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Projected Identities

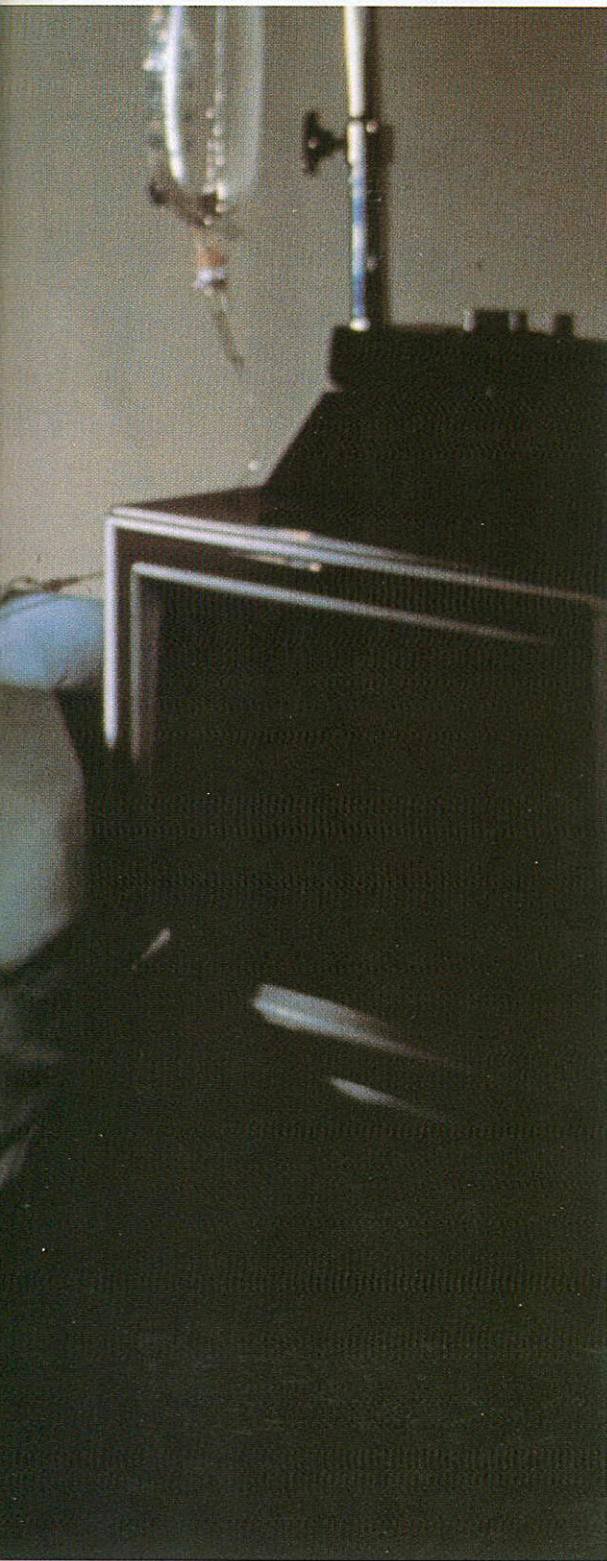
A recent exhibition revealed the range of themes that artists are exploring by means of complex slide and film installations.

BY DAVID JOSELIT

The Projected Image," an exhibition of six slide installations and two projected film-loop installations presented at San Francisco MOMA, was the latest entry into the long-standing debate over the nature of photography. The question of the use of photographic imagery in art works has become highly charged in recent years, as conservative politicians and religious figures have objected to certain photographic representations of the human body—particularly in the case of the homoerotic images by artists like Robert Mapplethorpe and David Wojnarowicz. Long before this controversy erupted, however, a number of artists had begun to investigate the assumptions underlying photography's use as an art medium and as a vehicle of mass communications. Richard Prince and Barbara Kruger, for example, have intentionally blurred the boundary between the art photograph and its seeming opposite, the magazine layout. Other artists, such as Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems, have used image/text combinations to question photography's reputed ability to capture the psychological essence of a sitter by transcribing his or her likeness. And within the realm of documentary photography, works by Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula have vastly complicated the traditional photo-essay by bringing together dissimilar kinds of photographs and texts, thereby undermining the notion that there is a single "truthful" form of photographic expression.

