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382 commitment to the unconscious and contrasts Lebel's use of the "real, sexually explicit, performative, liberated body" in his Happenings to the surrealists' "represented, metaphoric . . . body" to express liberation through the erotic (199). These intergenerational links and the convincing evidence of the vitality and relevance of surrealism in the postwar period are valuable parts of her book, as is its broad account of the political positions held by the surrealists and their continuing commitment to the power and efficacy of the erotic.

***The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation.* Blake Stimson. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2006. Pp. x + 220. \$19.95 (paper).**

Reviewed by Nancy Armstrong, Brown University

So many critical studies of American culture make grand claims on the basis of scant evidence that it comes as a pleasure to read Blake Stimson's *Pivot of the World*. The author carefully stakes out his territory as three photographic exhibits that attracted significant critical attention during the mid-twentieth century: Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man* (1955), Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1959), and Bernd and Hilla Becher's systematic photographing of industrial structures (1967). Stimson's first and most compelling reason for comparing these particular exhibits is to call attention to a distinct visual art form, the photographic essay, which, as he describes it, is committed to "feeling its way subjectively toward understanding about its object of investigation rather than through either the systematic analysis of science or the expressive enunciation of art" (32). Avoiding the extremes of modernism and consumer culture, such sequences of photographic images achieve coherence by means of their internal development from one image to the next.

Stimson proceeds to show how each of his exemplary exhibitions works through "the problem of political subjectivity—the problem of how to belong in the world and how to constitute new forms of belonging" (58). As it moves from exhibit to exhibit, his argument inserts a discrete cultural moment between modernism and postmodernism that challenges any unproblematic use of this opposition to understanding twentieth-century American culture. Rather than celebrate the vision of a particular photographer in the manner of modernism, and less fascinated with the products of a consumer-driven mass culture than postmodernism, he wants us to understand how *The Family of Man* and *The Americans* turned photography into an autonomous agent capable of transforming the world, as Steichen put it, into a "training ground for critical public reflection" addressed toward the pressing political issues of the day (24).

Stimson's selection of *The Family of Man* to launch this argument serves as an important corrective to the prevailing critical view that this exhibit, despite its phenomenal international reception, was never more than "a sort of humanist Trojan horse sneaking American-dominated economic globalization and political hegemony past restrictive political boundaries in the belly of a maudlin cultural embrace" (67). Stimson concedes this point, however, in order to ask the far more urgent question of how an exhibit of such obvious banality nevertheless attracted nine million viewers in thirty-seven countries by focusing on the political impact of the exhibit which resides in the shared identity achieved by the pictures' address to their beholders.

What *The Family of Man* did to the traditional opposition between self as subject and self as object was to define it "first and foremost by process rather than static opposition, by the flow of identification from one position to the next and the next and the next" (82). Positioned in between images, the beholder turns his body from one image to the next. Herbert Bayer sought in his original design the same objective that Steichen materialized by his meticulous curating of the

exhibit: the transformation of the audience into a single collective subject. The oppositions for which the 1950s were known “were to be kept in play in order to create a new sense of being in the world, and with it, a new sense of belonging” (87). The erotic component that accompanies the pulsating alternation of bodies offered up for identification is for Stimson the very quality that makes *The Family of Man* so symptomatic of the nuclear age.

To the question that launched his reading—“whence comes its claim to be ‘the greatest photographic exhibition of all time’?”—Stimson arrives at a more lyrical answer than I would prefer, loosely based, as it is, on psychoanalytic logic. *The Family of Man* modifies an earlier relation between the individual viewer of a photograph and subjected populations depicted so that the image no longer affirms the individuality of that viewer. On the contrary, the photo essay forces us not only to acknowledge our essential sameness with the human subject matter but also to enjoy the instability of ego that we experience as a result. Stimson invites us to make a rather large conceptual leap from the pleasure of this kind of politics to psychosis (rather than the anxiety of neurosis): “[The exhibit] positioned its beholders compulsively to repeat the cycle of life and death, to rush through the cycle of binding of affect, and fore-pleasure and end-pleasure, and release for 503 photographs, to experience again and again and again the moment’s governing platitude: ‘death has already reconciled us to one another’” (95).

To read Robert Franks’s *The Americans*, Stimson characteristically turns to form—this time to the form that delivers Frank’s peculiarly glum brand of modernism that not only doubts the adequacy of its descriptive system but that also doubts that doubt, a form that can therefore offer the viewer neither a window on to the world nor a mirror of the artist’s cynicism. Again, Stimson uses negative critical opinion as to the photo essay’s aesthetics to raise the question of how it operated as a social form. The fact that Frank’s critics invariably took one of two mutually corrosive positions begs the question of why Frank’s photo essay exercised so much influence on his peers and successors. For Stimson, the answer lies in “the road,” which not only serves as a thematic thread linking one image to the next but also fails to carry out its traditional function and provide the viewer with a sense of the nation as a social totality. Within individual images, moreover, the social landscape invariably appears resistant to community, despite Frank’s habit of confining his human subjects to claustrophobic spaces. Coupled with his fondness for poor lighting, smoke, graininess, and blurry spots it is easy to see Frank’s search for connectedness as aggressively disappointed in its subject matter and a much darker view of humanity than Steichen’s.

