BARBARA CRANE: CHANCING THE LOOP

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Barbara Crane was born in Chicago; which makes the city – as subject – her birthright. Though she left in 1945 to attend Mills College in Oakland, California, and later moved to New York City where she completed her undergraduate degree in art history at New York University, Chicago has been the primary crucible for Crane's art. Ironically, it was in a introductory design class at Mills College that she first read the writings of László Moholy-Nagy (American, born Hungary, 1895–1946) and György Kepes (American, born Hungary, 1906), both of whom were back in Chicago at the time, teaching at what was fast becoming the nation's preeminent school of design, architecture, and photography, the Institute of Design. In essence, Crane traveled full circle when she began her graduate studies in photography at the institute – nineteen years after she left Chicago.[1]

Founded as the New Bauhaus in 1937 under the direction of Moholy-Nagy, the Institute of Design promoted teaching based upon objective, abstract seeing and technical experimentation. Initially, photography was not offered as a separate discipline, but as part of an integrated design curriculum. In one of Moholy's foundation courses on the subject of light, students learned to make only photograms: pictures created with light and chemistry without the aid of a camera. The Department of Photography was established when the school was reorganized just prior to Moholy-Nagy's death in 1946.[2] Over the years, the instructors in this department, which included Arthur Siegel, Aaron Siskind, and Harry Callahan, shared with their students, among them Art Sinsabaugh, Ray Metzker, Ken Josephson, and Barbara Crane, a concern with photographic process and craftsmanship. This approach to the medium determined a particular style of photography that is both expressive and rigorously formal.

Many of the students at the Institute of Design eventually found their way out of the darkroom and onto the street. Chicago was the first and most obvious subject for institute faculty, students, and graduates, and working the same territory inevitably produces similar results. As Ray Metzker noted: "I can only say that proximity and shared experiences such as walking the same streets, produces affinities."[3] However, just as Harry Callahan believed that he could revisit certain subjects later in life and discover his new, more mature, self through his altered approach, pictures made in Chicago by Institute of Design affiliates demonstrate individual and intuitive responses to the city, as much as any stylistic accord.[4]

What could be discovered on the street was subject matter, or the counteragent of form: content. It is fair to say that content in the early days at the Institute of Design took a back seat to form. Photography itself was the true subject of every really good picture, an idea demonstrated patently by the best work of institute graduates. Ray Metzker, in

discussing his own nascent exploration of Chicago's Loop, aptly described two things – the compulsion he felt to penetrate the city and the primacy of photography itself in this investigation:

The Loop was a challenge. Its size, its power, its magnitude of elements were unique to my experience. In addition to the wealth of subject matter, the Loop was easily accessible, night and day, winter and summer.... I was convinced of the potential of the subject and I was possessed with a curiosity about this core of the city I had come to live in.... Ostensibly the Loop imparts hugeness, but it is more than just that. It seems to be the pendant of an intricate web; it is unique and it is magnetic. It is only a fraction of the city, yet like the spout of a funnel, it seems as if, at one time or another, the whole of the city's inhabitants must pass through it.... The Loop had aroused me; now all I had to do was photograph it.... I was determined to build a series of photographs, which could trenchantly state "this is the Loop." I began in accord with my socioliteral viewpoint. The resulting pictures could not stand alone; they needed the propping of verbal explanation to exist. Which meant subtracting a verbal dimension from physical reality. I had to interpret.... Throughout my search, one question persisted, what is a photograph?... I found it necessary to think in terms of the image.... I worked for some time on the project believing that a quasi-objective study would result. This was replaced with the idea of a personal statement about the Loop. Eventually the concept of the Loop diminished to a less significant stage; my concern was for photographic form.... If a statement of the Loop exists, it is of secondary importance to me. The primary value, realized only through working, is to have effected a productive relationship between the camera and myself.[5]