"The Projected Image" provided an opportunity to evaluate two largely overlooked practices—the slide installation and the film loop—in terms of the recent artistic and social crosscurrents within photography. Although shared themes and preoccupations emerged among the eight artists selected by curator Robert Riley—Richard Baim, James Coleman, Dorit Cypis, Stan Douglas, Howard Fried, Jim Melchert, Carolee Schneemann and Krzysztof Wodiczko—the exhibition was essentially a collection of one-person installations, with each artist assigned an individual space or room. (All these works require darkness and most involve changing images as well as a sound track, and so had to be separated this way.)

Given the difficulty and expense of mounting complex slide installations—which in this show typically included multiple projectors and computer-controlled dissolve sequences—"The Projected Image" afforded an invaluable opportunity to assess the potentials and drawbacks of a presentation form not usually associated with art. (The best-known example of this kind of work, Nan Goldin's slide/tape piece *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, was not included in this show.) Suspended between cinema and the still photo, these



James Coleman: Charon (The MIT Project) (detail), 1989, slide installation with sound. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery.



Jim Melchert: *Changing Walls* (detail), 1971, slide installation. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

installations set photographs in motion, both literally and figuratively. In doing so, they transformed the presumably passive, "reflective" photograph into an active agent whose purpose was not so much to mirror the physical world but, like a newspaper photo or a billboard, to aggressively shape it.

In contrast to the six self-consciously spectacular installations made during the 1980s, two relatively modest earlier works—Howard Fried's film loop *1970* (dating from that year) and Jim Melchert's slide piece *Changing Walls* (1971)—furnished a historical and esthetic starting point. Fried's work consists of a grainy film loop that projects columns of typewritten names onto a simple rectangular pillar in the middle of a gallery. The names, the first 1,970 found in a book of names for babies, are shown in a repetitive litany that accelerates in a way that Fried likens to a "fast-forwarding speedometer." In *1970* the individual is reduced to a single quantified aspect—his or her name—that passes rapidly through a larger social mechanism.¹

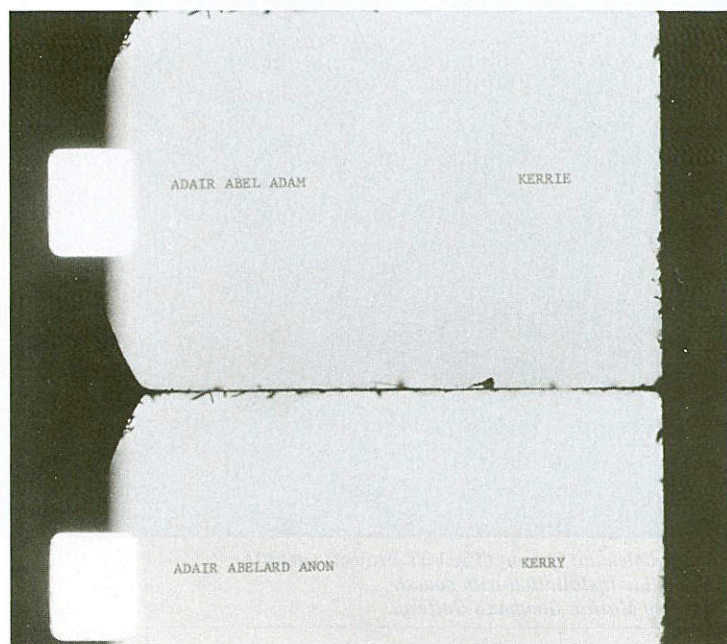
Melchert's slide presentation is one of many he made in the '70s showing friends or family members performing ordinary actions. *Changing Walls* examines the monotonous physical labor of an artist (who happens to be Howard Fried) applying red paint to a paper ground, only to tear away this "painting" when the surface is covered and start again. Projected nearly life size, the images fragment the artist's continuous movements into a series of frozen poses and serve to defamiliarize this unexceptional activity. Mel-

In Stan Douglas's "Overture," the grainy film loop of a train journey suggests the passage between waking and sleeping, between stable and unstable identities.

chert thus suggests that the workmanlike repetition and monotony of the artistic process can itself become a subject for art.

