of his actions and the evolved displays of the figures simultaneously. The images reveal a continuum of identifications as if occurrent at once. Unlike the typical photograph, which fixes a fractional moment of temporal appearance, unlike cinematography, which fixes many such moments in an extended continuum forcing theme to dominate over appearance, Halus's images bring both immediate fact and continuous events to stilled recognition. Moments of process gained and held become the meaning of the photographs.

Halus's images effect a symbolic identity naturally inherent in the very process of their manifestation. Night, its black opacity, is deemed representatively maternal and germinant, a primogenial matrix harboring physical possibilities. Light, felt by the photographer to be a generative force, is projected into the night, delivering to visibility human and environmental forms. The photographer, echoing his earlier activity as a sculptor, carves the figures from the darkness with his hand-held light. The nude figures, occasionally attendant animals, organic and inorganic fragments of the natural world, vague architectural or fabric precincts, are subtracted from what he terms the incubative night, invited to sight by illumination. Primordial genesis is symbolically reenacted.

These images affirm a unique collaboration between photographer and subject: Halus choosing what to illuminate, what to deliver from darkness, thereby bringing to visibility not only the enigmatic gestural presences of the figures but the very tracks of his pictorial distinctions and emotional investments; the models discovering their extemporaneous rites of appearance or action defined by light within the precincts surveyed by the camera. Each photograph is an accumulation of usually imperceptible aspects of being in time, each image revealing the rhythmic, ceremonial, and ritualistic nature of continuity itself, vital life gathered for vision and contemplation.

Whether presented as *nuditas virtualis* or *nuditas criminalis*, as symbolic of the sacred or the profane, of spiritual aspiration or of carnal desire; whether differentiated in gender or androgynous; whether idealized or individualized, the subject of the nude always summons universally shared empathies. In Halus's flashlight photographs there is something talismanic, something especially magical evoked by the figures and their identification; something that conjures an experience of the numinous when we are struck by the fact that these figures were once upon a time in fact there and here, then and now, before and after, having been and now being, having meant and now meaning exactly what is beheld.

Adapted from a commentary by William Parker in Siegfried Halus, *Photographs/ Perspective 1964-1977*, The New Britain Museum; of American Art (New Britain, Connecticut, 1977)-

IN MY RECENT WORK...

I seek to affirm the natural state of human form, to define images of the body at ease in the context of nudity.

The human figure, particularly the nude, has always been important in my work. Before I became committed to photography in 1966, I studied sculpture, first apprenticing with my father, a liturgical sculptor, and later at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Hartford Art School. I was initially challenged by Barlach's expressive treatment of the human form, his ability to embody elementary emotions such as anger, grief, supplication, or fear through just the stance or gesture of a figure. Although not inclined to share his formal approach, psychologically I came to admire Brancusi's use of abstract figurative forms as signs of potentiality and fundamental energy. In time, Manzu's narrative reliefs with their intense humanistic concerns became lessons. But, above all, I always felt most strongly influenced by Rodin— by the generative force and elemental sensuousness of his figures; his uninhibited presentation of the male nude; the way light behaved in reflecting from the surfaces of his sculpture; the subtle narrative aspect of figurative tensions and continuities in his work. As if central to my life, most of my work in sculpture was in response to the human form, and this response continued and remains primary in my photography.

For me, the most insistent sign of matter and energy is the body, its eternally interesting forms and gestural potentials. It has always amazed me how so many people consider the naked body offensive to sight when it is so obviously the most natural and fundamental proof of our individual presence in this world. I become suspicious in the

face of such offense. It is as if clothes were thought of as a control mechanism to deny erotic impulses or that to see the naked body is a transgression of sorts, a fall into lust, a glance at original sin.

The figures in my work are those of persons who are disinterested in principles of shame, of friends who share my interest in confronting pictorial revelations. Together, we discover how the body and light, how the body and its actions in time reappear in photographic images, images that never seem inventions, illusions, or fantasies, but facts—affirmations of physicality that may well touch the spirit in ways unforeseen.

S.H. (Andover, Connecticut, 1978)

ON THE NAKED AND THE NUDE (A DEBATE)

To be naked is to be oneself.

To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display.

To be naked is to be without disguise.

To be on display is to have the surface of one's own skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded. The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress.

JOHN BERGER, from Essay 3 in *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin Books, New York, 1977)

...To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes. ...the nude is not the subject of art, but a form of art. ...In the history of art, the subjects that men have chosen as nuclei, so to say, of their sense of order have often been in themselves unimportant. ...But the human body, as a nucleus, is rich in associations, and when it is turned into art these associations are not entirely lost. ...it can be made expressive of a far wider and more civilizing experience. It is ourselves and arouses memories of all the things we wish to do with ourselves; and first of all we wish to perpetuate ourselves. ...Apart from

biological needs, there are other branches of human experiences of which the naked body provides a vivid reminder, harmony, energy, ecstasy, humility, pathos. . . .

