

Border Crossings: 'Attentive Contradictions: The Photographic World of Philip-Lorca diCorcia' by Enright Robert and Meeka Walsh, November 2008, pp.28-47

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BORDERCROSSINGS

PHOTOGRAPHY

PHILIP-LORCA DICORCIA / RAYMONDE APRIL / MOYRA DAVEY / ARNAUD MAGGS



AD Coleman on Pictorialism / Stan Douglas / Robert Polidori / Nicolas Baier / Sanaz Mazinani
Sophie Calle / Rafael Goldchain / Meggan Gould / Philip Guston / Attila Richard Lukacs
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In 2003 Philip-Lorca diCorcia published *A Storybook Life*, a beautifully printed collection of 76 photographs taken in eight countries over 21 years. As he remarks in the following interview, there is a clue in the book's title that we shouldn't ignore. At face value, we are being presented with a life story, and our most rudimentary assumption is that the life inside the covers of his storybook will be discernible. But in diCorcia's photographic world, nothing is ever what you expect.

What we get is an arrangement of images unaccompanied by any information other than where each was taken and in what year. No text is provided, no explanation supplied. We are on our own, lookers at a story that gives up only what sits on the surface of the images.

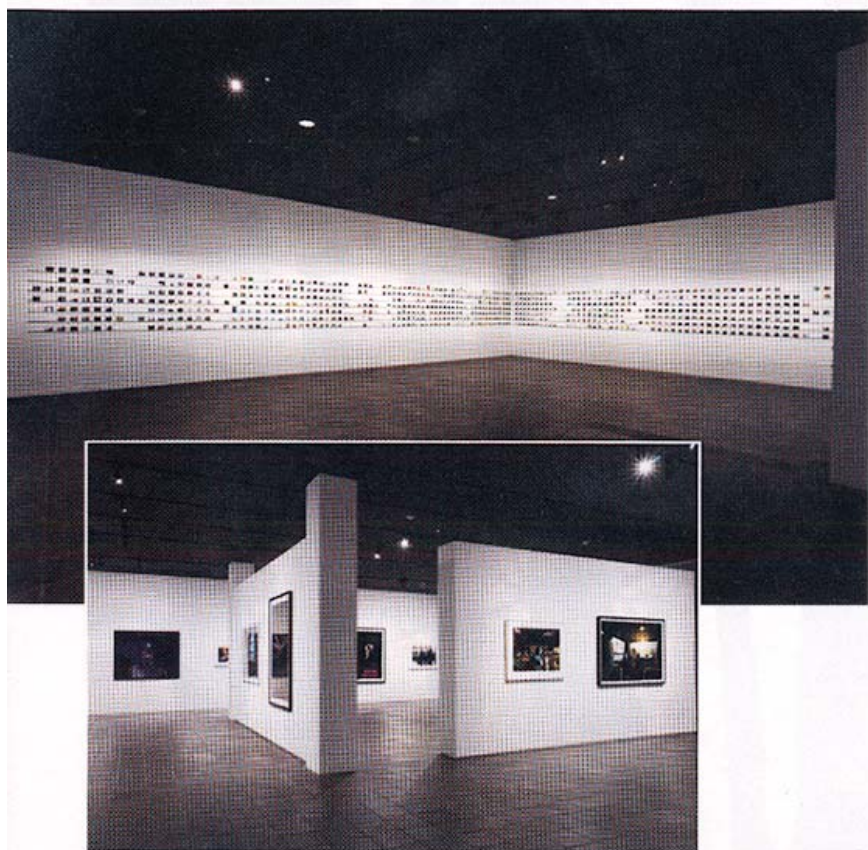
Introduction
by Robert Enright
Interview
by Robert Enright
and Meeka Walsh



Attentive Contradictions



The Photographic World of Philip-Lorca diCorcia



Installation views from
"Philip-Lorca diCorcia," at the
Los Angeles County Museum
of Art, 2008. © 2008 Museum
Associates/LACMA.

preceding pages:
Willowmac, 1988, from
"A Storybook Life," Fuji
Crystal Archive print
mounted to board, 16 x 20".
All photographs courtesy
David Zwirner Gallery,
New York.

If you look closely enough, you realize that the book is framed by a pair of photographs of the same man, taken in dramatically different circumstances. The opening picture shows him lying down, asleep, a stuffed toy at this side; in the foreground on the bedside table sits an almost empty glass of white wine. In the final picture, he is seen from a distance at the front of a room filled with empty chairs and surrounded by an abundance of sumptuous floral arrangements. He is again lying down, this time inside an open-lidded coffin. The storybook life, with its plush-toyed beginnings, has come to an end, and our expectation is that the remaining 70-some images will fill in enough detail for us to understand what it was about. We're encouraged in that expectation when diCorcia tells us that the man is his father, a Yale-trained architect who lived in Hartford, Connecticut. But these are his only appearances in the book, although a 1978 photograph of his living room at Christmas is included. Neither he nor his wife are in the picture.

There are other members of diCorcia's family in this storybook: his wife, brother, his son, Bruno, as an infant on a forest floor in Skopelos, his niece on the beach at Wellfleet. These personal images are mixed in with shots of passengers in a Singapore subway, a

shopkeeper in Naples, swimmers in Salonika, photos of skylines in New York and Tehran, suburbs in Oklahoma City and Los Angeles. The logic of their inclusion is not immediately apparent, and the family photos make too little connection for the story to become a deeply personal one. "One way to shoot something truly meaningful," diCorcia has said, "is not to talk about yourself." By that measure, *A Storybook Life*, inescapably, shifts into meaningful terrain. We take away from it what we're prepared to invest in close and inventive looking.

DiCorcia has no patience for visual passivity. "I've been trying to create photographs in which the emotional and psychological content is time-released.... From the very beginning, I was fighting against this media-created idea that imagery is so disposable that it's exhausted within a very short amount of time." His tendency is to slow time down, an apprehension that has nothing to do with entropy. Instead, it is a seduction into the act of looking.

All the images in *A Storybook Life* came from earlier bodies of work. In his most recent project, diCorcia has again mined his own previous archive. *Thousand*, 2007, a book comprising 1000 Polaroids, all reproduced on thin paper and in a reduced scale (2 7/8 x 3 3/4 inches). The pictures were chosen by the artist from over 4000 images selected from his family photographs, the "Hustlers" series (1990-92), the "Streetwork" series (1993-99), "Heads" (2001), and "Lucky Thirteen" (2005), his body of work with pole dancers in strip clubs. If you felt the possibilities for teasing out meaning were rich in *A Storybook Life*, then *Thousand* baker-dozens the scope. The image placement reflects diCorcia's interest in what he calls an "open narrative"; his technique is to run combinations of discrete images and clusters of pictures on certain themes or visual patterns—anything from empty chairs to people sitting in chairs; from skulls to people and their cars; from people in narrow passageways to people framed in windows. There are pictures of babies, still lives, nature shots, statues, office interiors, airports, nudes, and urban locations. There are also a number of self-portraits. But the book provides absolutely no information about any of the photographs (other than a page at the end saying it was designed by the artist and Pascal Daignin, and printed by Steidl).