Though they are somewhat jarring in their obvious conceptual and esthetic distance from the other installations in "The Projected Image," Fried's and Melchert's rather didactic pieces served to dramatize and historicize the themes touched on by the more recent works. Examining representation at its most literal level, Fried and Melchert employed reductive strategies common among a wide range of artists of the 1960s and early '70s, from Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner to Yvonne Rainer. Although the installations dating from the '80s continue to explore questions of identity and representation, they also move in a noticeably different direction. Where Fried and Melchert avoid the kinds of photographic imagery found in advertising, commercial cinema and mass culture, the other artists consciously position themselves within this commodified language of images—in order to analyze and to undermine its logic.

Stan Douglas's moody, vertigo-inducing installation *Overture* (1986) consists of a freestanding booth from which a film-loop projection and a narrative sound track emanate. Assembled from archival footage shot by the Edison Company between 1899 and 1901, the six-minute film loop is composed of three grainy, overexposed segments that show a train journey in the Rocky Mountains. The camera, positioned at the head of the train, conveys the dizzying motion of the locomotive as it weaves around the serpentine mountain slopes and, at the end of each segment, plunges into the total blackness of a tunnel. The dreamlike quality of the images, heightened by their deteriorated condition and the alternation of darkness and light, is further reinforced by the accompanying sound track: a

