

Introduction to a portfolio of ten photographs by Murray Riss
Produced at the Center for Photographic Studies, Louisville, Kentucky, 1975.

Murray Riss has stated that “his photographs ask questions—not academic questions, but those that try to ascertain the proximity between photographic possibilities and the turmoil in my mind.” Such words admit an involvement in the primordial and persistent conflict between the real and the imagined, his share in the conflict act has always perplexed important image makers. His statement also declares a prime interest in discovering the potential signals to belief wallowing in the overlappingness of the real and the imagined, a need to discover the meaning of their conduction in the possibility of invention become photographic fact.

Avoiding extreme alterational violence, Riss, nonetheless, arrests and relocates, even arranges, and on occasion transforms, the original occupiers of his images so the persons, things, or events will insinuate presences that are convincing as simulacra of reality and, at the same time, as confirmations of the inventive acts of mind. Constantly seeking and affirming relational possibilities that at once deny and satisfy visual expectations, he and his photographs challenge conventions of perception typically brought to bear in an encounter with photographic images: the *what-who-where-when-why* issues of a familiar past-tense world so naggingly present in the midst of any attentive or questioning response to the mnemonic trace of the photograph. Paradoxically, as the world goes and becomes, his defined relationships seem both credible and incredible, his photographs behaving as visual fictions that influence belief. Such fictions appear convincingly natural to our eyes and mind despite the obvious fabrication of subject identities and behaviors; such fictions are more often than not splendid lies that seem to become the truth.

To see a Riss photograph, particularly those in this portfolio, is to know things that simultaneously affirm and deny reality as we usually perceive it to be. Despite such visual ambiguity, we accept his prevarications, his substantiation of visual pretexts in which the illusional and allusion become *what are* because of our conditioned will to believe in the presentations of photographs. Murray’s photographic fictions do not declare fidelity to the world we know and understand, much less the world we often dismiss as inconsequential. Instead, his photographs represent readjustments of persons, things, and events in order that we might see and understand relationships between the world and projections of the mind as questions rather than as answers. Such readjustments and the questions prompted by their issue are always proleptic, photographic postulates in which possibilities and impossibilities conjoin and seem presently occurrent, born in a convincing matrix of light and silver.

Proleptically, *anticipatively*, Riss presents us with images that make us believe we are seeing things that are not typically present. Disturbing as questions and satisfying as possibilities, if not as answers, his photographs make us believe in facts or events of a visionary order that, nonetheless, seem indeed to be the case. If we are beguiled into sharing his privileged consciousness which accepts photographic fictions as *de facto* truths, we also discover his mental turmoil not to be a private matter. His psychic predicament is ours as well, particularly when we have to face not only what the world has *been*, but what his photography fashions the world to conceivably *include* or *be*. And if we dare to suspend disbelief, to go out of our rational, differentiating mind and beyond our more familiar world experience in the engagement of his proleptic images, reward abounds: in viewing a Riss photograph and in engaging its content, we see and we know, as if now accomplished and as if now already existing, the

representation or the assumption of relationships between persons, things, and events that seem regained from the past or, gained from the future, their impossibility having become a credible possibility, as if magically and realistically obtained.

The proleptically oriented work of art has ancient roots, realized most stunningly in the Eyckian vision of the fifteenth-century, made manifest in images which paradigmatically suggest, even predict, the atomistic clarity of photography. But the belief in prolepsis, the admission of impossible things by way of anticipation, to states that seem matters of fact, lay fallow for centuries after the “Late Gothic” period, awaiting the medium of photography to reaffirm its force. The concept of *equivalence*, in itself an ancient concern active long prior to Stieglitz and his subsequent devotees, relates to prolepsis, but all-too-often *equivalence* as a concept seems bent on conceiving photographic manifestations of the world as “a function, an experience, not a thing” as Minor White would have it. Thus mind and its symbolical urgencies dismissed the primarily identifiable *objectness* of things and sought transcendence “into a specific and known feeling, state or place” within the psychomatic secrets of the confessional heart and the spiritualizing loins of the mind. In time, a resurgence of conceiving the function of the photograph as a necessary insigne of reality, and the potentials of that reality, became both an extension of the concept of *equivalence* and, at the same time, its denial. Some began to feel that photographs *are* and *include* things in themselves or at least persuade us to believe such to be so; their objectness, in fact and by reference, the one proof that the “coherence of the world past,” its “completeness without me,” as Stanley Cavell has stated, may also be denied. No longer *equivalence*, that felt form, that ultimate affirmation of mind forgetting the world; no longer the concern with nature’s survival, but the expressed need to insistently envision that object-photograph which makes things past and present and future coalesce; which merges the objective and the subjective conditions of mind and matter, perceiving them both as operations of a permanently affective now. As early as 1968, Murray Riss stated that “photography is the vehicle of my imagination. But as part of the use of any medium, one must examine its form—vocabulary and method of function, then *accept, change or invent* those aspects that will specifically be suitable to oneself.” Clearly, Riss neither articulated a need to transfer the world exclusively to feeling nor to affirm a world excluding himself, but ultimately, to accept, change, or invent a world, always as an affirmation of possibilities both in the world and in himself suitable for the attentions of camerawork.