Thousand embodies an associative logic, but not a narrative one, since the connections between and

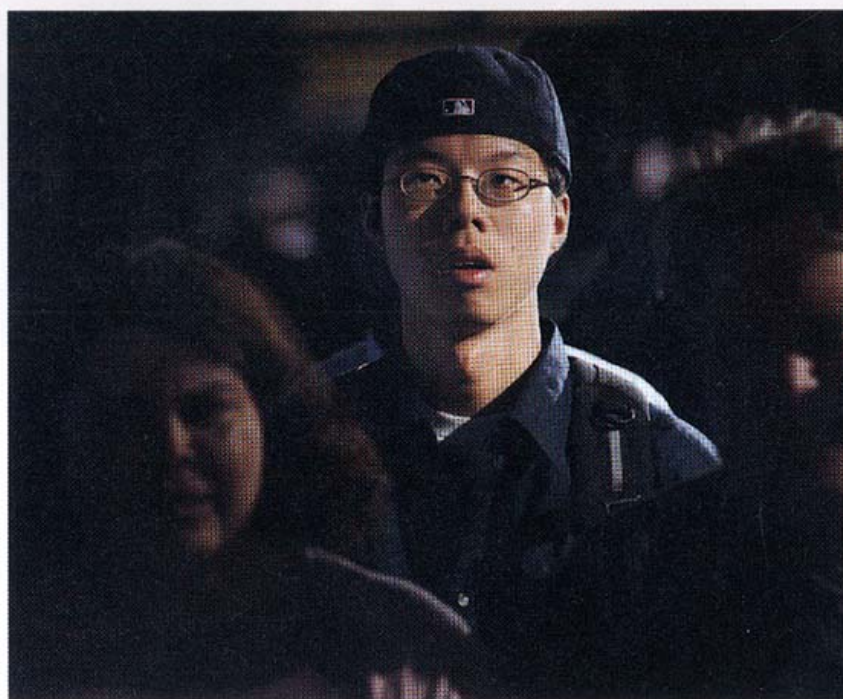
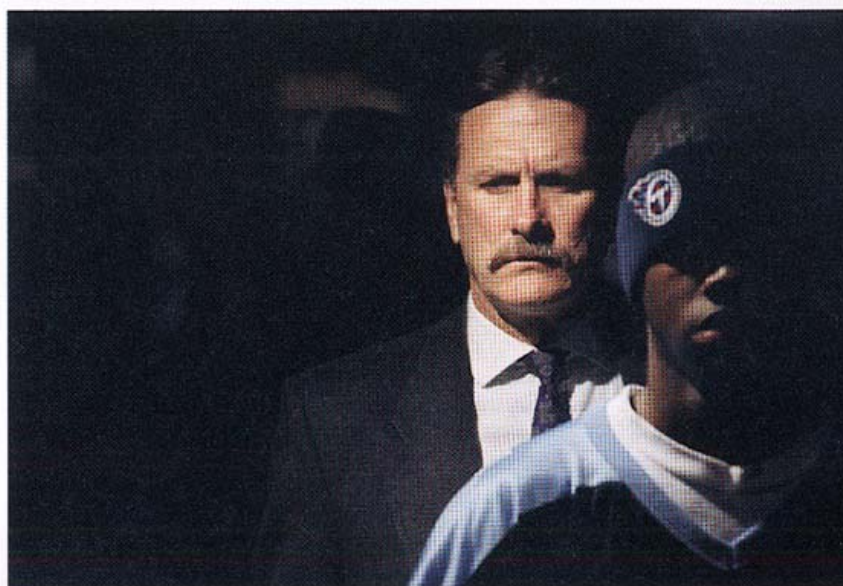
among images are invariably contingent. It is one of the most challenging and irresistible books I have ever encountered. It forces you to adjust the way you have traditionally looked at images. DiCorcia's correct assessment is that its impact "is only really felt by attention." Regardless of where you open it, you find yourself beginning to make connections, not in a linear way, but backwards and forwards, sometimes making leaps over hundreds of pages. The 264th photograph is of the same person and the same place as the final photograph in the book. The same, but different.

Then different, but the same. Let me offer a simple example. The 99th photograph is an unremarkable image of a roasting pot soaking in a sink. The detergent bubbles have risen in such a way that they form a shadowed indentation at one end of the pot. You think nothing of it until you turn the page, which shows a woman in a bathtub, her ass rising above the surface of the water, the separation of her buttocks forming the same shadow as the bubbles on the previous page. DiCorcia is either eroticizing the banal, or banalizing the erotic. He is a kind of visual Janus, looking both ways inside this world of images he has offered us, contradicting our looking and his shaping every step of the way. Make no mistake about the urgency and agency he assigns to the idea of contradiction. It is an attitude that runs consistently throughout his various bodies of work. "I have definitely tried to work with many contradictions—with conveying emotions and with clinical forms of capturing imagery. I dealt with narrative by having things be completely non-linear. In the case of 'Heads,' I tried to deal with a chaotic, random situation by making it seem as if everything was in the hands of a higher power."

Every time diCorcia picks up a camera and takes a picture, things are in the hands of a higher power. They belong to him.

Philip-Lorca diCorcia was interviewed by Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh at the David Zwirner Gallery in New York on June 17, 2008.

PHILIP-LORCA DICORCIA: These past two years I've had a confusing overdose of hindsight. It started out with my having to do the *Thousand* book, which meant looking at, and responding to, things that went back quite a way. Then I had a show at the Institute



of Contemporary Art (ICA in Boston for which I had to do a catalogue, and that also required a lot of hindsight. At the same time, I left my former gallery and that required ending a 15-year relationship, another form of looking back in order to look forward. I had to get all that work back and sift through it. Then this show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), what I call a Selectrospective. It's abbreviated, but it does include 35 works which come from the past.

BORDER CROSSINGS: Are there things you learn from that process of personal archeology?

top: Head #6, 2001, from "Heads" series, C-print, 48 x 60".

below: Head #20, 2001, from "Heads" series, Fujicolor Crystal Archive print mounted to Plexiglas, 48 x 60".



Head #23, 2000, from "Heads" series, Fujicolor Crystal Archive print mounted to Plexiglas, 48 x 60".

P-LD: You do and you don't. One of the problems with hindsight is that it doesn't come with context. I'm happy with some of the work, but I would have done it differently were I doing it now. It's something you can never take back. I also forget that at the time I was doing those things I was challenging what was happening in photography. A lot of that has been absorbed to the point where it's almost a cliché. Everybody sets up photography now, and if you don't, people wonder what kind of dinosaur you are, and production values have completely overwhelmed any other kind of value. Also the idea of narrative, especially a kind of elliptical narrative, has entered the photographic language and is shouting down pretty much anything else.

BC: *In a sense you end up having to historicize yourself. Are you placed in a strange relationship to your own past when you're obliged to look back in this way?*

P-LD: I was with a gallery that had photography as a kind of subdivision within it, which kept my points of reference pretty limited. One of the effects of having

to force myself to consider my past is to think about it in terms of other forms of art. Other than photography, my main referent had been the media and not any other form of art. My relationship to the work I did in the past was often too involved in personalities, too involved in struggles. I can see things as being good because they were so difficult to do, or so uncomfortable that simply having gotten through them was a form of success. Of course, no one else knows any of that. But one thing I've always avoided is resting upon my laurels. I tend to do distinct bodies of work that, though connected, are quite different from one another. I'm not going to make some new greatest hits.

BC: *What compelled you to start photographing members of your own family?*

P-LD: Before I started photographing my family, I didn't photograph people at all, and now I almost never take a photograph that doesn't have a person in it. I've always admitted that photographing my family was pretty logical because I could push them around

and tell them what to do. They were available, and although they were almost invisible to me, everybody else seemed to find them interesting.