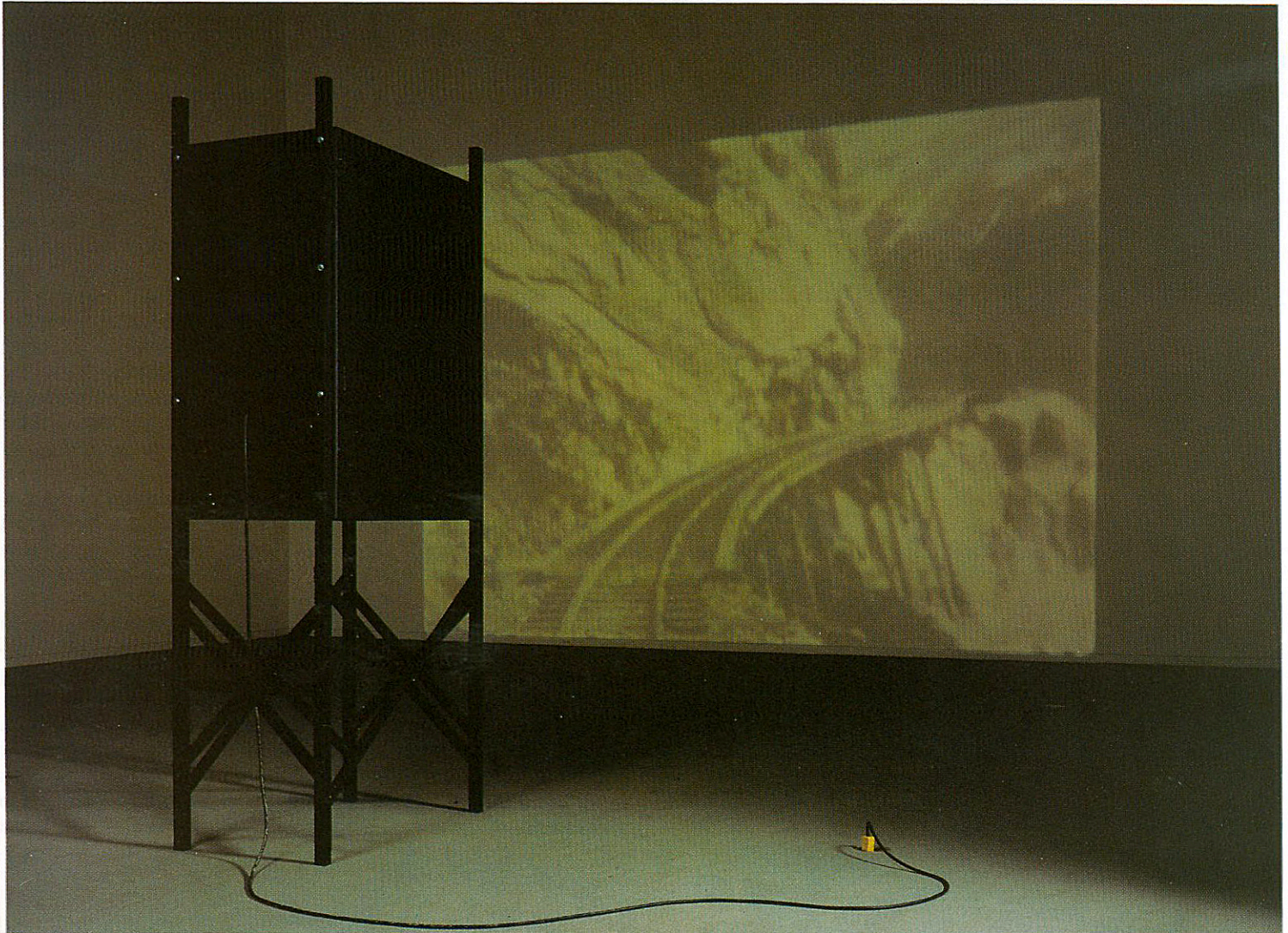


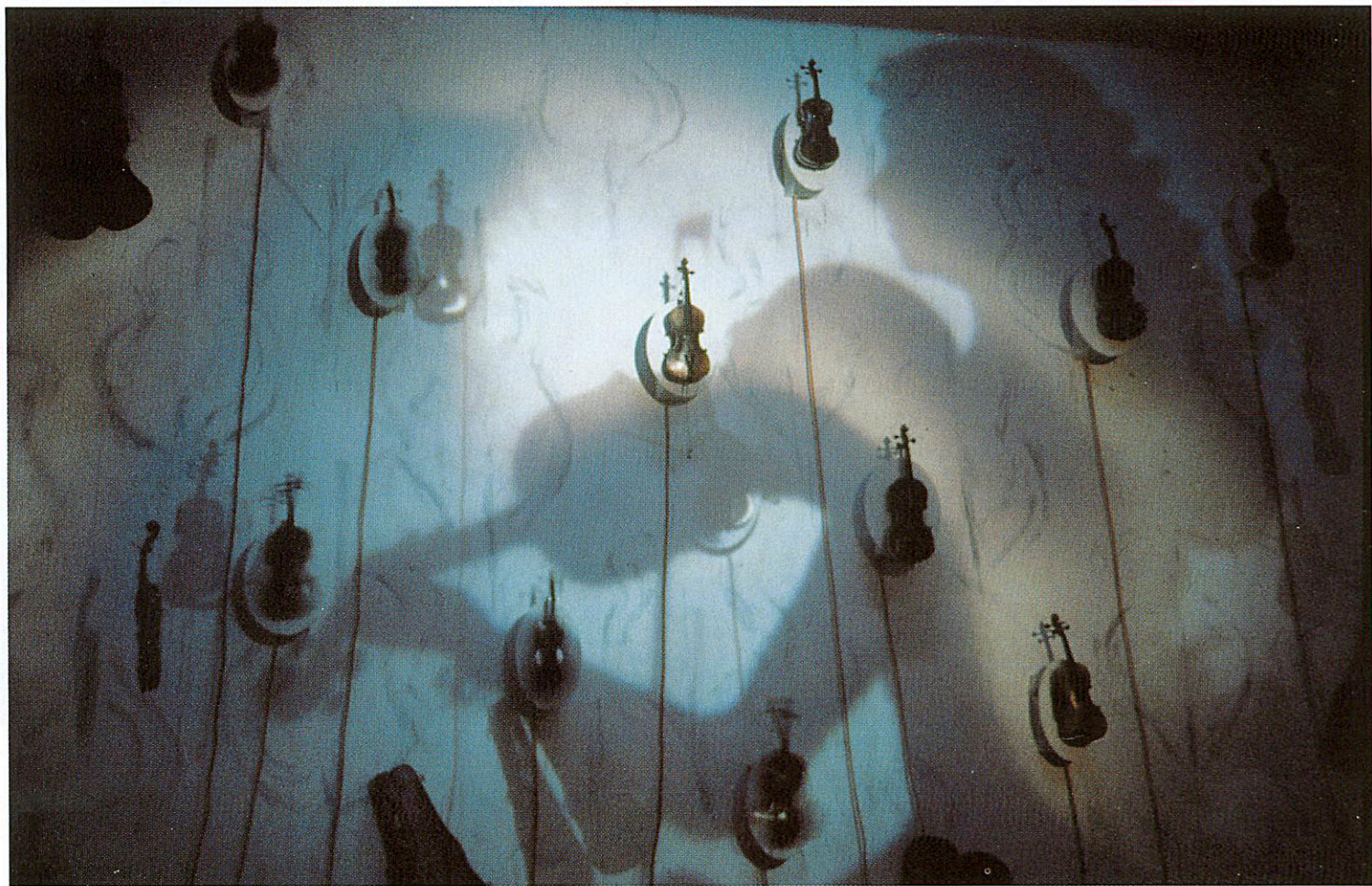
Howard Fried: *1970* (detail), 1970, film installation. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Above, Richard Baim: Turn of the Century (detail), 1989, slide installation with sound.