The Loop district known to institute students was built after 1871, the year of the great fire that destroyed the entire downtown district of the city. Legend blames a Mrs. O'Leary's milking cow for starting the fire, which burned out of control for three days driven by a "devilish" prairie wind and feeding upon a city that had seen no rain for three months. The fire consumed 1,687 acres of land, killed 300 people, and left another 100,000 homeless. Close to $200 million dollars in property was lost and some 17,500 structures were burned. Historically, the fire functions as "Chicago's great divide, the B.C. and A.D. of the city."[6] By 1871, photographic technology had not advanced sufficiently to capture the motion and speed of the flames, so there are no known photographs of the fire as it burned. However, photographs made in the weeks following the event reveal the fire's devastating effects and mirror contemporary descriptions: "The work of destruction was as complete as if the whole had been caught up and borne away.... Block after block would reveal no evidences of there having existed civilization."[7]

What is hard to imagine when looking at these pictures (fig. 1), is that within the year more than 300,000 square feet of office space had been reopened, and by 1897, when the Union Elevated Railway was built, over 4,699,000 square feet of commercial space had been added to the city's central business area.[8] The fire taught the city's architects and engineers obvious lessons regarding buildings constructed of wood as well as those with iron frames and façades (which buckled and collapsed in the extreme temperatures). Significantly, it was in this neighborhood over the four decades following the great fire that the famous "Chicago School" of architecture, led by William LeBaron Jenney, Louis H. Sullivan, and John Wellborn Root, flourished. Rebuilding invited new technologies

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and, driven by higher property values that demanded taller, more cost-efficient buildings, it was here that the internal load-bearing steel frame sheathed in fire-retardant masonry was developed, giving birth to the world's first skyscrapers.

The "Union Loop" elevated train tied together the end lines of three railway companies, allowing trains from the south, west, and later, north, to circle through the city's core above Wells, Van Buren, Wabash, and Lake streets. "The Loop threw a tight ring around the [city's] inner heart.... This extreme compaction offered valuable advantages that proved to be potent factors in the development of the central business district from the beginning to the present day."[9] The rectangle of some thirty-five square city blocks circumscribed by the elevated tracks not only defined the city's business nexus, but its cultural and civic center as well. The Auditorium Building (1889), The Art Institute of Chicago (1892), the Chicago Public Library (1897), and Orchestra Hall (1905) were all built along Michigan Avenue, one block east of the elevated stations on Wabash. The theater and primary shopping districts, including the flagship Marshall Field and Company (1893, 1902–1907) and Carson Pirie Scott and Company (1899, 1903–1904) department stores, were ringed by the Loop, as was the City Hall and Cook County Court House building (1911).[10]

It is notable that so many photographers have made Chicago, and the Loop neighborhood in particular, their subject. Obviously, the presence of the Institute of Design and the School of the Art Institute drew photographers to the city and, by default, Chicago found its way into their pictures. But as noted by Ray Metzker, the Loop *aroused* him. Other photographers not affiliated with these schools – most notably Walker Evans, Andreas Feininger, and John Szarkowski – have found their way to Chicago on one photographic mission or another. Bob Thall, a native like Barbara Crane, called Chicago the "perfect American city" by way of explaining his own compulsion to make pictures of it: Chicago invites photographic interpretation.[11]

Much of what makes the city attractive to photographers is its location on the shore of Lake Michigan and the quality and quantity of light that is reflected onto its urban face by such a large, relatively still, body of water. The location has created a dramatic landscape in which the city's skyscrapers tower like canyon walls over the Chicago River and the flat expanse of the lake. The overall plan of the city as conceived in 1906–1908 by Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett (based upon Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann's plan for Paris), and adopted in 1910, encouraged a form of grand civic architecture, broad avenues, green public spaces, and serviceable transportation lines. Though never fully realized, the formality and openness of this plan, when married to a tradition of architectural innovation and certain organic, uncontrollable processes of urban growth, resulted in a city of visual fecundity.