BC: *I'm fascinated by the operation of narrative in your work. Is the first image in A Storybook Life your father lying down, and the last image a photograph of him in a coffin?*

P-LD: Yes. I began the editing process with those two pictures in mind as bookends and then worked from there. There were some pictures I knew I would use, but then other things were put in as the form took shape. It has always bemused me that people find my work so cold. In some strange way it's a reflection of the way people receive emotional content through photography, which tends to be anecdotal and a direct reference to something you can understand. I've been trying to create photographs in which the emotional and psychological content is time-released and so is its form. From the very beginning, I was fighting against this media-created idea that imagery is so disposable that it's exhausted within a very short amount of time. At first I was trying to illustrate that, and then I was trying to do things which I felt had an impact that would only be felt by attention. I made images that would be seen alone without reference to previous works, and those things in some way had an emotional half-life that was quite long. Before you could actually say what they were about, you had to spend some time with them. Then I decided I would try to do that with a book; so in *A Storybook Life* the sequencing decisions were made to build up tension either by deliberately meeting or denying your expectations. I did it as a book, meaning that it should be seen from page 1 to page 76 in exactly that order. Part of the clue is in the title: it's a storybook; you go from one to the other and you don't start at the end. There are images in there that were never meant to be considered as discrete images: they were bridges, segues.

BC: *Even though the bookend photographs of your father are only a year apart, the book ranges over a number of countries and across 20 some years. So inside the frame a whole series of worlds open up.*

P-LD: When you look at something for a long period of time, you see things that other people see and sometimes they don't. I got the distinct impression from people that they did understand it, that they did realize there was a certain emotional content that was relayed without it being a strict, linear narrative. I've always maintained

that good work, whether poetry or art, has the capacity to short-circuit front-brain thinking. Not expecting that things will make a lot of sense leads you to the other parts of your brain which are equally important.

BC: *Poetry is an essential and reduced form in which connections are made that aren't linear and certainly aren't sequential. Is that how you think of your work when you put it together in book form?*

P-LD: I do. I'm a little ashamed to use a loaded word like poetry. You know there's a lot of bad poetry. I think a lot of people aspire to be poetic in their work and end up being more like bathetic.

BC: *But in your work there is a kind of rigour. Let me ask about a particular image, it's called Major Tom; Kansas City, Kansas. \$20. 1990-92. The subject is a hustler; he's lying down in front of a John Lennon star, and behind him is a sign from the Los Angeles Times referring to "a new way of looking at the world." There's also a Greyhound bus going by, a tasty addition in relation to street photography. All these things add up to what I take to be a reflection on a failed utopia.*

P-LD: I'm not sure how much one can take full credit for in that particular kind of photography. Some of this is editing. I obviously didn't ask the bus driver to pass at that particular moment. I certainly saw the *LA Times* thing, but I probably didn't see it when I went to the John Lennon star. I use Polaroids and the camera is on a tripod, so I'm aware of the frame and what's included in it before I even begin to take the actual photograph. I made the decision to include the *LA Times* reference. I often made direct connections which seemed silly afterwards. I could have fallen on my face with John Lennon and Major Tom, but I think that one happened to work. It's almost an editorial way of creating content, to have some symbol of what you're trying to say about the person or the situation be in the picture with the person or situation. I would never attempt that now because I've been through that phase. But I was learning it then and I had to fall on my face. I mean I photographed a lot of people in the "Hustlers" series. There's one in the show in Los Angeles that the curator liked, but I thought was too obvious. It's a guy standing outside a fast food restaurant at twilight, and he's holding a hot dog. When I saw it later I thought, "You just photographed a hustler holding a hot dog."

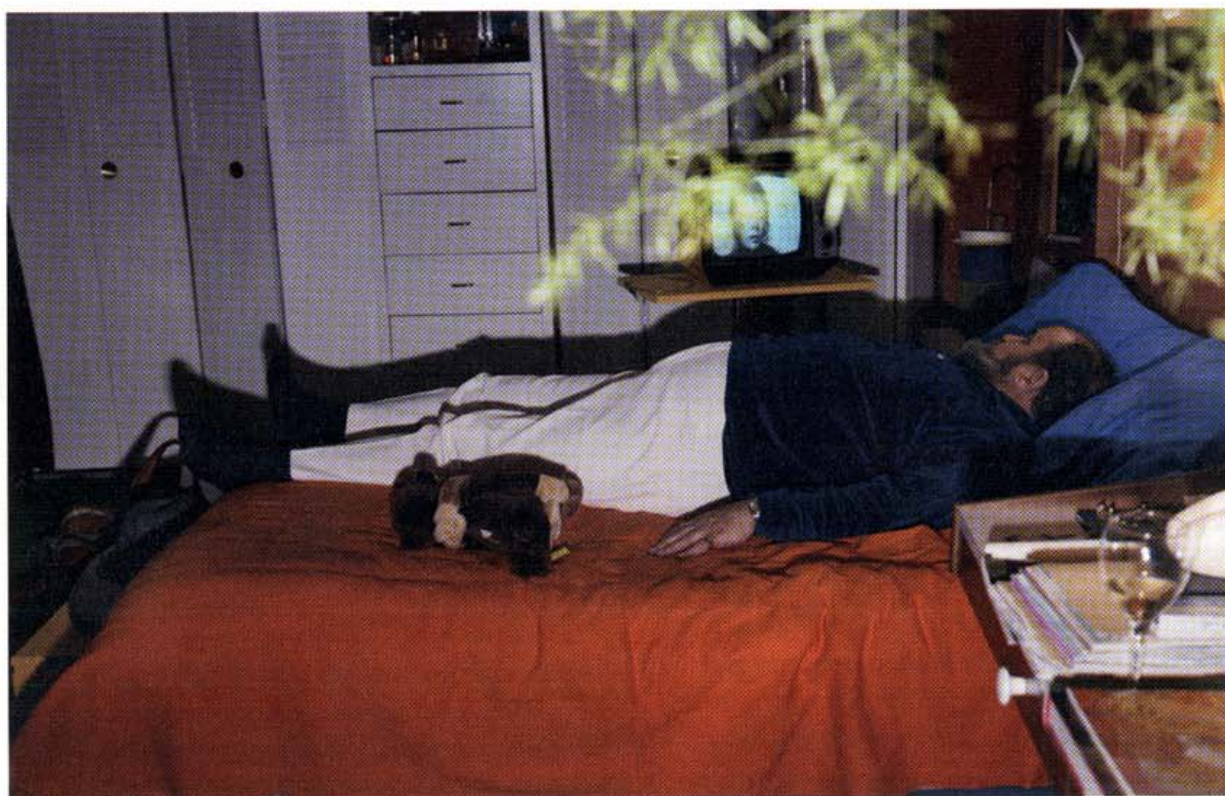
BC: *But you do include the photograph of Eddie Anderson, a 21-year-old hustler from Houston who stands outside another fast food place that has "Peace on Earth" written on the*

window. The emblem of that peace is a hamburger cradled in a red basket on the counter inside the window.

P-LD: That was the cover of the MOMA book. I was really surprised because to me that was the most contrived picture of them all and a curious choice considering MOMA's lineage stemming from Walker Evans. I just thought how plain-spoken his photographs are and how his contribution to photography was transparency, and how un-transparent, despite the fact that it's looking through a window, that particular photograph is. I mean it shouts that this picture was put together by somebody. I've always tried to keep really quiet the idea that my presence is a part of the process

work, you were obviously aware of Evans and Winogrand and Robert Frank?

P-LD: The idea of reconfiguring street photography didn't occur to me. I was interested in moving from control to serendipity. Luc Sante also said there was something providential in the lighting, and I don't see serendipity and providence as being necessarily connected. But part of the complexity of any work should be its contradictions. I definitely have tried to work with many contradictions—with conveying emotions and with clinical forms of capturing imagery. I dealt with narrative by having things be completely non-linear. In the case of the "Heads," I tried to deal with



Hartford, 1979, from "A Storybook Life," Fuji Crystal Archive print mounted to board, 16 x 20"

of making any image. Part of the reason people call my work cinematic is because I never put the camera in the position of someone holding a camera. Everybody's used to seeing photographs that look like you're part of the room. I and the camera and the point of view are outside this scene. I try to eliminate any sense that the viewer—and the photographer by inference—is participating in what is going on.

