

The Performance Space of the Photograph: From 'The Anti-Photographers' to 'The Directorial Mode'

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on work in the 1998 exhibition *Sightings: New Photographic Art*, ICA, London, the emergence of narrative photography in the 1990s and the tension between the documentary and the fictional within these contemporary works will be explored through the concept of the performance space of the photograph. Two articles from one issue of *Artforum*, in September 1976 – AD Coleman's 'The Directorial Mode: Notes Towards a Definition', and Nancy Foote's 'The Anti-Photographers' – allow for a consideration of the histories of narrative photography and conceptual art that jointly inform this contemporary practice with images by Jennifer Bornstein, Sharon Lockhart and Annika von Hausswolff providing this paper's focus.

'The Anti-Photographers' and 'The Directorial Mode' are titles of two articles published in a special issue of *Artforum* in September 1976. This issue focused on photography, with other articles on Nadar, Marey and recent photography books, alongside AD Coleman's article 'The Directorial Mode: Notes Toward a Definition' and Nancy Foote's 'The Anti-Photographers'. In Coleman and Foote's articles, the writers set out theoretical and historical groundings for contemporaneous photographic art, with Coleman's article focusing on the history of photography, whilst Foote considers the use of photography in conceptual art. In both articles, the authors consider the uneasy status of photography in art, with the works they discuss presenting challenges to modernist and realist notions of photography.

Common to both Coleman's and Foote's arguments is the importance of the photograph as documenting a performance – whether this is a staged scene in the tradition of the Victorian tableaux, or the trace of an ephemeral event, such as Richard Long walking a line. I am going to focus on this idea of the photograph as a performance space to explore the ways in which these two articles can help us to consider the more recent trend of narrative photography

in the 1990s. Often characterised as cinematic, with the prevalence of large-scale, colour works, I want to consider these works within a history of photography, to see how conceptions of the photographic and traditions of art photography are replayed in these fragmented narrative scenes. The focus on the cinematic, I would argue, obscures this work's relationship to a history of photographic art, with the challenges presented to modernist photography by conceptual art artificially confining the historical context to after conceptual art, missing out a rich photographic history, which already engages photography with both painting and cinema.

To discuss this performance space in contemporary narrative photography, I will look at the 1998 exhibition at the ICA in London, *Sightings: New Photographic Art*. This was one of a number of exhibitions taking place internationally during the late 1990s and early 2000s that attempted to map out the popularity of photography in contemporary art.¹ By looking at *Sightings*, I want to see how the rise of large-scale, colour photography in the art gallery has reframed issues of photographic conventions and expectations that have been the material of much postmodern art. Focusing particularly on works by Jennifer Bornstein, Sharon Lockhart and Annika von Hausswolff, I want to consider how previous models of photography are re-animated in their work – primarily the portrait and the documentary image. By taking genres such as the portrait, and restaging them in a way that both acknowledges the challenges of postmodernism and conceptual art, as well as embracing the visual pleasures normally associated with painting and cinema, these works articulate a sense of history dragging on the medium of photography. By considering their works in this exhibition as being in dialogue with the concerns of both Coleman's concept of the directorial mode, and Foote's concept of the anti-photographers, I will propose links with staged photography in the broader historical context than the usual postmodern points of comparison such as the work of Jeff Wall, Cindy Sherman or Richard Prince. I want to stage the emergence of narrative photography in the 1990s in the context of this fertile moment in the 1970s, with the theorising of the history of photography and the use of photography in art; a

moment in which the long and diverse history of photography was being revisited and re-evaluated.

During the mid-1970s, photography had become a key medium for experimentation in conceptual art, whilst its status as a fine art form was only just being consolidated in the museum and the market. This ambiguous status – as a medium almost 150 years old, with a history of art photography that was only recently being assimilated into the history of art – is one that colours the different reception and conceptualisation of photography presented in the two articles by Coleman and Foote. Whilst Coleman sees his project as unearthing a hidden photographic history that stretches back into the nineteenth century, Foote stages the use of photography by conceptual artists as being somehow ‘unphotographic’. During this period debates around the photographic, and the relation of the history of photography to the history of art intersect with the dematerialisation of the art object, with the photograph being a way to subvert the notion of an art object by operating in the margins of documentation. Definitions of the photographic varied widely, with much at stake in its theoretical construction. My interest here is the exchange between vernacular uses of photography coming into art as ‘anti-photography’ and art photography that remained outside of fine art. By exploring similarities in these two areas, I hope to show some commonality to their definitions of the photographic, as related to the performance space of the photograph. During the 1970s photography had been embraced by the museum in certain guises – primarily modernist and personal documentary, as championed at the Museum of Modern Art, New York by John Szarkowski – however these two articles described approaches to photography that were not seen as part of its identity in the museum.²