It was the historic urban patchwork of the Loop that attracted Barbara Crane to it in the 1970s. As one might expect of an institute graduate, Crane's project of photographing the Loop grew out of a larger extended artistic program, one that explored chance operations, multiple imagery, and the idea of the photographic series. The importance of

FIG 1 UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER,
***LASALLE STREET NEAR WASHINGTON*, 1871**

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the photographic series, as it would be taught at the Institute of Design, was described by Moholy-Nagy in 1933:

There is no more surprising, yet, in its naturalness and organic sequence, simpler form than the photographic series. This is the logical culmination of photography. The series is no longer a "picture," and none of the cons of pictorial aesthetics can be applied to it. Here, the separate picture loses its identity as such and becomes a detail of assembly, an essential structural element of the whole, which is the thing itself. In this concatenation of its separate but inseparable parts, a photographic series inspired by a definite purpose can become at once the most potent weapon and the tenderest lyric.[12]

Beginning in 1964, Crane unleashed her curiosity and highly developed design sense on the photographic series. Her exploration took many forms, ranging from a set of single images composed of multiple exposures, as in the *Neon* series (1969) (fig. 2), to an arrangement of separate types of images (portraits, landscapes, and architectural views) combined to form a single evocative whole, as in her *Wrightsville Beach* series (1971) (fig. 3). In other sequences, Crane invited chance to play a part within her otherwise highly controlled formal program. The *Whole Roll* series (1968–78) posits a take it or leave it approach to the sequence. In these works, Crane exposed an entire roll of film, cut it into strips, and then printed the resulting images as a grid in one complete picture (fig. 5). The results, whether picturing tar splatters on the street or flying pigeons in Grant Park, are rhythmically syncopated and have been likened, in their optical effects, to the paintings of Victor Vasarely and Bridget Riley.[13]

In the *People of the North Portal* series (1970–71) Crane deployed a variety of investigative techniques to examine a single theme: strangers as they passed through a doorway of the Museum of Science and Industry. Crane notes: " Upon seeing the magnitude of the cross-section of humanity exiting the most widely attended museum in Chicago, I made the decision that any conceptual or technical manipulation was an insult to the subject matter in which I had become intensely interested." Chance played a part here: as people walked by the artist and her camera, she could not control their responses or their gestures. Crane was most interested in what resulted each time she deliberately changed the situational or technical terms of her endeavor. All of these pictures were made with a 4-by-5- or a 5-by-7-inch view camera, but sometimes Crane positioned herself at a short distance from the door with a short lens, other times she used a long lens, and on still other occasions she walked through the door holding the camera focused at twenty-one inches in order to capture the passing faces.[14] Most relevant to the later *Loop* series was Crane's concentration on formal problems such as how the edges of the picture relate to its central subjects or how the passing figures randomly arranged themselves in her field of vision (fig. 4).

Like the *Whole Roll* series, Crane's *Combines* (1974–75) were constructed in the darkroom. Instead of chance operations (such as a flight of pigeons) set loose within a given system (the grid, the whole roll), these pictures center upon a large, single image around which smaller, sec-

FIG 2 ***UNTITLED*, 1969**
FIG 3 ***WRIGHTSVILLE BEACH, NORTH CAROLINA*, 1971**
FIG 4 ***PEOPLE OF THE NORTH PORTAL*, 1970–71**
FIG 5 ***PIGEONS, GRANT PARK, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS*, 1975**