BC: Luc Sante says you set out to entirely reconfigure street photography. When you started doing the street

a chaotic, random situation by making it seem as if everything was in the hands of a higher power.

BC: Is that a residue of your conceptual background or just a way of recognizing that life is contradictory? Is it a philosophy or an aesthetic?

P-LD: No, it's completely a reflection of my sense of what life is about. Human consciousness is formed from enormous contradictions, and if people were to really think about it they would probably all go crazy.

BC: I've gone through *Thousand* half a dozen times now, image by image, and one of the things that fascinates me is figuring out what might be the connections among and between images. There seem to be thematic patterns—the skull, people sitting in chairs; then you realize people sitting runs for about 30 or 40 images. Were you conscious of organizing the images around ideas of a series of interrupted narratives?

P-LD: What's strange is that *A Storybook Life* was never meant to be a show. It was always meant to be a book, and it ended up being the most toured show I ever did; whereas *Thousand* was meant to be a show and ended up being a book. I was trying to challenge myself and

to me, maybe eight on a sheet. I gave them in random order and they were scanned in a different order, so they would come back with associations I never saw. Then I started to think, why not just make it random? The original idea was to assign each one a number and then scramble those numbers in a computer and sequence the book in exactly that order.

BC: But that wasn't done?

P-LD: It was not done. It was like, "Okay, are you going to stick with this or are you going to play with it?" and once you play with it you've already undermined the whole thing, and somebody's going to find out and you're going to get busted. So very small images were



even the conventions of publishing. Steidl said he'll never publish it again because it was so much trouble. I already had about half the Polaroids, and then I spent lot of time making new ones and going over other things. I started out with 4000, and I thought if I can't find 1000 out of that number then I should be doing something else. But in the end I couldn't and had to spend eight months working on it. At that point I would feed the Polaroids to Pascal Danguin at Steidl to be scanned, and they would be given back

printed out for me, and I had a huge board—three actually—with a grid, and I started the process of putting them in some sort of order. It took me about two weeks. The interesting thing about it was that, when images are reduced to half an inch by an inch, you can't really see the image that well anymore, and formal elements start to pop out because form gets reduced. You start to see circles everywhere. I started to arrange things in particular orders, but that wasn't going to play out over a 1000 images. I had this clock

Hartford, 1980, from "A Storybook Life," Fuji Crystal Archive print mounted to board, 16 x 20".

(I don't have any idea why I had so many of these clocks), and so there are sections divided by that image, which makes it seem diaristic. To some degree it is. *Thousand* is the first book I've done where I am the protagonist. It has more of what I would call personal photography than I've ever used, and I'm probably one of the only things in every single section. So I become the protagonist in my own book, but being the protagonist doesn't make me the hero.

BC: Obviously if you include images of a clock, then time is foregrounded; then you put in a section with skulls which introduces the idea of memento mori. So the viewer reads into the book an emerging narrative of life and death. Were you making those same associations?

P-LD: I clustered them together to make them both important and banal at the same time. If I wanted to make them important, I wouldn't have stuck them all together. This book presented a number of challenges; first, the question of your attention span. Is anyone going to look at every one of those images at one sitting, which I doubt. Then what sequence do you do it in and the extremely throwaway nature of a lot of the images. It was a kind of luxury. When you have a 1000 images, you start to play with the idea of what is acceptable as an image. Because of the size and the way they're printed on this very thin paper, their sheer number tends to level everything. When that happens you almost randomly wind up with things that pop out in your mind. Certain things come back the way memory works, and they're not necessarily the most prominent ones. It's like you go to bed hungover and all you dream about is water.

BC: There's one sequence of three images. In the first one, a beautiful woman sits behind a wine glass; the second image is a young girl whose grimace breaks what might have been an emerging pattern of feminine beauty. She's wearing a top with fish on it, and then the next image is three fish on a plate.

P-LD: I definitely saw that. There's generally a link between one picture and the next, or between one and another slightly further on, which is either thematic or formal. Sometimes there are things that nobody could know; that woman with the wineglass was my girlfriend and we fought constantly.

BC: That's not in the picture.

P-LD: I know. We were together when I edited this book. The next one was my niece who must have been four years old when that image was made. I can't honestly say what I was doing. Was I flipping my ex-girlfriend the bird? One of the things I used to hate about being a photographer was that you would always wind up feeling you had to turn your life into a photo op. Part of the reason I started setting things up was because I wanted to discretely separate the practice of photography from the living of my life. But crazy things happen. It's almost like the old phrase that truth is stranger than fiction. Sometimes I try to turn it around and make fiction stranger than truth.

BC: I was showing *Thousand* to my son and was trying to explain how I was reading the narrative. He asked me if I knew about the concept of the rhizome, which is the underground system of rooting. The idea in literary theory and philosophy is that any one point can connect to any other point, and he was suggesting that this could be a way of talking about how narrative functions in your work.





P-LD: Over the course of 1000 images there is an ebb and flow. Sometimes the connections are quite obvious and, at other times, they're not. A bit of a curve in all of that is how people experience books. When I was being educated, the most outstanding example of editing in a photography book was Robert Frank's *The Americans*. Today it seems like an extremely obvious edit, but at that time people didn't do things that way. There is a formal connection between a car and a car cover and a dead man on the side of the highway with a shroud over him. It's a logic that screams at you when

Coney Island, 1994, from "A Storybook Life," Fuji Crystal Archive print mounted to board, 16 x 20".

I N T E R V I E W

top: *Mario*, 1978,
c-print, 20 x 24"

below: *Skopelos*, 1993,
from "A Storybook Life,"
Fuji Crystal Archive print
mounted to board,
16 x 20"

facing page: *Hartford*
(*Auden with Knife*, 1988),
1989, from "A Storybook
Life," Fuji Crystal Archive
print mounted to
board, 16 x 20"



you see it, but it's not necessarily logical to put it together when you're dealing with raw imagery. Up until I got out of college, I only had three books: *The Americans*, Diane Arbus's first Aperture book and Lee Friedlander's *Self Portrait*.

BC: *I want to talk about "Heads." Your camera was obviously stationary, but I'm wondering how the lights work?*

P-LD: The shutter of the camera set off the lights through a radio signal. Because of the extremely long lens everything had to be pre-set, and the only way I could respond to someone being exactly in the place where it was in focus and where the lights were aimed at them was to put a mark on the ground. The frame was so tight that if they were just slightly in front of, or to the side of, the mark they would be out of focus and out of frame. It was important that they not be cropped in any way. These images always refer in some way to a kind of standardized imagery that people already know. Photography trades on that most of the time. In "Heads" they're like a head shot—that's not why I chose that name—but they use what is almost glamour lighting. While you can't say I make anybody look better than they actually look, I try to fit them into a photographic reference that is out of context.

BC: *They represent a typology. All those characters look like I've seen them before.*

P-LD: Part of it is the editing process. I wasn't going for a typology, but in order to come up with just 17, I had to take thousands of photographs. You could immediately throw away a bunch of them for technical reasons. What made me choose those particular ones? I didn't want the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker, but I got them anyway. There's the postman. I suppose the security guard stands in for the policeman, the businessman, albeit a black one, and the beautiful teenage girls.