. . . modern art shows even more explicitly than the art of the past that the nude does not simply represent the body, but relates it, by analogy, to all structures that have become part of our imaginative experience. . . . The Greeks perfected the nude in order that man might feel like a god, and in a sense this is still its function, for although we no longer suppose that God is a beautiful man, we still feel close to divinity in those flashes of self-identification when, through our own bodies, we seem to be aware of a universal order.

KENNETH CLARK, from *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (Doubleday & Company, New York, 1956)

THE BODY AND GESTURE

I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is enough,

To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,

To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough...

I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea.

The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is sacred,

No matter who it is, it is sacred...

Each has his or her place in the procession_____

Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight, and he or she has no right to a sight?

All attitudes, all the shapeliness, all the belongings of my or your body or of any one's body, male or female...

O1 say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul,

O 7 say now these are the soul!

WALT WHITMAN, from "I Sing the Body Electric," [in the Children of Adam poems,] Leaves of Grass (G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York & London, 1902)

The primordial medium of all expression is the body. With every movement the body not only can but must express; as it is the seat of an existence, each of its poses. . . is always significant. . . the gesture is always an effort to adapt oneself to the situation and the situation to oneself, or better, to bring both together in a meaningful, manageable configuration. . . . Whenever the body moves to take an attitude, a meaning is incarnated in matter, a sense inscribed in things. . . .

. . . the primordial human gesture contains in seed all the characteristics of more sophisticated acts of expression. It inscribes itself through the body immediately into the "stuff" of the world, where it becomes a kind of line of force or of polarization that is significant.

Its special significance—the transcendental unity of two moments achieved in the opposition of subject and situation —radiates beyond itself and suggests innumerable possible variations of gestures or reaches and of objects desirable or undesirable, obtainable or presently unobtainable. It incarnates the individual's attitude of the moment without freezing him or exhausting his personality and possibilities in the process; it summarizes his situation without pretending finally to explain the world on which it is meant to be only a momentary hold and into which it opens many possible new perspectives.

. . . the animal lacks man's ability to withdraw from his own most fundamental, biological montages and to know them as "his." The human being can substitute one sense structure achieved through these montages for another seen as equivalent; he perceives that both incarnate his presence in the world equally fully, although in different modes, instead of simply jumping like the animal from one field of action to the next, making no connections between one configuration and the next.

This superiority of human expression, the ability to count on past experience without becoming “stuck” in it as animals get stuck in their instincts, must originate in a capacity to pull out of the absolute present into, as Heidegger says, *noch nicht*—a “not yet”—from which the present can be viewed as present and the typical as typical. The human gesture uses the body’s natural biological dispositions to express something more than this basic biological givenness: by his *recul* into the merely intended, man manages a projection in both directions and thus “on the spot,” making of his own instruments a past to be used in extending command over the future. This paradoxical expression—a *recul* (backward) into the future (normally thought of as ahead)—is an attempt to render the miraculous nature of consciousness, of the originaive moment in which time is ever newly founded and differentiated into its extases past and future. This phenomenon, which Merleau-Ponty describes in terms of “fission of Being,” is the fulgurating, radiating power through which individuals exist, Being comes to be, and sense is born.

THOMAS LANGAN, from Merleau-Ponty’s *Critique of Reason* (Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1966)

IN MY RECENT WORK...

the night is like a black slate upon which I cast light to reveal and praise the vast promise of forms hidden within its shapeless dark. Light is magical, the flashlight like a baton directing and orchestrating phenomena. I have begun to understand the lyrical nature of light, like visual poetry edging its way into the world of darkness.

S.H. (Andover, Connecticut, 1978)

ON SEEING THE INTENDED

Good Sir,

It was such an overwhelming feeling when I was called to the Pinegowrie Postmaster to receive a packet from yourself—I was so pleased to finally hear from you. Thank you. . . .