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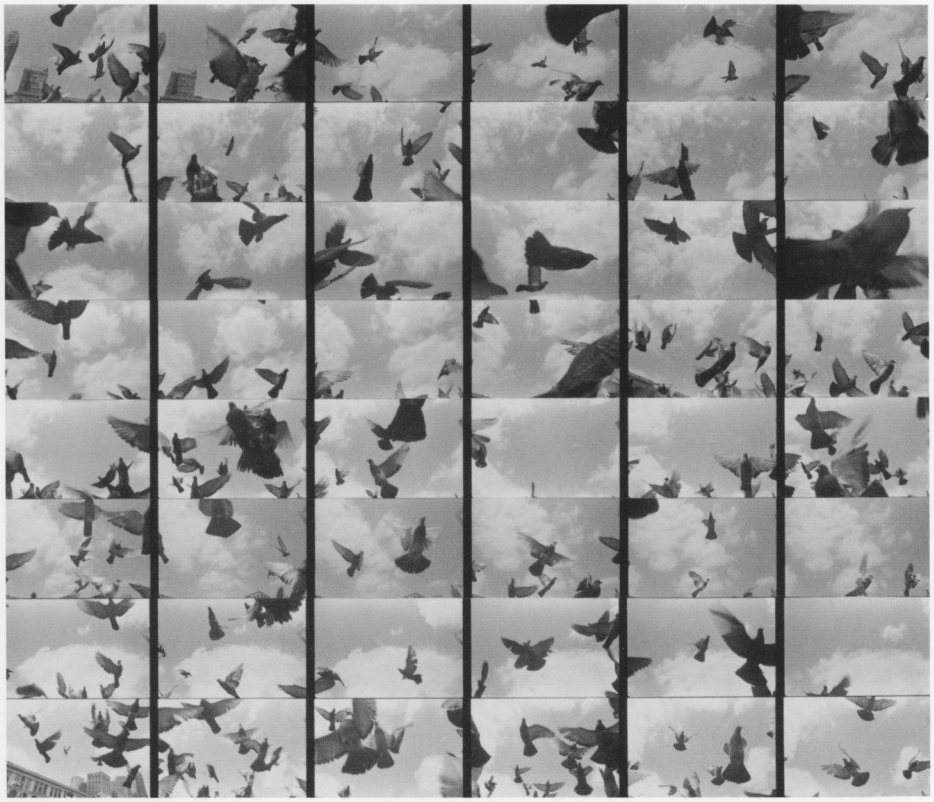

ondary images are ordered. The relationship between the parts is intuited, but visually inspired. One work, *Computer Revelation* (1974) (fig. 6), combines a central image of an old-fashioned computer punch card (Crane's son was working at the time in a computer lab) along with strips of film sprockets and numbers placed above and a repeat of photographic frames of electric switching boxes on the Illinois Central train tracks below. The linked patterns of punch card holes, film sprockets, and switches anticipate Crane's layered discoveries in the *Loop* series a year later.

The *Combines* series relates directly to two important commissions awarded to Crane in the 1970s, both of which built upon her fascination with multiple-image fields. The first, in 1975, for the Baxter/Travenol Laboratories Corporate Headquarters in Deerfield, Illinois, required that Crane create twenty-four large-scale works incorporating Baxter products in the composition (fig. 7). As in her *Combines*, Crane worked most of her designs for Baxter around a central image. Produced as 8-by-8-foot or 9-by-7-foot wall murals, many of these images read like patchwork quilts in which the patterned repeat of images unites the whole. The second commission was for the Chicago Bank of Commerce located in the Standard Oil (now Aon) Building. Titled *Chicago Epic*, the finished mural combines multiple views of Chicago's architecture with images of pigeons in flight. For this project, Crane created deliberately skewed pictures of Chicago's familiar skyline using a 4-by-5-inch press camera. In order to photograph the pigeons, she reclined in a city park and had her assistant scatter bird feed over her. As the pigeons rushed in to feed and were driven back by the assistant, Crane made her exposures. Chance, again, was in operation. The finished mural measures twenty-four feet in length. It is a jazzy composition – one that Crane calls "controlled chaos" – in which a central horizontal spine leads the viewer's eye across a cacophony of overlapping angles, inter-cutting edges, and pigeon wings (fig. 8).

Upon completing the arduous creation and installation of *Chicago Epic*, Crane decided to "return to basics." The antithesis of her synthetic process was the single image, and Crane, who admits to "getting insecure," wanted to test her ability to make single, well-conceived images – haikus instead of epic poems. She was concerned that fabrication, rather than conceptualization, was dominating her art; that she had lost her eye for what order could be found in the real world. This discipline of establishing an assignment in order to refresh her point of view – no doubt learned as a student at the Institute of Design and reinforced as a professor at the School of the Art Institute – has operated to great advantage in Crane's long and highly productive career. This time for her subject, she chose the Loop.