BC: *But isn't that just the nature of human physiognomy? You are photographing people after all.*

P-LD: What makes somebody more interesting than somebody else anyway? Often it's who they're standing next to. It's symptomatic of American culture that the ideals people have of attractiveness have been established and they're all very youth oriented. People can be extremely sophisticated looking, and the minute they open their mouths out comes something valley girl and high pitched. I guess one of the advantages of photographs is that you don't have to listen to



them. I don't know how well known it is, but "Heads" was meant to be the inaugural show of PaceWildenstein's new gallery when it opened on 25th Street. September the 13th, 2001, was the opening day. The review in the *The New York Times* had already been written but it made it seem that these were all Everypeople, and after that the work got re-contextualized in a way that I didn't intend.

BC: *Why such a radical reduction—from thousands of images to just 17? Was it to fit the space?*

P-LD: It had nothing to do with that. Unlike other things I've done, I knew these were going to be seen together. Because they're so reductive and simplified in form, you can't help but see one as part of a series, and for that alone you want to reduce the number of things it refers to. One of the most difficult things was not just to get them technically right but to get images that seemed significantly different from one another, which is maybe where the taxonomy comes in. To get one to have enough contrast to the other one, you almost have to pick an entirely different type. It was all done in Times Square, and you stand for hours and hours and everybody starts to look the same.

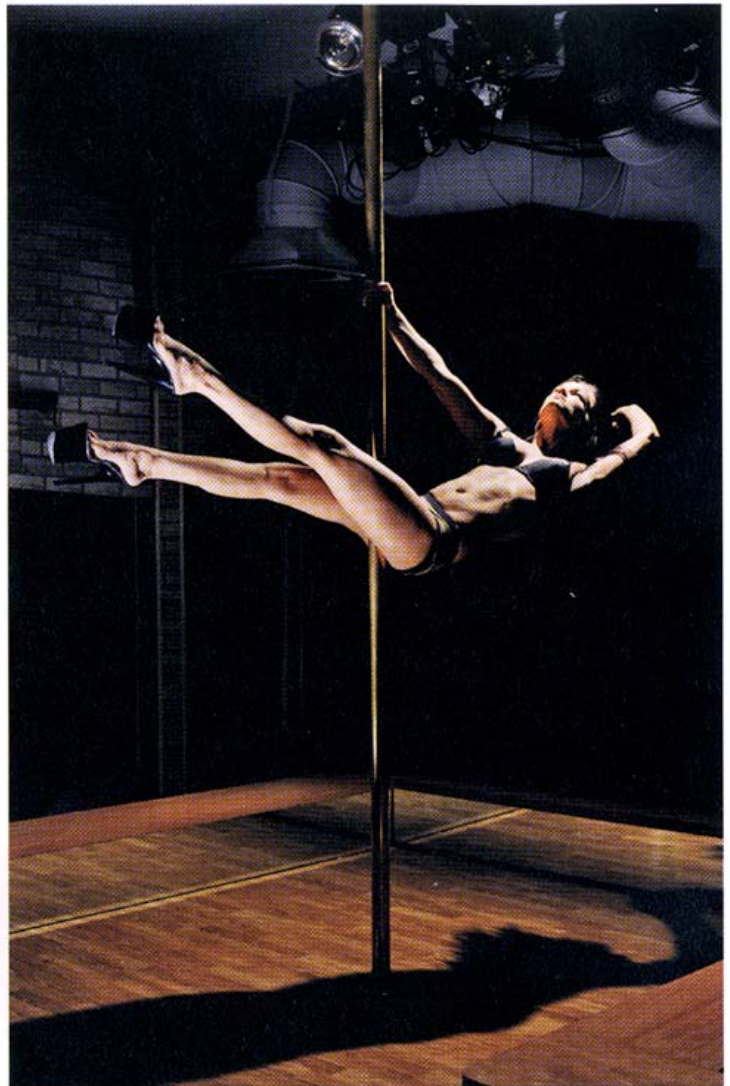
BC: *Did anybody blink?*

P-LD: Because it's not as dark as it actually seems in the photograph, the flash doesn't seem as bright as it looks. Some people did and some didn't. You have to understand these are construction sites, too, so there's a lot of stuff going around. It's noisy and it's very crowded. The scaffolding was to channel people because when they see a big camera on a tripod, they go out of their way. So they were forced to follow this course like cattle. A small number of people realized what was going on. Rarely did anyone object and the most anyone would say was, "Did you just take my picture?" And I would say, "Yes," and they would go, "Oh," and leave. Or they thought I was making a movie and they would wave and say something like "Hi, Mom." The third and negative reaction would be, "What are you doing?" At first I didn't really know how to respond, then I realized that the biggest non sequitur I could come up with was to say I was working on an art project.

BC: *That would send them away in no time.*

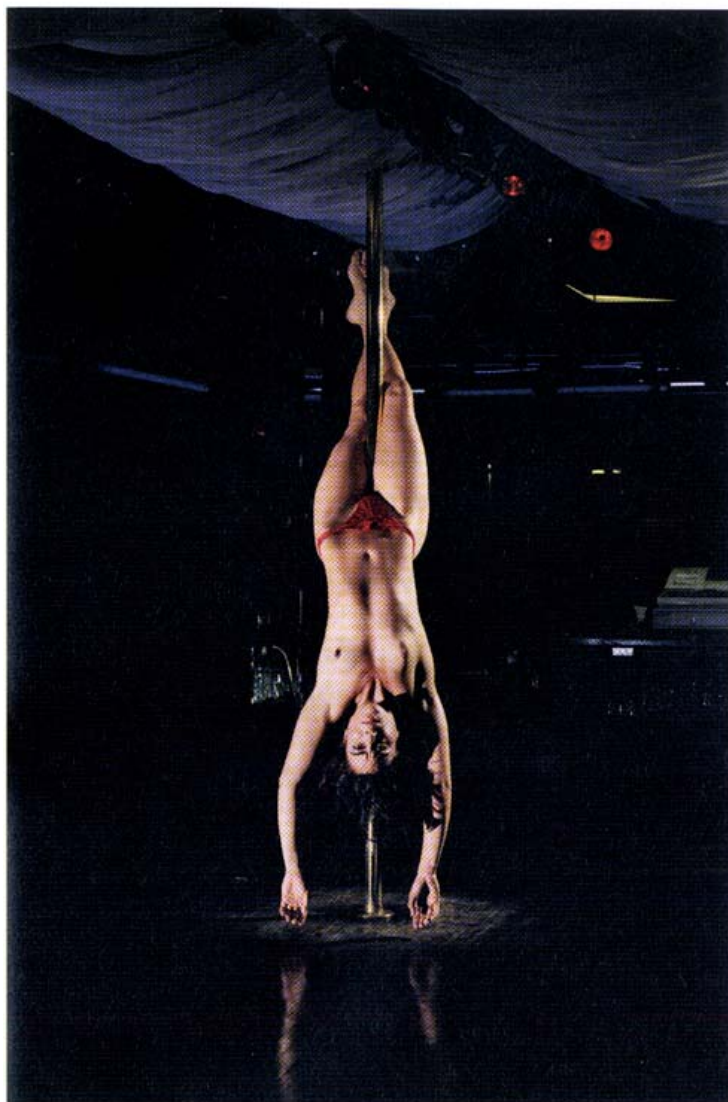
P-LD: In no time. The project took about a year and a half. I didn't go out every day, but I figured by the number of rolls of film I shot that I photographed about 3000 people.

BC: *One of the most interesting of the images in A Storybook Life is Willowemoc. It's a picture of a single ball in the forest and, of course, you automatically think of the child the ball belongs to. Where is he or she? Has the child been abducted?*



What's going on? In Thousand, there's a nude woman standing in that same place in the forest (there's also a man and a whole series of variations at the same site). As a viewer you wonder what is that naked woman doing in the forest? What is her connection to the missing child? Your inclination is to become the narrator and tell the story to yourself.