J.H. Kent, a nineteenth-century photographer is quoted in *Wilson’s Photographic* of 1881, to state: “Now what we want, good fellows, is less reality and more idealism; less completeness and more suggestions; less of the actual and more inference in our work.” An even more remote voice, the “authority” Charles Akers, states that “Any good photographic artist will be found to have his ideal, just as any good painter or sculptor— an ideal towards which he is striving, and from which he is always remote...the impossible tempts him...And no one knows better than he that he cannot rely on his instruments, that cameras and chemicals are but means of growth; that for all finer results he must depend upon himself.” Neither searching for less reality and more idealism, nor an ideal from which he is always remote; Riss is indeed tempted by the impossible, dependent upon himself to effect a credible world defined in a photography that “still depends on subject matter and one’s awareness of it ... where each photograph is a moment, derived from an experience, stemming in a happening and resulting in a picture that is significant to me and an attempt to reach someone else.” His subject matter has been extended since his statements of 1968, and indeed many of his recent works include multiple moments in their definition of time and place. But the subjects continue to be his

family and his friends, his adopted environments in New York, Providence, and Memphis, those places where the intimate dramas of his photographs were enacted; where wife and children become, in fact, both what they are and what they are not; where their possibilities for identification and for the purposes of meaning are explored. Consider the photographs herein.

In Memphis, flanking a street with accumulated debris, a reticulated sidewalk in an “established” but decaying neighborhood, is visited by an accordion-folded newspaper broadsheet bearing the mimetic glitter of a new edition from General Motors, occupied by an arms-folded girl at rest, as if the haughty, yet indifferent commanders of a mechanical hulk. Her eyes seem to survey the vacuity of the environment; her presence maintains a promise of affluence — a picture within a picture articulating the typically American, obscene auto-dream; the depiction of a banal prop in an utterly empty world. Girls from Harper’s Bizarre and Vogue, their magazine-page semblances crushed and wrinkled to become grotesques, their disembodied freak-faces pinned to leafy branches, their cosmetic allure turned to offensive flowers. Both of these initial images are impressive signs of the persistence of proleptic identification within a slipping culture and of the fleeting import of its promises.

Inverted heart-shaped leaves are deliberately arranged to configure their own identity with a realized grandness of scale, their hovering mother-leaf gestalt emergent from their collective placement; a sign not of what things are but what things can become when their original randomness is disturbed by an ordering touch and sensitive intention. The fragile unit, the tender shape, one placed near to another, exerts a new possibility of identification, a new mode of recognition in which the impossible seems so natural and expected, as if the photographer and even the leaf anticipated the inevitability of this new design within the natural world.

The image of Elly — wife, every pregnant woman — turns to our view, her gravid belly held by her hand, her expression neutral, enigmatic, internalized. Behind her, concealed by a curtain imprinted with gigantic cabbage-roses, the daughter stands with her arms and hands cupped against her stomach, a rose pulled taut against its forced protuberance, less an imitation of the mother than a visible anticipation by the daughter of her own potential for ripeness in time.

More emphatically than Rejlander’s *Ginx’s Baby*, the boy-child squalls in his rattan chair, his flailing arms and legs not quite arrested by the camera; his sister beyond a wiremesh screen, petulantly aware of his condition but seemingly unable to help or to act in his own behalf. The photographer *took* the moment: was he aware of that menacing shadow between the two children, that profiled figure cast by, but barring sister from brother? Or did he anticipate the moment when stress must have its way and seems to be visited by, accompanied by, even emanate, its independent partner: that spectral silhouette-monster, that creature born from helplessness and hysteria?

A nightgowned child stands in the grasses by the edge of a sidewalk defined through a linear perspective that leads beyond a vanishing point to infinity. She, daughter, holds a spoon vertically, a direct-center bifurcation of her oval face. Her other hands hold fast to a flower, a sign of this world, while her spoon appears to have become a divining rod, an instrument with which she might survey and measure an imagined place of the mind projected within the world. She seems to see through the expected guises of reality, contemplating the more substantial possibilities of childhood fancy and dreams.

A figure, a man with no face, darkly anonymous in the full light of day stands before us, his identity seeming to have been proscribed as if a late descendant of some of the mysterious faceless figures in those murals at Dura-Europos dating from the second to third century A.D., a descendant prompting a very different emotional response. His casual stance, his white medical coat obsessively buttoned over an incongruously florid shirt, his tight black trousers and glistening shoes cooperate to cut an ominously magnetic presence. His environment seems equally threatening: the clouds appear to promise some weirdly evil weather; the house with its yawning porch and peculiar turret, the street and the leaf-littered sidewalk and steps in the foreground conspire to define a locale where something horrendous might occur, a place where something or someone could be abandoned, maimed, or destroyed.

A tufted chenille bedspread come anthropomorphic, a child's dress with extended sleeves floating against it, each prompting one to ponder the absence of bodies; to wonder who is beneath the bedspread or to imagine who might inhabit the dress. Is this a depicted game, a spoof, a ghostly charade? Or do the forms make us want to see things that are not in evidence, a reversal of the projections expressed in the fable of *The Emperor's New Clothes*? Does an innocent child or mind know there is no body within the garment or beneath the spread? Does the gullible mind believe a body to be so?

Do the spotlighted genitalia of the child held aloft by his mother signal the pride of his father, the promise of lineage, or the abandoned joy of summer nakedness and interior play? Even if none of these, we sense ourselves to be in the precinct of a ritual, in the midst of a revelational event enacted in the living room environment of the photographer's Memphis home, an enactment transformed to become an epiphany, an especially attentive honoring of the son.

As if to reach, to touch some realm beyond the world and mind, children's arms and hands extend from verdant foliage. Like *orant* gestures expressing some rare state of ecstasy, these hands seem to contact invisible recognitions.

According to E. H. Gombrich, in *Art and Illusion*, we "'see' and we 'interpret,' according to our acceptance of what things look like and according to our projections based on the filing of impressions in our mind ... and we are prone to project our fears and hopes into any shape which permits such identification." In viewing the photographs effected by Murray Riss our proleptic instincts find a new opportunity for release, and we are prone to share his fears and hopes and belief in the shapes of an invented but inevitably credible world. Ultimately, we cannot but honor his photographic recognitions and praise his assistance in increasing our visual potentials and our capacities for belief.

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