As we have seen, Crane incorporated architectural subject matter in her Chicago Bank of Commerce mural completed in 1976. More significantly, however, from 1972 until 1979 she had worked on yearly contract for the Chicago Commission on Historic Architectural Landmarks in a citywide initiative to record key buildings and monuments. In working for the commission, Crane had learned the scouting techniques practiced by all good documentary architectural photographers. Upon receipt of her site map, Crane would visit the building to be photographed at different

FIG 6 ***COMPUTER REVELATION*, 1974**
FIG 7 ***JUST MARRIED*, 1972**
FIG 8 ***CHICAGO EPIC*, 1976 (DETAIL)**

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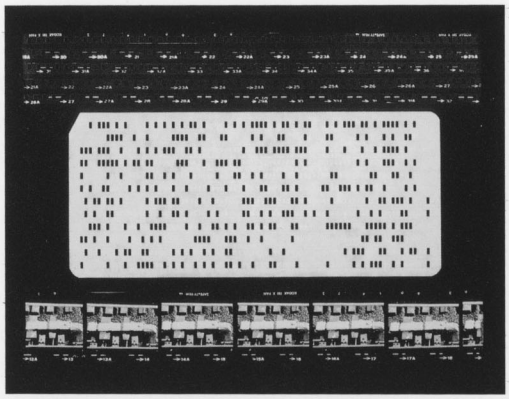

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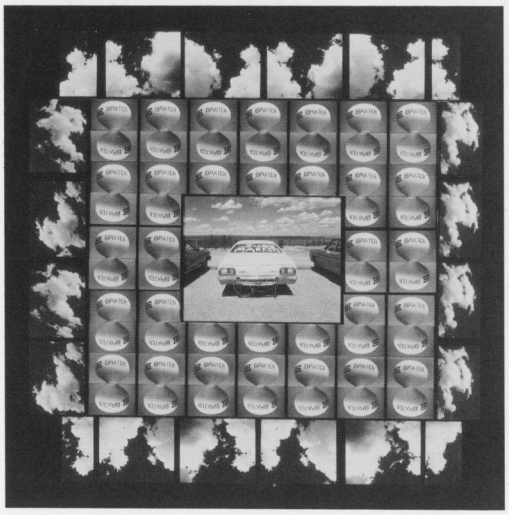

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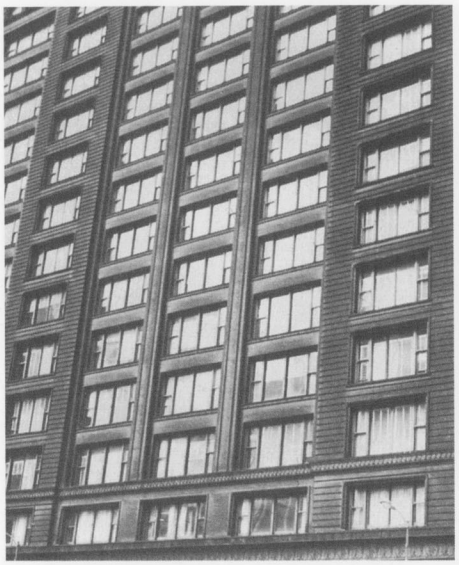

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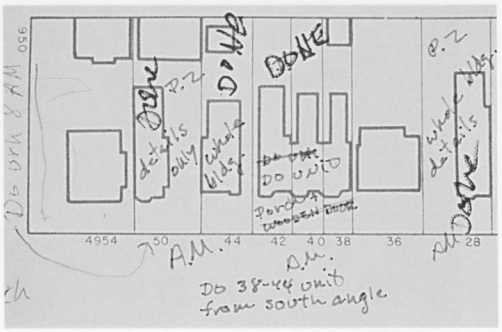

hours of the day and in different weather conditions to determine the optimum time to make her photographs. She noted sunlight and shadow patterns and exposure and shooting instructions on her map for later reference, returning to make the final pictures only when the time was right (fig. 11). This patient and studied process was applied again in Crane's self-selected project to photograph the architecture of Chicago's Loop.