For many years past I have had a special interest in photography but never have been able to experience the skill. Photographic equipment and manuals et cetera are all imported into our land and as a result, very highly priced. Besides, since my military

service, I have been studying to become a teacher and earn no salary through these years. However, when the free lecture time comes up I often take myself off down to a news agency where a good selection of international periodicals is stocked. It was there where I first discovered some of your superb work published in Photography Annual 1977. I am truly so overwhelmed to have had such a kind reply from yourself following my brief note of appreciation for your work. . . . I guess that I am just a very plain human being with no special abilities other than a vivid imagination and appreciation of the subtleties and wonders of the environment. I believe the term is a “romantic”—I gain such pleasure and fulfilling feelings from Nature, and although people are so often unreliable, they too, are so important to me. I enjoyed a most ecstatic holiday in my last vacation period when I went on one of our land’s many hiking trails (from Sabie to Graskop in the east sector of my province). I walked 48 miles in 3 days in beautiful swaying forests and windswept mountaintops where the silence seems to buzz in one’s ears. It was so superb to be in a seeming timelessness and to be surrounded only by the truth of nature. At times like that my thoughts are so viable and imaginative. I tend to look at the shapes in things, conjure up my own interpretations and emerge into my own little world. That is, I think, why I was so immediately taken up by your recent photography. If you do not mind my interpretation, I appreciate the manner in which you have returned the human body to its natural form, unclothed, and displayed much of the subtlety it can suggest through the postures it can assume. I have very great respect for the perfect shape of the human being. One of my most pleasurable pastimes is to see how people are expressive of their feelings through their physical and facial conduct. Your work seems so natural yet there is an overwhelming theme in each picture. For one like myself who can look at one of your unique photographs and imagine countless meanings it is truly exciting. For myself, a book of photography is like an anthology of Poetry. . .

GARETH BEHREND, from a letter to Halus (Republic of South Africa, 1977)

REFLECTIONS

THE POETIC MOMENT

. . . It is so that he can construct a complex moment and concentrate into that moment many simultaneities that the poet destroys the simple continuity of sequential time.

Every real poem, then, contains the element of time stopped, time which does not obey the meter, time which we shall call vertical to distinguish it from ordinary time which sweeps past horizontally along with the wind and the waters of the stream. . . . the end is

the stabilized moment in which simultaneities, by ranging themselves in order, prove that the poetic moment possesses metaphysical perspective.

The poetic moment is thus of necessity complex: it excites and proves, it invites and consoles, it is both astonishing and familiar... At the very least the poetic moment is the awareness of an ambivalence. But it is more than that because this ambivalence has been provoked, is something active, dynamic. . . . On a more intuitive level, the well-knit ambivalence can be identified by its temporal character: we have here neither the spirited, masculine time that thrusts forward and overcomes, nor the gentle, submissive time that weeps and regrets, but the androgynous moment. . . . Is it still time, though—this plurality of contradictory events within a single moment? Yes, because the accumulated simultaneities are arranged in order. They give that moment dimension because they give it internal order. Time is order and nothing but order. And all order is time. Consequently the order of ambivalence in the moment is time.

THE PHOTOGRAPHED MOMENT

. . . revelation has the greatest potentiality in photography and that is probably why these things happened as they did during the photographic session in Colorado. . . .

Anyone involved with photographic processes, regardless of when or where that involvement occurs or how sophisticated that involvement may be, must be aware of light and time. Whether using a light meter, setting shutter speeds and determining f-stops, exposing photographic film or paper, or calculating length of development, time in relationship to light is the very first point of departure.

I waited for the flashlight to reveal me, following it with my eyes, anticipating its contact. I thought of the chemistry of photography and of the darkroom, and of how all things in life that are to be born and to grow make a pilgrimage out of darkness. As I assumed various positions, I had time to let my mind wander over these ideas. But from that mental wandering grew a realization so fresh and startling that I have since struggled to get it down on paper in cohesive form: I became convinced that certain transforming energies were at work in that photographic process we shared together. Although technically the experience was subject to the laws of time, I felt that as a model, as a light-reflecting physical form, I entered another altogether different realm of being in which those energies liberated me from time in the usual sense. The creative energies at work were not subject to the laws of time and space as I knew them; life and the duration of life could no longer be dealt with in the context of what was measured by my wristwatch. I had a sense of leaving my body, of stepping back and observing us at

work. I felt my existence outside of time and entered another dimension, another state of time that the resultant photographs depict.

. . .Here then are the three orders of successive experience capable of liberating the person imprisoned in horizontal time:

1. getting used to not referring one's own time to other people's time—breaking the social framework of time;
2. getting used to not referring one's own time to the time of things—breaking the phenomenal framework of time;
3. getting used—this is the hardest—to not referring one's own time to the time of life—to no longer knowing whether one's heart is beating or whether one's happiness is burgeoning—i.e., breaking the vital framework of time.

Then and only then does a person reach the autosynchronous reference point at the center of himself, stripped of all peripheral life. Suddenly all commonplace horizontality disappears. Time no longer flows. It gushes.