Below, Stan Douglas: Overture (detail), 1986, film installation with sound. Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.





Carolee Schneemann: *Cycladic Imprints* (detail), 1988/91, slide installation with sound. Courtesy Emily Harvey Gallery, New York.

passage from Proust that reflects on the liminal space between sleep and waking.

When I awoke in the middle of the night I could not even be sure at first who I was, for it always happened that when I awoke like this and my mind struggled in an unsuccessful attempt to discover where I was, everything revolved around me through the darkness.

In *Overture*, the train journey signifies the passage between sleeping and waking, between stable and unstable identities. Douglas's work conjures up a disoriented subject who, like Proust's narrator, cannot be sure just who she or he is. (In conjunction with Proust's text, the speeding train also brings to mind Freud's association of the train journey with death.²) At the same time, the movie camera mounted on the train's engine transforms the locomotive into a machine seemingly endowed with human consciousness—one that can both "see" a world and set itself in motion. *Overture* thus dramatizes the way that the processes that characterize machines like the train and the camera do not remain simply external to us, but are internalized by the individual psyche.

Similar concerns seem, at first, to be at work in Richard Baim's *Turn of the Century* (1989), a large-scale production involving six projectors, a complex series of dissolves and superimpositions and an original sound track. This 14-minute work divides roughly into two parts. The first has to do predominantly with telegraph wires, printing presses and other 19th-century technologies, the second with a fast-paced sequence of colorful patterns that resemble close-ups of computer microchips.

The first section shares something of *Overture's* elegiac tone; the transition from slide to slide takes place as part of a complex visual play in which images emerge from semivisibility only to fall back into obscurity. Several kinds of images wash over one another; reproductions of drawings and photographs of machinery and views of industrial landscapes circulate within the screen. The pace of these visual "waves" transforms the mechanized landscape into a soothing vision of pastoral calm.

This idealized industrial past is shattered, however, as the slide sequence moves into its second part, unleashing a sensory assault whose cacophonous sounds and flashing imagery almost induce nausea. Like Douglas, Baim explores the subject of technology by means of metaphor, but *Turn of the Century* is less hesitant in evoking technology's potentially destructive impact. In the work of both artists, however, industrial imagery remains in the end ambiguous. Whether Douglas and Baim are critical of, or simply fascinated by, the interpenetration of the social, the psychic and the technological remains unresolved.