P-LD: I didn't have any expectation that anyone looking at *Thousand* would be familiar with *A Storybook Life*. But that particular forest was actually a tree farm that had been let go. The trees are all in a grid, and I found it an interesting contradiction that this natural place would be so structured. I'm not sure if the photographs you're talking about were all done at the same time, but I definitely knew that in looking at the book they would be an indication of time passing. I also have to say that there are psychological aspects to why things are put where they are that I don't even realize. If I were going to give you my dime-store psychoanalysis, I would say there was me,



a naked woman and a baby's toy. I married that woman and we did have a child, but we didn't have a child then and we weren't married yet.

BC: *There's another photograph included in A Storybook Life of a baby lying on a forest floor in Greece where the baby looks to be in awe, as if it has been visited by god. That image seemed like an answer to the forest and ball picture that you'd shot earlier in the tree farm.*

P-LD: That child is the product of the relationship with the woman in the forest. His name is Bruno and he's my son. I set up that photograph and put a light in the tree above. I wanted the baby to be crying, and that's what I thought was going to happen, but it didn't. He was perfectly comfortable; the flash went off a few times and it didn't seem to bother him. And he was in awe of whatever was going on.

BC: *You have a complex way of using people who are close to you.*

P-LD: Think of photography as it exists in the art world, and let's just take the biggest fish in the ocean, Andreas Gursky or Thomas Struth. Every one of the Germans makes me look as if I'm self-indulgent. Then you can take Nan Goldin at the other end of the spectrum. There is something confessional in the work that relies on an empathetic response, not to the quality of the picture, but to the nature of the experience. I'm not asking for that either.

BC: *Yet you have images that bring Nan Goldin to mind. In Thousand we see a man and a woman in bed, an intimacy is implied, and you're present as the photographer. The book cuts across a wide spectrum because there are also images that take a page out of Guy Bourdin's fashion work. You seem to have worked through a repertoire of possibilities.*

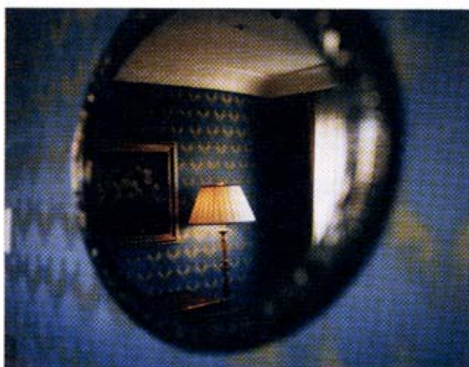
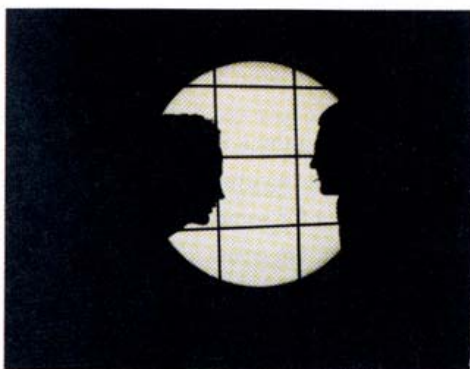
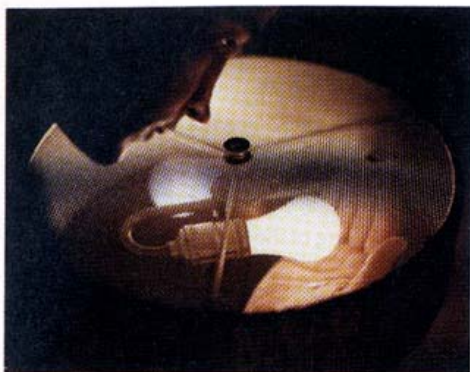
P-LD: Well, it is a visual product, and I think it's especially ridiculous that some people have made a virtue of denying style. I mean, I'm making something for someone to look at. I'm not candy-coating the pill, but I'm trying to create a delivery system for the message that is compelling.

BC: *You framed A Storybook Life with a pair of fairly intimate images, which is an unusual way for someone who is regarded as cold and distant to bookend a story. Implicit in that frame is something notably autobiographical.*

P-LD: There was a lot of auto-something. Biographical is maybe too precise a term. A lot of people have expressed anger at the idea that I would not identify who the people were. In both *Thousand* and *A Storybook Life* there is nothing more than time and place indicated; there is no text and there's not even a name. That seems to be intentionally perverse on my part, but it's not at all. It's because I don't expect things to be self-evident, but when you're trying to convey something as vague as a psychological or emotional state, I think to give somebody clues is faking it.

BC: *And you don't want to be the village explainer either. You were critical of your own earlier work because you felt it was too instructional and didactic.*

P-LD: I really don't want to be the village explainer. You can't close the circle; you have to give somebody a point of entry and let them do some work themselves, which ultimately is much more satisfying. That's always been a problematic aspect of photography within the art world because the medium displays a totally different kind of reticence. You can have reticence in most other forms of art, and people don't try to figure it out. That's the profound part. Unfortunately with something as reality-based as photography, when there's something incomplete, people tend to see it as that, as lacking. It's been a frustration all along.



this and facing page: from "Thousand," 2007, Polaroids.

BC: Your observation suggests that photography is still seen as so much a child of reality that it can't partake of the same permissions that art can.

P-LD: I'm absolutely saying that and it remains a problem. However cold the art world's embrace of photography might seem right now, there was a time when it was almost on a par. It's fallen back, but I don't think it was ever allowed the same privileges and rights as the other mediums.

BC: When you started doing "Lucky 13" did you have a sense that you were a provocateur?

P-LD: The hardest part about the work was to get over the idea that it was a cliché. At that time a bunch of other people were doing things with pole dancers. Sam Taylor-Wood did pictures of herself where she removed the pole; there was The White Stripes video directed by Sofia Coppola with Kate Moss dancing on a pole. I think there was a period where people were doing it as exercise. I had to get over the idea that everything had to be original. Most people say that nothing is original anyway, but I don't believe that. I just don't think it necessarily makes it better and should not be a discouragement. I didn't know how the images were going to come out since it was difficult to set those situations up. It's not an easy environment. I mean just getting an appointment or getting people to call you back was difficult. I was working in the club before it opened, which was also a problem. These women work until four in the morning, and then they have to show up for some photographer they probably suspect of having ulterior motives. They had to come in at 11:00 a.m. because, strangely enough, those clubs open for lunch.

BC: What made you decide to do pole dancers in the first place? Why would they have been compelling subject matter?

P-LD: I really thought of them as falling. And I was thinking about sex and death, Eros and Thanatos. I usually don't say what the inspiration was for the dancers, but I had a picture that was on the cover of *The New York Times* pasted on the lamp on my desk which was just the stripes of one of the towers and a guy upside down, falling. It's almost abstract because it was taken from so far away. I'm afraid of heights; I can't even go on a balcony without getting vertigo. So for me, jumping would be the worst possible way to die. The pole dancers were all supposed to be inverted, but the problem was that they couldn't do what I wanted. If you go to a strip club they don't really dance; they just swing around on the pole. To climb up a pole is hard enough, then to turn around, turn upside down and do this whole manoeuvre is physically demanding in the extreme. It was very hard to find people who could do it.

BC: Do you always start out to do a body of work rather than a discrete photograph?

