

Recollections

BY PAUL VANDERBILT

My first connection with Barbara Crane's prolific output came when she wanted to show me her People of the North Portal series in 1973. I was on the program for a conference in Louisville, and she wrote to me, saying she was going to be there and had some pictures she wanted me to see. I knew her name. I had met her casually and was familiar with only a few of her works in reproduction. She was to me but one of many photographers who are recognized as the background framework of contemporary American photography. Barbara never made it to Louisville for the meeting, but later visited me at my home in Middleton, Wisconsin, and we talked about North Portal.

I wish I now had a perfectly clear recollection of those first conversations, which may have been nearly monologues on my part. I don't think my opinion has changed much. I both liked and disliked those pictures and was trying sensibly to separate and pin down this conflict in reaction. I had a somewhat adverse feeling about the pictures themselves, but I felt an immediate enthusiasm for the project that brought them into

being. There was something behind the photographs, something mysterious and otherworldly about the rationale of this undertaking that fascinated me. It was the intensity of the whole thing. Any commitment so involved, so prolonged, had to be something pretty special, and I was intrigued rather than put off by my own inability to finger just what that special quality was. I knew that I was looking at something very like the bottom line. Barbara's wish notwithstanding, I could not accept her claim that the validity lay in the photographs themselves. The pictures were very literal, very immediate; however, I felt that I was face to face with a hypnotic situation in which the subjects vanished, leaving me with a metaphysical proposition of the first magnitude. This reaction was intensified as I became familiar with her subsequent projects. Barbara has her eccentricities and I have mine. One of mine is that I think of photography as a whole, as an activity on the part of many people, as millions of fixed and tumbling images, and not as a limited, precious treasury of a few portfolios of individual masterpieces. The

individual images of Barbara's that I most often prefer are invariably from a long, intensive series, and I know that one could not come into being by itself, but only as the result of a prolonged and varied exercise — a loving feeling for the essence. I see the whole but remember the one and know that one to be memorable because it is more than itself.

For a long time, in fact several years, I had in mind to write a text for the People of the North Portal series, and I worked on it. But it never came out the way I wanted and probably never will, though some glowing coal, some unresolved challenge still remains. That face. Is it photography or is it humanity? What I had in mind was a running text of a factual and background nature, broken at intervals with passages indented and in a different typeface; it would be of a stream of consciousness, both of Barbara's own pain, for it was that, and fragmentary dialogue, supposedly from this burst of humanity in their passage across the stage, a theme that was to recur with a different scenario in later projections of Barbara's Commuter series, engulfed in the nonstop onset of strangers:

This man in the back seat, he was a political candidate and he asked the taxi driver what in this country bugged him the most. And it set me thinking. I'll tell you what bugs me the most. It's asking for a little information and not getting a good answer or being put down and laughed at.

I thought the gathering of material would be difficult, but it was not. And I thought the sequencing would be shaky, but it fell into place on the first try. What made it hard was my conviction, from the outset, that there was a latent philosophical aspect here, a question of sign and realization that had to be dealt with, without which no one would see these randomly spaced people in any role but exiting through a stage-like door. I was faced with a problem that has bothered, but interested, me for years. In the case of an inspired and introverted passion and not of a common cliché,

assuming that a photographer has "put" so very much into a picture (or a long set of pictures), does any viewer, under any circumstances, lacking background information, without something beyond the image as such, really get anything like what the photographer meant to add as personal reaction to the content of the picture itself? So I thought there had to be a text, like a sound track, and a handle, not in the sense of title, but a connection to keep it from drifting. There would be one long continuous sound.

Some people have like overloaded circuits and just can't hold on to all that's happening. Not accurately. They get struck by certain things, but the whole picture — no way. You have to put first things first and some people just don't have all that capacity. Some have gigantic memories and don't miss a thing, up to a point of course, and others just have a few wires, and some of those loose, and they just don't notice when something changes and a new team comes on.

The commitment to series rather than single pictures is perhaps the most strikingly innovative quality of Barbara's work. Not that series as such are innovative, but it is in the nature of her series and the ways they were put together, in the essentially philosophical contention that the ephemeral, immaterial subject, far from being in any one of the momentary images, is not even possible in the limited series, but only in an infinite projection beyond the pictures themselves.

Unfortunately, a book format does not accommodate reproduction of Barbara's long roll, a 10× automatic enlargement onto a single continuous roll of paper of thirty-six color negatives of a sailboat, only a few yards in front of the camera, passing a point in the harbor. I can imagine what a good filmmaker might do with the image of Barbara on her hands and knees unrolling the event on the floor (it takes an entire living room, a hallway, and a cleared dining room). We can see the sections, the individual frames, evolving

shape by shape, like punctuation marks in wonder.

With no loss of wonder and no concession to mere design, the fascination with multiplication and cumulative effect came to dominate a period of her work. It was an intensive exploration of all the variables within a parameter to the point where the basic subject, obviously still there, nonetheless disappeared, and there remained only the variableness of its suggestive potential. It was an anti-monumentality, a revelation of what lens-vision can do to relative scale.