James Coleman's *Charon* (*The MIT Project*), seen last spring at Marian Goodman in New York [see *A.i.A.*, July '91], fully exploits the seductive and the coercive potential of the slide installation. Projected onto a huge wall, the images—often larger-than-life close-ups of faces—impose powerfully on the audience. There is more than a hint of intimidation here, both in Coleman's manipulation of scale and in the cold perfection of the images themselves, which mimic the antiseptic style of commercial studio photography. Using slide sequences and a voice-over delivered in the firm, paternalistic tones

of a professional announcer, *Charon* is divided into 14 narrative units. The subject of each of these discontinuous vignettes is a protagonist referred to simply as The Photographer. As this vague appellation implies, The Photographer is a shifting character, one who not only concocts stereotypical representations of the world with a camera but who also serves as a disarmingly blank screen onto which numerous identities are projected. The narrator refers to this protagonist alternately as "he" and "she," and indeed The Photographer appears variously as a white man, a black man and a white woman.

Through a series of paradoxical stories, *Charon* unfolds as an allegory of the unstable relationship between the camera, the photographer and the photographer's subjects. In one vignette, while photographing a murder witness who is attempting to aid the police by imitating the killer's grimace, The Photographer realizes that his subject is actually mimicking the faces that he himself is making as he operates the camera. In the penultimate section, Coleman evokes a monstrous vision of photography. Following an obsessive self-examination in the mirror, The Photographer makes a Frankenstein-like picture of himself in disguise. He places this picture above his bed and, at night, dreams of the terrifying creature he has created—and become. In this and other sections of *Charon*, The Photographer is not so much in control of his medium as he is called into being through it. It is this potential of the camera to actively give form to reality and identity while pretending merely to mirror them that emerges as perhaps the central concern shared by the artists in "The Projected Image."

Some of the most innovative and influential photographic work of the last decade has critically examined the oppressive stereotypes of femininity that circulate in both high art and the mass media. Such work ranges from Cindy Sherman's canny autoportraits in masquerade to Silvia Kolbowski's more polemical and analytic montages, which attempt to unveil the codes of high fashion. In "The Projected Image," similar concerns are engaged by the installations of Carolee Schneemann and Dorit Cypis. Both artists explore a wide array of feminine images, from anatomical illustrations to renderings of ancient goddesses. In Schneemann's *Cycladic Imprints* (1988/1991), slides are projected onto a large wall on which several oscillating violins are mounted. The nonnarrative sequence of images presents close-ups of a woman's body, including buttocks and vagina, fertility idols, "artistic" representations of women, and musical instruments. In light of recent feminist theory, which understands femininity as a constantly shifting and transformable set of characteristics, *Cycladic Imprints* appears somewhat naive.³ In its dependence on supposedly timeless symbols of the female body—the violin, fertility figures, the vagina itself—Schneemann's work seems to assert that femininity is something timeless and unchanging and based on the body alone.

Cypis's *X-Rayed (Altered)* (1988) establishes a much more complex and reciprocal relationship between the camera and the feminine subject. The installation resembles a small, dim, fantastic boudoir. The room contains three projection sites, each associated with its own type of framing device. The first site is the entrance to the installation itself: flanked by red velvet drapes is a sheer curtain onto which slides are projected—mostly studio shots of a small girl playing with a toy theater.

The second projection site is an ornate gold picture frame skewed across the corner of the room, so that the slides we see within this frame—primarily "narcissistic" images involving the artist herself—are fractured across the adjoining planes of two walls and the ceiling. In one sequence, Cypis is shown gazing at herself in a makeup mirror, as though considering how to endow herself with a

Dorit Cypis's installation "X-Rayed (Altered)" examines the ways in which, the artist says, a woman may "stay in possession of her body while being looked at."

visual persona. In a second sequence, we see her, nude, examining photos and diagrams of the female body in anatomy texts; these scientific representations, of course, stand in vivid contrast to the artist's own body. And in a third sequence, Cypis, stretched out with eyes closed as rhythmic, controlled breathing is heard on the sound track, searches with her hands for what can be imagined to be points of energy distributed along her body. It is through the practice of a kind of "subversive narcissism," Cypis suggested in a catalogue statement accompanying a previous gallery showing of this work, that a woman may "stay in possession of her own body while being looked at."⁴

The third site encompasses an entire wall, on which a set of shelves support small, framed, snapshotlike pictures. The slides



Two details from Dorit Cypis's *X-Rayed (Altered)*, 1988, slide installation with sound.
Top photo Ben Blackwell.