. . .For me, the entire process seemed to offer the direct experience of altered states of existence, transforming usually contemplative and oft unfathomable recognitions of multiconsciousness, dream, sacred image, prayer, and psychic projection into a psychically and physically actualized participatory experience. The sometimes strenuous positions I assumed were awkward at first, even painful, but became in time vehicles for entry into the realized actuality of such experience; discomfort gradually dissolved. In its place was an alert calmness, a meditative yet active sense of peace, a direct glimpse of the never before completely realized possibilities of the world and my being within it. . . .My every sense perception became acute. In a flash there occurred an awareness of the temperature of my body and of the bodies of others present, the inner functioning of vital organs, respiration, the exact positions and relative distances of the other models and, even though I could not see such, the movement of the stars overhead, the smell of damp juniper. . . .Of all the comments that I have received when showing the prints you sent me. . .one stands out in my mind as the most significant. Someone said: "You know, these photographs are transtemp or all" This comment helped pinpoint my understanding of why the experience of being defined by your directed light, by the camera recording my various stations and positions, perhaps even revealing or confirming my anticipatory states of mind, so strongly identified my sense of

time during the session—that feeling of a melting of distinctions between past, present, and future.

. . .Night and light are evoked not for the sake of their extent or their infiniteness but for the sake of their unity. Night is not a particular space. It is a threat of eternity. Night and light are immobile moments of darkness or brightness. . . . The poetic moment is at its most complete in the line in which one can unite the immensities of both day and night. . . .The poet is thus the natural guide for the metaphysician who wishes to understand all the powers of instantaneous connections. . .without allowing himself to be split by the clumsy philosophical duality of subject and object or balked by the dualism of selfishness and duty. The poet operates a subtler dialectic. He reveals in the same moment both the solidarity of form and person. He proves that form is person and person is form. Poetry. . . has no interest in that which shatters and that which dissolves, in time-as-duration that dissipates echoes. It seeks the moment. It needs nothing but the moment. It creates the moment. . . .There is a pure dynamism of pure poetry. It is that which develops vertically in the time of forms and persons.

GASTON BACHELARD, from “The Poetic Moment and the Metaphysical Moment,” *The Right to Dream* (Grossman Publishers, New York, 1971)

. . .When I would get up and move to another location I felt a rhythm to my motion. If you remember, I often would move on ahead of the other models and explore the immediate area we were to work in. . . .I had the bizarre sensation of being already there, already positioned in that area, perhaps perched in a tree or lying obscurely within a rock formation. It was not only that the new space in which we were to work seemed to direct me as to where I should be, what I should do, which way to move, behave, or become defined, but rather that I was moving ahead to actually see how I was already there! I had only to enter my predetermined existence.

There is a beautiful sequence in *Annie Hall* where Keaton and Allen are in bed and she wants to smoke a joint. She leaves her body and sits down in a chair next to the bed and watches herself and Allen. Do you remember? This happened to me in reverse. I could see myself in the same way, but instead of leaving myself I entered myself. Strangely, I feel that we were all compelled to do what we did. . . .

This notion of us being compelled to do what we did is perhaps the most difficult to describe. . . .I am trying to suggest that during this particular session, for me and I think for all of us, what we did was something that we had to do because we came into contact with a highly activating creative force that constantly gravitates toward a

receptive medium. We and your photography were that medium. It was Yeats who asked: How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Adapted from a commentary by Edward Krayner in a letter to Halus (San Francisco, October 30, 1977)

PERMANENT TESTAMENTS

What calls forth the forging material, the substance from which my very act of living draws its continuance? My photography, the pleasure of being at the center of a creative encounter, the insistence of vision—these are forces I do not dare deny nor imagine doing so. The world that I encounter is an endless stream of images touching me too deeply to deny.

I remember once when a throw of the coins offered an affirmation. A changing line revealed a new hexagram, from HI to H, 22. Pi/Grace to 30. Li/The Clinging, Fire. What I then only felt, I now so surely know. We are reenacting ancient patterns.

S.H. (Andover, Connecticut, 1978)

30. Li /The Clinging, Fire

. . .The trigram Li means. . .“brightness”. . . .Li stands for nature in its radiance.

THE JUDGMENT

THE CLINGING. Perseverance furthers.

It brings success. . .

What is dark clings to what is light and so enhances the brightness of the latter. . . .Everything that gives light is dependent on something to which it clings, in order that it may continue to shine. . . .

THE IMAGE

That which is bright rises twice:

The image of FIRE.

Thus the great man, by perpetuating this brightness, Illumines the four quarters of the world.

. . .the two trigrams. . .represent. . .the function of light with respect to time. The great man continues the work of nature in the human world. . .he causes the light to spread farther and farther and to penetrate the nature of man ever more deeply.

From The I Ching or Book of Changes (The Richard Wilhelm Translation, Bollingen Series XIX, Princeton University Press, 1967)