In most of the photographs made for the Commission on Historic Architectural Landmarks, Crane strove for clear pictures that fully described the structure in question. Her picture of Orchestra Hall, for example, made directly in front of the building from across Michigan Avenue, could not be more matter-of-fact (fig. 10). Only the moving cars, pedestrians, and patterned reflections in the three central, second-floor windows betray Crane's taste for complexity. On occasion, however, Crane took artistic license and went with her instinct, making more expressive photographs like that of the 1894 Marquette Building (fig. 9). Here, Crane cropped her picture tight to the building, cutting out cornice and entrance – stripping away the inessentials in order to emphasize the thing itself. In addition, she disrupted the building's geometry by positioning her camera at an angle to it and shooting up, creating a twisted view that celebrates, as well as describes, the two key architectural features of the building: its height and its cellular façade of "Chicago windows."

Working on the *Chicago Loop* series years before the installation of handicap-accessible street curbs, Crane, a petite woman, bought a bright red golf bag with a set of large wheels in which to transport her 5-by-7-inch view camera and tripod. She describes how her comical appearance invited comment – usually supportive inquires from women and golf jokes from men. In the golf bag's pockets she could store eight sheet film holders, which meant she could make a maximum of sixteen exposures on each outing. Crane worked on the *Chicago Loop* series for three years, though not exclusively and mostly in the warmer months. In its final edited form, the series contains ninety pictures, a number that only hints at how exacting and methodical were her efforts to fully comprehend her subject: she exposed over five hundred and fifty view camera negatives.

In 1978 Crane wrote of the *Chicago Loop* series: "I was entranced by the random layers of textures, tones, and planes, all adding up to an explosion of visual excitement only comprehended when I had time to look carefully and was not rushing by car, bus, or train on the way to some appointment."[15] Having spent so much time in the Loop, Crane set out on this project with a very clear conception of the type of pictures she wanted to make – how she wished to contain this "explosion." As in her *People of the North Portal* series, Crane determined a set approach to her subject – certain technical parameters and working rules from which she never swayed – and then allowed the subject matter to contribute the pictorial variables. She sought views that expressed the stratification of architectural form in the Loop, that combined masonry buildings with the reflective glass on a new skyscraper, that through a mix of shapes, shadows, and textures, "would make noise."

Working with a long lens, which tends to flatten space in front of the camera, Crane isolated the forms in front of her by cutting out sky and

FIG 9 ***THE MARQUETTE BUILDING*, 1973**
FIG 10 ***ORCHESTRA HALL*, 1977**
FIG 11 **SITE MAP (DETAIL)**

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ground and allowing the resulting architectural "screen" to bleed edge to edge in the picture. Having made more topical views of the city (fig. 12), Crane knew that this compacting of space would abstract the architecture, as it had in her picture of the Marquette Building made for the Landmarks Commission. However, in the *Chicago Loop* series, Crane corrected for parallax by shifting the camera back as necessary. As a consequence, though she always worked from the street, Crane's photographs appear to have been made a flight or two above ground level or from an elevated train platform.

Each time she went out to photograph, Crane tackled a new compositional problem. On any given day, she might decide to bisect every picture plane in the middle (page 48), or quarter it (page 41), or make stripes through it (page 32), or fold it (page 47). Crane admits that these visual investigations helped to keep the project interesting over three years, but more importantly, they allowed her to return again and again to the same location, confident that if the problem was changed, then the picture, regardless of the familiar subject matter, would be altered as well. These exercises can be likened to just that: calisthenics that through discipline and repetition build muscles. In reviewing her negatives recently, Crane observed that she did her best work during the last third of the project – the concept had indeed become stronger.