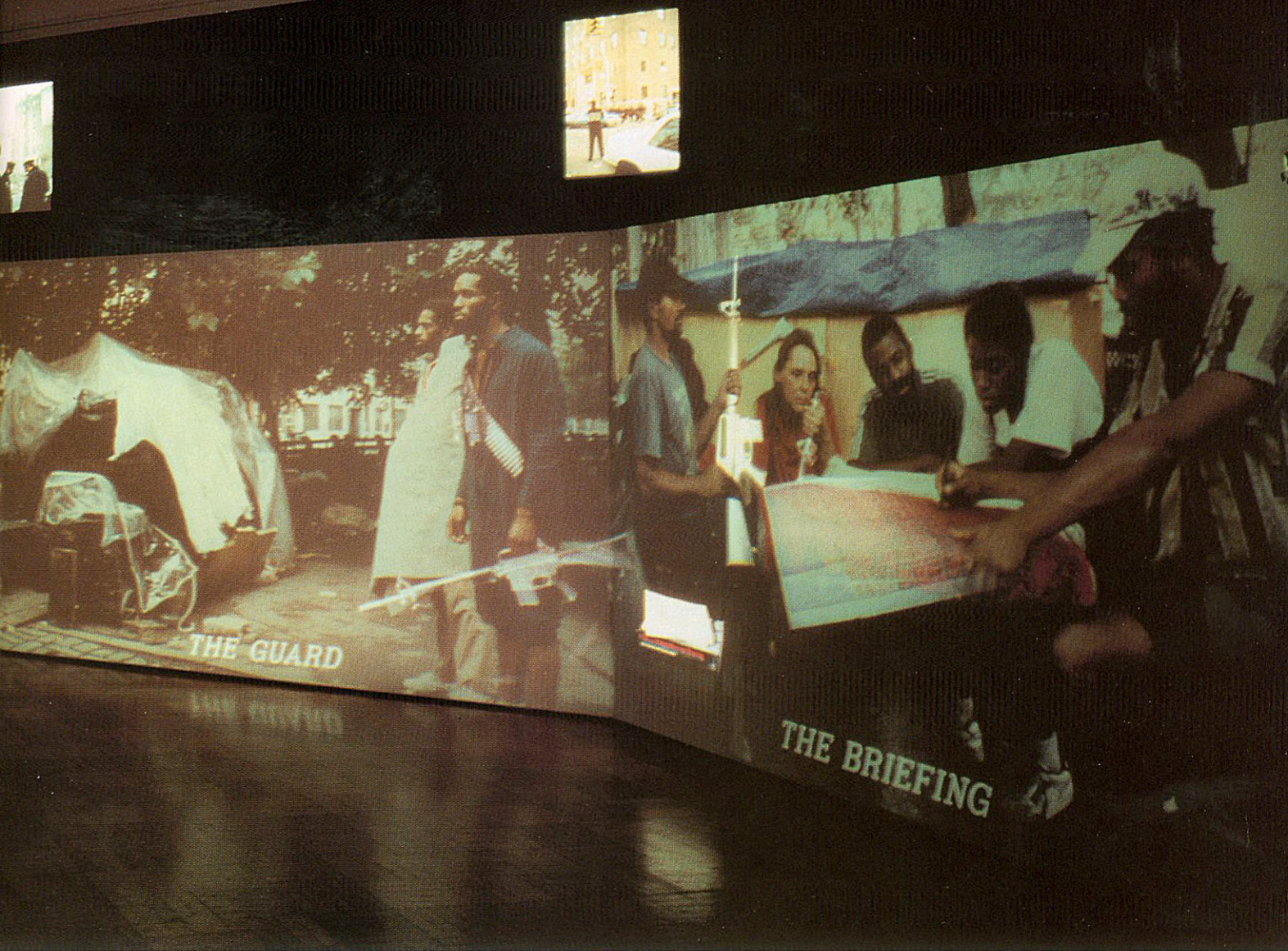
Installation view of Krzysztof Wodiczko's *New York City Tableaux: Tompkins Square, 1989*, slide installation. Courtesy Exit Art, New York, photo Ben Blackwell. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

projected onto this wall engulf these smaller images; the projections show moments from the artist's personal history (family photographs), images from ancient history (goddesses and archeological sites) as well as evocative anthropological views of East Asian dance.