P-LD: I have tended to use a systematic approach with certain parameters that get repeated in each picture. It's hard for me to think that way anymore. There's a lot of work out there that is heterogeneous. In the same show everybody is putting everything together in ways that don't necessarily make any sense, that incorporate different styles, different references. And I'm not just talking about photography. So I'm faced with this problem: if I were to do a body of work that incorporated different kinds of subjects done in different kinds of ways, am I setting myself up to be accused of being trendy or incapable of breaking out of what is a trick? Although it doesn't seem like it, I usually avoid content which

could be called provocative, and just by using pole dancers you set up a certain reaction. Sometimes the content of the images gets subsumed in the reaction, and you have to deal with that. In the case of the pole dancers, a lot of times they were viewed formally and not as nearly naked women, upside down on a pole.

BC: *Larry Sultan in The Valley and Timothy Greenfield-Sanders in his XXX: 30 Porn-Star Portraits are working similar subject matter, but nobody is doing sex. There's always this displacement; the subject matter is being used in such a way that it isn't about what the life is about.*

P-LD: If my topic was their particular social situation, I could have dealt with it in the same way. There is something dispassionate about the contortions they go through. Basically the service they provide is not dancing, it's lap dancing. That's how they make their money; they don't make any money dancing on a pole. Lap dances are 20 or 25 bucks and you're not allowed to touch anybody. It's asexual, and I don't know why anybody would waste their money on it, but they do.

BC: *You have to admire anyone who can hold themselves upside down on a pole like that.*

P-LD: They're not holding themselves; they're actually twisting around and spinning, but they're frozen by the flash. I had a motor drive. The dancers would do it but they couldn't do it for very long. After 20 minutes they would be completely exhausted and so sweaty that they couldn't hold the pole.

BC: *I know of at least 10 narratives that you did for W Magazine. I'm intrigued by your move out of an art background—with an academic pedigree from Boston and Yale—into fashion. You seemed able to make an easy transition.*

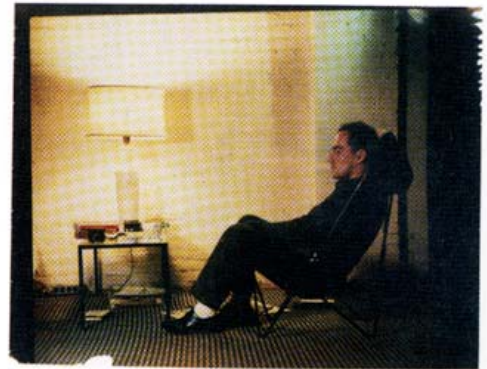
P-LD: Some of it was necessity. I needed to work when I got out of art school, and working in the media didn't bother me. There wasn't a huge amount of opportunity otherwise. It is, as photography is for me sometimes, a way of having experiences that you either couldn't afford or wouldn't do otherwise. I had worked for magazines long before W asked me to do anything. To create a story was both natural for me and was also what they wanted.

BC: *With the Marc Jacobs shoot everyone is in rooms with expensive contemporary paintings—Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin—so the backdrop is the art world.*

P-LD: In that particular sequence it was because that was the art issue, and I was photographing Marc Jacobs's collection. That was the point of the article, and to his credit, he said rather than just send somebody to photograph my collection, why don't you ask Philip-Lorca diCorcia to do it. He couldn't have been a better subject, and so for two days I went around making images, every one of which includes him. But it was an easy match. The environment is always a part of my work, and his environment was the subject. He was actually secondary.

BC: *What's going on in "A Perfect World"? I can recognize the images; I just don't know what the story is. The blonde woman looking out the window looks as if she's a potential suicide, while the two women behind her look like product endorsements for some kind of antiseptically perfect living.*

P-LD: She's supposed to be the daughter of one of them. They're this clichéd dysfunctional, rich family. There's the couple, the dark-haired friend and the two children, coupled with their estrangement from each other and the kid's isolation. There's one photograph where she's inside and the family is outside by the pool.





this and facing page: from "Thousand," 2007, Polaroids.

We tried to keep it simple. Nobody noticed it, but there's no handle on the door, so you actually can't get out. The thing about those images is that they're done in three or four days because we have to move a lot of stuff from one location to another.

BC: *Is it storyboarded?*

P-LD: It's storyboarded after the fact. You have the Polaroids after the first day, and you start to think, where are there gaps? You know your location, and rarely does it get spontaneous because you have a van full of people, so you just can't say, "Okay, let's stop here." Normally, I've seen scouting photos, and for the first two days I go around to all the locations which have been scouted, and if there's casting to do, we do the casting. Then we just put it all together. The actual point of view, the props, and how the images are arranged, that I have to make up on the spot.

BC: *In the photo sequence called The Secret History, you include a tributary photograph that is right out of The Americans. I thought it was an homage.*

P-LD: Sure. Except I was actually in a car chasing that cable car. I've even ripped myself off. I did a thing with Isabelle Huppert where I absolutely made her like a "Head." I set it up in exactly the same way.

BC: *The last image in that sequence, called La Belle Isabelle, is an example of your ability to compose abstract spaces. Does it represent a formal attempt to manipulate the photograph?*

P-LD: I tend to have spaces within spaces, looking through something within the rectangle of the image, or with other rectangles to break up the space. Sometimes that's a necessity, but I don't like straight-on pictures. It was difficult for me to do the "Heads" without any of that. But the technical part is now much easier. It used to be that if you had somebody in the foreground in one space and somebody in the background in another space, they couldn't both be in focus. I don't like things that are out of focus, or blurs. That's why I don't like Thomas Struth's museum pictures. I mean it shouts that it's a photograph.

BC: *So you wouldn't have much patience for Thomas Ruff's porn shots pulled from the Internet?*

P-LD: They're so abstract you don't think of them as having to conform to the same rules. When you abstract a pornographic image, there is a tension between the content and the abstraction, and that's the line they are meant to walk. That's basically what they're about.

BC: *But when you do fashion or commercial photography, it doesn't in any way violate art? Implicit in the "Fashioning Fiction" show, which looks at photography in the '90s, is the idea that these approaches to image making have crossed over so thoroughly into one another's terrain that their hybridity isn't an issue anymore?*

P-LD: I'm having to grapple with that now because it's not a matter of choice anymore. I mean you could ignore it. I'm pretty illiterate in the Photoshop/Final Cut world, but you can always find somebody else to do it for you.

BC: *You can remain illiterate and still function?*

P-LD: Yes, you can. That's one of the perks of having moved on in my career. They'll even do it for free. It's a huge issue. The digital world has almost eliminated the analog world; Polaroid is officially out of business. It's becoming increasingly difficult to find people who even process film anymore, and the quality of digital images

has increased to the point where the difference is going to be so little that it won't be worth the enormous hassle that comes with using analog processes.

BC: *Are you nostalgic about that change?*

P-LD: Well, I can barely see because I spent so much time in a darkroom, so I'm not really nostalgic about those hours spent in a grungy, smelly little room feeding things into processors.

BC: *I was talking on a higher plane than that.*

P-LD: I don't like instant feedback for one, and that's something people really appreciate, especially in the commercial world. I mean they're looking right over your shoulder. People immediately know what they've done and so they adjust it. There's no better indication that you're going to be dissatisfied with your work than feeling really good about it when you're doing it. If you over resolve things at the point of making things, then they're going to be underdone later.

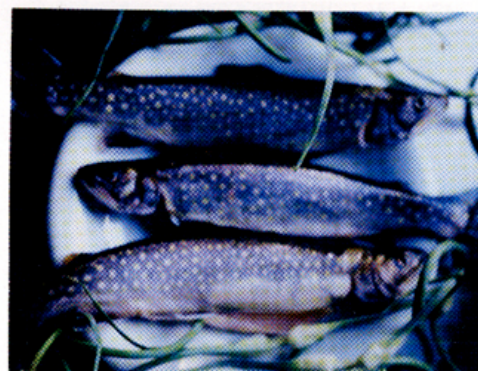
BC: *I was sure when I looked at the images in "Cuba Libre" that you were acknowledging the influence of Edward Hopper. At least four of your images look like remakes of specific Hopper paintings.*

P-LD: When we saw that bar we said this is really cool, and as soon as we started it was apparent that it was Hopper-esque.