But the reason the figure of the road seems so bad at unifying its component parts, Stimson argues, is because it also bears a different—and contrary—sort of promise. The road offers the viewer an escape route from one image as well as the possibility of seeing something different in the next, even as it boxes in and alienates its subject matter. While no individual image seems up to the task of eliciting identification, the process of moving from one to another seems to carry the viewer past the limits of that depressingly visible slice of life into the not yet visible. As in his reading of *The Family of Man*, Stimson arrives at this redemptive conclusion by a complicated dialectical move that negates the negative in order to achieve a positive synthesis in the form of collective identity on another ontological plane. But where the self-generating sequence of sentimental clichés structuring *The Family of Man* induces its viewer into identifications that simulate a new kind of belonging to the world based on homogeneity rather than difference, Frank’s negation of precisely such clichés and reinstatement of the principle of difference ought to produce a very different result—or so one might assume.

Not really, according to Stimson, who attributes the power of the photo essay to its processional form. On this level, Frank’s negative vision of America as a sequence of similarly disaffected and alienated individuals gives way to an experience larger than the sum of its parts—one not all that divergent from *The Family of Man*. As viewers move from frame to frame, he argues, they can see a culture gone stale through “fresh European eyes,” their movement fueling the fantasy “of a pot constantly rejuvenated from the outside, of identity taking on a permanently

384 fluid state and moving easily between languages, regions, events and identifications, of identity realizable by simple synthetic declaration” (131). Having established that the photo essay positions its viewers within a process that significantly transforms the desire for a stable identity, he proceeds to show how successive variations on this form modify the conditions for experiencing a sense of collective belonging.

The Americans provides Stimson with the means of comparing the politics of form during the 1950s in the United States with the kind of photo essay that commanded similar prominence during the 1960s. Where Frank responded to the monocultural humanism of *The Family of Man* by exposing the seamier underside of its “syrupy universalisms,” Bernd and Hilla Becher appear to reject Steichen’s organicism in favor of what Stimson calls “an older, prewar paradigm” (137). What he wants to stress, however, is the contrast between Bechers’ photographs of industrial structures and an older paradigm that sought to revolutionize labor by instrumentalizing art, the better to show how the photo essay transforms that archive. Yes, the Bechers produce what Stimson calls “a full-blown nineteenth-century archive exactly in the manner that Foucault would describe,” but the Bechers do not offer a human archive “of the formal, physiognomic variations of deviance” but one of industrial buildings that have lost their usefulness along with the human energy that animated them (160). Thus, Stimson concludes, the beholder’s satisfaction or frustration (as the case may be), is to be found in the “object without any specific individual aim or instrumental purpose” (166); such an object comes into being along with an archive structured around the absent ideal that shaped the old paradigm of the age of realism. By this means, the Bechers’ sequences of industrial images turn around the Enlightenment ideal that drove the invention of photographic technology in the first place—a form of representation that promised unmediated knowledge of the material world.

What is perhaps most significant about Stimson’s selection of the Bechers’ project to conclude his study of the photo essay form is the level on which it forces the reader to grasp “form” itself as a social force. Of the photo essays considered, theirs most obviously rejects photography as representation in favor of photography as a way of striking up a relationship to the world as participant observer. Stimson’s study is exemplary in moving from aesthetic form to affective response and from there to ideology, never giving one transcoding the entire advantage over the other as the standard of comparison. His focus on the form of the photo essay consequently frees this book from the discourse of medium specificity, producing instead a more sophisticated and historically sensitive study than those intent on deriving meaning from the technology of a given medium. Never once succumbing to the critical theoretical temptation to suggest that an art form can change the world, he succeeds in offering a thoroughly persuasive account of a moment when photography did reshape the image of the world as one to which a significant number of people felt they belonged.

***The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects.* Peter Schwenger. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. Pp. 200. \$25.00 (paper).**

Reviewed by Brad Evans, Rutgers University

Peter Schwenger’s latest book is a meditation on why, explicitly and implicitly, the relationship between object and subject appears so often to be one of melancholy. Or, more exactly, it is a meditation on how art, philosophy, and psychology have, for the last eighty years or so, explored the elusiveness of objects—the loss we feel when sensing that objects are always just beyond our possession, even as they possess us.