The act of framing is not the only aspect of photographic activity that is highlighted in Cypis's installation. She also makes it impossible to overlook the presence of the slide projector itself. Four towering projector stands are set up inside the gallery, and viewers moving through the installation must pass in front of the projectors' lenses, thereby adding their own shadows to the stream of images. This literal insertion of the trace of the physical body into the projected image effectively echoes the dominant "narcissistic" theme of Cypis's slide presentation. Writing about Frida Kahlo, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen have pointed out the potentially subversive dimension of feminine narcissism.⁵ Along the same line, Cypis's

X-Ray'd suggests that the narcissism associated with the camera should not simply be rejected, but rather that it should be intensified. The camera can be turned back on itself, so to speak, and camera technology used to strip away the assumptions and conventions which surround photography's everyday use.

As Cypis's installation suggests, it is hard to imagine transforming the image or self-image of any group without simultaneously calling the photographic medium and its uses into question. This is also the implication of Krzysztof Wodiczko's *New York City Tableaux: Tompkins Square* (1989). The installation grew from Wodiczko's involvement in the movement against gentrification in New York's East Village, where in 1988 public opposition to the eviction of homeless people from the park triggered police riots. *New York City Tableaux* features four mural-size projections of scenes involving the homeless residents of the park; above these tableaux are four smaller projected images showing police surveillance activity around Tompkins Square. Each of the tableaux is actually composed of two superimposed slides. The first is an innocuous documentary-style color image showing homeless men and women standing, sitting or lying in the park; the second, in black and white, adds not only captions—"The Exercise," "The Barricade," "The Guard," "The Briefing"—but also



inserts ghostly machine guns, ammunition, maps and revolutionary books. The spectral projected weapons produce the jarring realization that the banal color scenes depicted harbor an enormous potential violence; in this way a critical space is opened up that allows a utopian hope for violent social change—or a nightmarish fear, depending on one's political allegiances—to rush in.

As dramatic as it is, Wodiczko's vision of a militarized underclass provokes some difficult questions. His portrayal of the homeless as an organized force on the verge of violent explosion is probably meant to illuminate the paranoid fears of the middle class as much as the political aspirations of those whom he depicts. But by insisting on the absolute and violent otherness of his subjects, Wodiczko tends to further marginalize them. While the artist obviously hopes to force his audience to take the situation of the homeless seriously—to make these invisible citizens visible—the risk he runs in *New York City Tableaux* is that of conjuring up an unresolvable social standoff. □

less than one second. The four columns on the left hand side of the frame use the first nine names from the right hand column and the first syllable of the word anonymous, ANON [sic], to count the names in the right hand column as they appear. The names are used in the same manner as the digits 1 through 9 in arabic numerology. ANON is used as a zero. So, for example, the first name, AARON, immediately to the left of ANON would mean 10. Simultaneously in the right hand column the name ADDISON, the tenth name in the baby name book would appear. . . . The effect is that of a fast forwarding speedometer."

2. See Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, translated and edited by James Strachey, New York and London, W.W. Norton, 1966, p. 188.

3. See, for instance, Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984.

4. Dorit Cypis, statement in *Dorit Cypis: X-Rayed (Altered)*, Minneapolis, Intermedia Arts Gallery, 1989, unpaginated.

5. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, "The Discourse of the Body," in Rosemary Betterton, ed., *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, New York, Pandora, 1987.

"The Projected Image" was on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from Mar. 7 to May 5, 1991.

1. In an undated artist's statement, Fried explains the complex system he used to generate 1970: "The film consists of two sets of columns. On the right side of the frame the first 1970 names from a baby name book appear sequentially for slightly