BC: *But you've got the woman sitting on the bed in a louvred room, the office image looks vaguely like the office in the Hopper painting.*

P-LD: I'm certainly aware of all those images, but at the time the only one I was conscious of being Hopper-esque was the bar picture. The backstory that I gave the magazine was that this was about a bureaucrat who had been left behind when the Russians moved out; she still had her day job and then she had her night life. I won an award for that story when MOMA did the "Fashioning Fiction" show, and it was a weird confirmation of my impression that a lot of critics see validation in connections. In hindsight I thought the worst thing they could have done was to put that story in that particular show. They were just asking critics to accuse us of doing pastiches, and that's exactly what happened. They made the even bigger mistake of putting a Cindy Sherman thing in there. She's the Gold Standard for quality photography, and for her to do the same thing she always does, but to wear some designer's clothing, is not the same problem faced by any one of these real fashion photographers. The idea of constantly having to invent something from nothing under high-pressure circumstances is different from playing around in your studio. Beyond that, the museum had a real problem. They actually said to me that the show would never have been put up in Manhattan. It was because it was in the temporary headquarters in Queen's that they even allowed it. They're so highfalutin that a show of fashion photography wouldn't have made it to the main museum. I think they felt the way to validate the work was to make it seem referential. When I used to go to MOMA as a kid, Irving Penn was always up on the wall, and so was Avedon, but that's pretty much where it ended.

BC: *There is a concept in literary criticism called the anxiety of influence, and it underlines the problem of writing in the shadow of predecessors like Shakespeare and Cervantes. The equivalent problem in the area of fashion photography would be William Klein, Guy Bourdin, Helmut Newton and the breakthrough work they were*



doing in the '70s. You weren't doing that kind of work but you must have been aware of it.

P-LD: I have to say as an aspiring photographer I really admired that—Helmut Newton somewhat less but Guy Bourdin and Klein absolutely. There were a number of people, even Avedon to some degree, especially the early things.

BC: Because something has been done, is that an impetus for doing it even better? Does it encourage you to find a corner of that kind of work and develop it? I guess the anxiety is implicated in this notion of originality: you don't always want to make it new.

P-LD: If there is some conceptual basis to the motivations that lead me to my work, it starts out without any tangible support. So you're flying by the seat of your pants for a while, and you don't have any idea how things are going to work out. Even with a loaded subject like pole dancers, it's not like I knew what it was going to look like, or whether it was even going to be interesting. That alone is a form of anxiety.

BC: And it's always contingent—you don't ever know what you're going to get?



P-LD: You don't ever really know what you're going to get, and even to the degree that I have set things up, either for a fashion photograph or for myself, I never really know. Within all the constrictions and restrictions that you apply to the situation, there is always the opportunity for something unsuspecting to happen, and that's the opportunity you have to leave the door open for. Because it you're so fixed on making it perfect, you're not going to see something outside the realm of your expectations

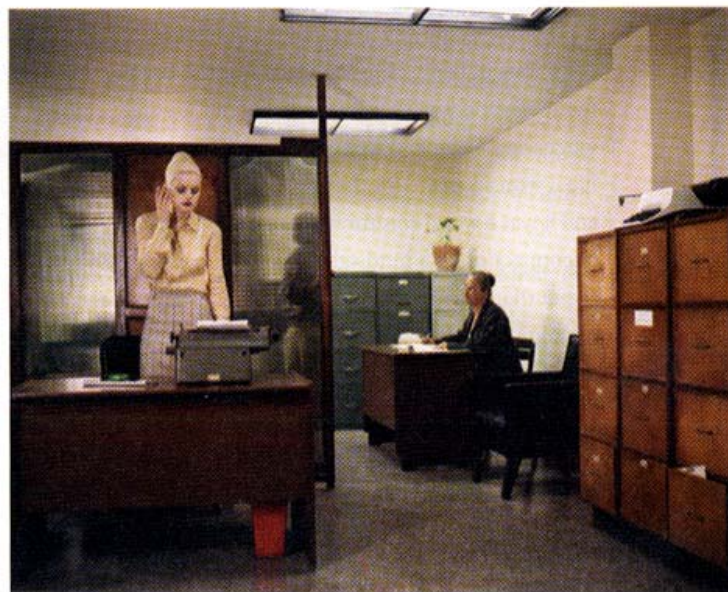
that is actually much better than anything you could have conceived.

BC: In your binary between control and serendipity, the door is being kept open for serendipity?

P-LD: More so now. Meaning comes from putting yourself in meaningful situations. You can't manufacture it. If a situation happens to be one that is not loaded with social significance, then that offers the opportunity to open up different possibilities for meaning, especially in a medium like photography which is so mired in the traditions of photojournalism and voyeurism. There's the basic flat-out pleasure of looking at somebody else, the Other. In order to circumvent that, or undermine that, you have to leave yourself open to an enormous amount of possibility.

BC: There's a captivating image in *A Storybook Life* of a woman and a child in an outdoor shower in Wellfleet that certainly engages us in the pleasure of looking.

P-LD: That was my wife and niece, and my wife was pregnant. There are two animating things about that: one, the position of the camera is a little bit stealthy, a bit voyeuristic,



and two, the shower has been backlit with a flash so that the drops become illuminated and are almost individualized. There's a tension between the grace of the gesture and the age difference. I guess whether or not anybody knows that she's pregnant is irrelevant, but I knew. So you could see it as a meteor shower of water and this illicit point of view.

BC: But it's not predatory in any way?

P-LD: I didn't think it was. There are also other things at work—the fact that you can't see her face. Rules get affirmed

or denied in a very specific way which, since I was trained as a postmodernist, bring up those rules themselves and then become tools for adding complexity to the work. In the end, the emotional part and the intellectual part, or the non-emotional, technical part, are all supposed to co-exist. I think it's imperative to make sure that not any one of those things overwhelms the other, so that you're not just selling anybody a cheap emotion. I'm not sure there is an emotion that a photograph could convey that you wouldn't have had already. It's really just reminding you of emotion.

BC: What keeps you interested?

P-LD: I go in and out. *Thousand* was done in between projects, so was *A Storybook Life*. That period was four years or so, and for the first two of those years I didn't pick up a camera. I was editing, so it's not like I removed myself from the world. But people would ask, "What are you doing now?" I'd say, "Nothing," and they'd come back with, "What do you mean you're

doing nothing?" as if it were a crime or something. What's the point of being successful if you can't do nothing?

BC: What compels you to start doing something once you've stopped?

P-LD: The anxiety of influence, the pea under the mattress. I get too comfortable, and there's this little thing way down there that's starts to annoy me because I've been lying around too long. It's not like I don't do anything. I fail at things, too. A four-year period that produces one project might include two others that fall flat. The last project I did was the pole dancers and it's four years old now. In the meantime I've started a couple of things, and I don't know if it's the anxiety of influence, but they felt like ideas. I thought they were good ones, but the product still looked like the illustration of an idea. And as I said before, that's just not enough. ■

facing page, left and right:
Untitled photographs, from
"Cuba Libre," for *W*, March, 2000,
chromogenic colour prints, each
approximately 30 x 40".

this page: *Major Tom; Kansas
City, Kansas*, \$20, 1990-92, from
"Hustlers" series, Fuji Crystal
Archive print mounted to
Dibond, 30 x 40".