The precision of Crane's vision is demonstrated by her attention to critical detail. For instance, she never lost sight of the compositional placement of the notch caused by the sheet film negative holder (seen at the top and bottom edges of her horizontal pictures), seeking to reveal rather than mask it. In the field, she continued to map sunlight and shadow effects, returning when the light she had observed on one particular day was restored after a week of rain, or delaying a picture entirely until another season, when the sun might be lower in the sky. She gave a great deal of consideration to window shades. And in the end, it is this sort of detail – the irregular grid of rough brick courses at the rear of a building (page 8), the squat but curiously photogenic water towers (page 39), the craning swan neck of a street light (page 33) – so elegantly observed – that rewards our looking.

Barbara Crane can be quite dismissive of subject matter. Her favorite photographs are disorienting abstractions that float free of locality (page 23) and her least favorite are those that describe too well (page 40). Her pictures, Crane argues, have little to do with their subject matter. One detail, the almost complete absence of people in these pictures, should persuade us that this is Barbara Crane's Loop – not the lively neighborhood we pass through on our way to work. Like Metzker before her, when faced with the Loop, Crane had to interpret. But the point, after all, was to make intelligent pictures out of what was there because it *entranced* her. It is in the *Chicago Loop* series that this ticklish relationship between Crane's art and its subject finds symmetrical expression.

In her influential book *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* (1961), Jane Jacobs championed a form of built urban diversity:

Sometimes, diversity of uses, combined with diversity of age, can even take the curse of monotony off blocks that are far too long. Still more interesting visual effects, and again without any need for exhibitionism or other phoniness, can and do arise in cities from mixtures in building types.... How to accommodate city diversity well in visual terms,

FIG 12 *CHICAGO LOOP*, 1978

how to respect its freedom while showing visually that it is a form of order, is the central esthetic problem of cities.[16]

As we have seen, Crane worked for many years in the service of the burgeoning architectural preservation movement of the 1970s. Her photographs for the Landmarks Commission are straight declarative statements: "I am a significant building." Crane's *Chicago Loop* series, through its focus on interstitial spaces rather than single buildings, offers more subtle commentary. In individual examples and in the series as a whole, Crane has reflected upon the city, its history, growth, and its "diversity of uses." Then and now, Crane has marveled at the historic happenstance responsible for the architectural vitality of Chicago's Loop. Urban planners be damned – Barbara Crane understands that it is *chance operations* that make the city look the way it does. It is from this only partially "controlled chaos" that she creates visual order and it is this vitality that she celebrates in her photographs.

1 Conversation with Barbara Crane, September 18, 2000.
2 Charles Traub, ed., *The New Vision: Forty Years of Photography at the Institute of Design* (Millerton, New York, 1982), unpag.
3 Ray Metzker, Atlanta, Georgia State University, *Harry Callahan and His Students: A Study in Influence*, text by Louise E. Shaw (Atlanta, 1988), unpag.
4 Washington, DC, The National Gallery of Art, *Harry Callahan*, text by Sarah Greenhough (Washington, DC, 1996), p. 44.
5 Ray Metzker, "My Camera and I in the Loop," *Aperture* 8, 2 (1961), unpag.
6 David Lowe, *The Great Chicago Fire* (New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1979), intro.
7 Quoted in Robert Cromie, *The Great Chicago Fire* (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1994), p. 189.
8 Carl W. Conduit, *Chicago, 1910–1920: Building, Planning and Urban Technology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 302, table 2.
9 Ibid., p. 39.
10 Ira J. Bach, ed., *Chicago's Famous Buildings* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).
11 Bob Thall, *The Perfect City*. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 106.
12 László Moholy-Nagy, "Photography an Objective Form of Vision in Our Age," *Korank Kolozsvar* 8, 12 (1933), reprinted in Krisztine Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1985), p. 328.
13 Tucson, Arizona, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, *Barbara Crane: Photographs 1948–1980*, text by Estelle Jussim (Tucson, 1981), p. 6.
14 Ibid., pp. 8–9.
15 Barbara Crane, unpublished notation, 1978.
16 Jane Jacobs, *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), pp. 227–29.