The fertility of this period yielded images in line, in juxtaposed layout, in overlap, and in superimposition. Did you ever try, as an exercise in concentration, to superimpose two or more unconnected thoughts so that they are not following one another but are actually simultaneous, as in a multiple image? It appears impossible, but maybe all thoughts actually start as a blend, their forms only recognized as the figures are disentangled.

Running throughout all these convergencies and overlaps, there was always a strong suggestion of "otherness." The "other" may be wanted, very intentional, as the distinguishing identity, or it may be the price of that very privilege or, more tragically, more creatively, the infusion of a symbol with sufficient power to overtake the original that is out of reach.

Multiples, series, random findings, shutter effects, the "other" posture — all these are obliques (not near, not middle, not far), and the element they have in common is what they are not. Some artists, Barbara among them, can work on several kinds of obliques, but consecutively, not simultaneously. I wrote to her:

Dear Barbara,

You know that my reading of the world's literature is biased in the direction of irregularity, of unpredictability, and not in the direction of good, sensible stock conformists, following "good advice," and thus I find ways to sustain and encourage you. I'm always trying to find within

art a principle of judgment superior to the principle of precedent. What is right in this particular case today, all other cases notwithstanding? When something is right in a work of art, it is irrevocably right in a way that is distinct from any doubt with which it may be charged. If I sometimes seem to react only mildly to design, it is because I think you are usually beyond design. I am seeing, instead of those images which are indeed wonderful, but left at that, some particularity, the "image" of invitation, of interdiction, of effervescence. I think of emotion as non-design. I am looking at one of your finest landscapes, the Moonrise at Great Punched Card, and I know that the height of the mountain has to do with the perception of detail, the vines and rock surfaces, just as in *The Crust*, the line which has no endeavor, no analysis, will spread that landscape all over my life.

This "otherness," a zone system of falling and placing reaches of reference (rather than tones), determining scales by their extremes, putting the exceptional where the standard is expected, will in the end serve you (and your pupils) well; for how else is one to learn the degree to which things are not what they seem.

Photography may deal successfully with the essential philosophical problems, not solvable by words and thus "not solvable." Philosophy has been male-oriented, toward systematic solution. Photography's "otherness" may make the most of feminine-oriented, unlimited, unsystematic unreason; may make peace with insolubility — so that to say a "problem" is insoluble is not to dismiss it, but to give it a multiple texture. If a thing or an event is not what it seems, what then is it? It's a photograph. Identity hardly matters. The thing it is not is in turn not what that seems, and so ad infinitum. Where the mind stops, the lens takes over.

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As artist-in-residence at Apeiron Workshops, I

picked up two significant points. Both are conceptual ideas apparently of currency in at least some academic circles, but new to me because of some lapse in my reading. I am not through with either one. That is what's valuable: they are worth working over to see what each in turn seems not to be. It was, for one thing, new to me, perhaps surprisingly, that every still photograph is an image of time as well as space. I had to work this out for myself, often using some of Barbara Crane's pictures to test the way. I came out with the thesis, which may not be orthodox, that in every image, even of the most rigidly static "subject," there is implicit an action, perhaps only of being, and that the time represented is the time, not necessarily linear, for that "action" to run its course: that is, the interval between the aspect shown and the next. That face looking straight at you is there until one of you surrenders. And I have come to wonder whether that time may not be a negative quantity, a kind of time turned back into itself, the interval between a preceding eternity and the moment of exposure.

I am looking at one of my favorites from among Barbara's hundreds of sudden incidents along Chicago's lakefront summertime, a picture I have long had tacked up by my desk, wanting to write about it. The time is retrogressive, back to the moment before. Originally it was, we presume, a tableau. And then? The positivist ethic requires that a picture go from No to Yes, and here the accident has not happened yet and we are only at the warning. You can show the trap set for the springing and you can show the death; you can even catch the trap closing, the guillotine released and falling. But I cannot recall a single newspaper picture, the photographer dealing in such emotional contraband, in which what you thought you saw is cancelled and you are taken back a step in premonition.

Furthermore, at Apeiron I was introduced to the doctrine that early man, say at about 10,000–8,000 B.C., before his conquest of the earth, was in his best spiritual and ecological balance with the universe, that he had knowledge as a natural function and that his history since then has been a desperate, pretentious, and probably futile effort to regain that lost adjustment. My weighing of this view somehow becomes associated with the Commuter series, for instance, the tiny spotlighted figures crossing the immense black screen in a theatrical lockstep, or the triptych onrushes boiling over the photographer, making for the sun, the endless conveyor belts with energies stampeding to expiration. The time in those daily migrations is the time it will take a silent collective to pass a given point in a straight, pulsating line, and that is not forever, but only to the outer limit of our present concern. Every question of religion is raised; every rightness in art is affirmed. It is an hourglass filled with human sand, and there is no way it can stop running.

I often wish there were some way in which a photograph could go directly to its intended target, like a welcome letter or a telephone call, directly to a specific person at the precise moment that recipient is ready for it. We all want to speak to the world, and all these exhibitions and publications are a wild sowing of seed in that direction, a blind hope that some random wind will drop a meaning where there has been a corresponding personal struggle. We need to do more intimate giving, if not of physical prints, then of content, for it may be the function of the world to be seen by photographers.

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