The Anti-Photographers

Nancy Foote’s article ‘The Anti-Photographers’ presents an argument that is familiar to many art historians interested in conceptual art and the position of photography within postmodernism. She starts by describing the discrepancy

between 'fine art photography' and the use of photography in conceptual art. Whilst 'fine art photography' is seen as not quite fine art within the New York gallery system (she tells the reader how fine art photography is sold alongside prints at Castelli gallery), there is no question that photography in conceptual art should not be seen as fine art. As she ironically puts it: 'For every photographer who clamors to make it as an artist, there is an artist running a grave risk of turning into a photographer.'³ She then rehearses a now well-worn argument, that whilst photography is 'crucial' to conceptual type work, the main use of photography is as 'documentation', although she admits that 'it can be argued that photograph offers certain specific qualities and possibilities that have done much to inform and channel artistic strategies and to nurture the development of idea-orientated art.' She goes on to say 'Despite its dependence on photography, however, conceptual art exhibits little *photographic* self-consciousness, setting itself apart from so-called serious photography by a snapshot-like amateurism and nonchalance...'(46).

Foote then cites Alfred Stieglitz's 'PR campaign' for photography in the early decades of the twentieth century, giving the modernist terms against which these 'anti-photographers' are working against: namely the focus on 'the unique photographic print' and 'abstract formal values', which for Foote conceal the photograph's 'unique ability to gather, preserve, and present outside information' (46, 48).⁴ She then contrasts Stieglitz's conception of modernist photography with the Duchampian approach to the photograph as ready-made seen in this new generation of artists (I'm putting aside for the moment the argument that photograph becomes a modernist art form through this reappraisal of photograph in the 1960s)⁵. She tells how these 'Duchampian underpinnings strip the photograph of its artistic pretensions, changing it from a mirror to a window. What it reveals becomes important, not what it is.'(48) This shift from 'a mirror to a window' follows the logic of conceptual artists using photography as straightforward documentation. However, this idea of photography operating as a window belies the range of photographic styles that are shown in the illustrations for this article. Whilst Foote's comments are illuminating for many of the conceptual works she refers to, this thesis does not

cover the theatricality of Eleanor Antin's *100 Boots*, the mock-heroic landscapes of Hamish Fulton, or the precision of the Becher's typologies. To explore the tensions within Foote's construction of the 'anti-photographer', which I will argue



Fig. 1: Vito Acconci, *Trademarks*, 1970. Copyright Vito Acconci. Bottom left image was used as an illustration for the article 'The Anti-Photographers'.

come from situating their practices only in relation to a Stieglitz-style modernism, I want to consider a few of the artworks illustrated in the article.

The opening image, from Vito Acconci's *Trademarks*, 1970, seems to support her argument, with the trace of his teethmarks on his arm neatly fitting the focus

on indexicality that dominates discussions of this kind of work (fig. 1). The full series is a combination of text, photographs and prints made from Acconci's body, circulating around the ephemeral performance that took place in front of the camera. The text that accompanies this project reads:

Sitting naked on the floor, and biting myself: Biting as many parts of my body as my mouth can reach.

Printer's ink is applied to each bite; bite-prints are stamped, like finger-prints.

We are told that the photographer is Bill Beckley, with the photographs showing Acconci biting himself, and the marks made on him. The photographing of these traces on his body, which are then inked and printed onto paper, can be argued to reveal a photographic self-consciousness, in that the piece can be read as the body of the artist generating parodies of the indexical photograph with the indexical prints. Although the prints are not displayed in this representation of the work, the imagined, smudged image tells the viewer little about its making, rendering the transparency of the photograph into an incomplete trace of an event that the viewer is no longer privy to.⁶ In this piece, key characteristics that Foote identifies are shown: the use of photographs in series, the use of photographs with text, the use of photographs to collapse a long performance into a few frames, and equally to collapse distance in the bringing into the gallery evidence of a distant action. Whilst I do not want to contest the importance of documentation and the consideration of the photograph's indexicality, to simply see the use of photography as 'unphotographic' ignores the sophisticated and disparate uses of photography by conceptual artists such as Acconci. (A different, humorous meditation on the indexical could be seen in the illustration of one of John Baldessari's photographs in which his finger literally points in the photograph, the index materialised, details from the work *Choosing: Green Beans*, 1971).⁷

Robert Smithson's *Nine Mirror Displacements*, Yucatan, 1969, like Acconci's *Trademarks*, also plays with the absent presence of the artist and the action

presented in the photograph. From the spread in the magazine, the amateurism of the photographs and their 'nonchalance' might be supported. However, when the colour slides that these images are taken from are viewed, a rather different impression of this work is given (fig. 2).

The lushness of Smithson's images, with the mirrors glinting in the light, reflect back to the viewer a magical scene, a mirage rather than an artwork, a moment in time concretised as a space within the photograph. As Smithson writes in his essay 'Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan', 1969,

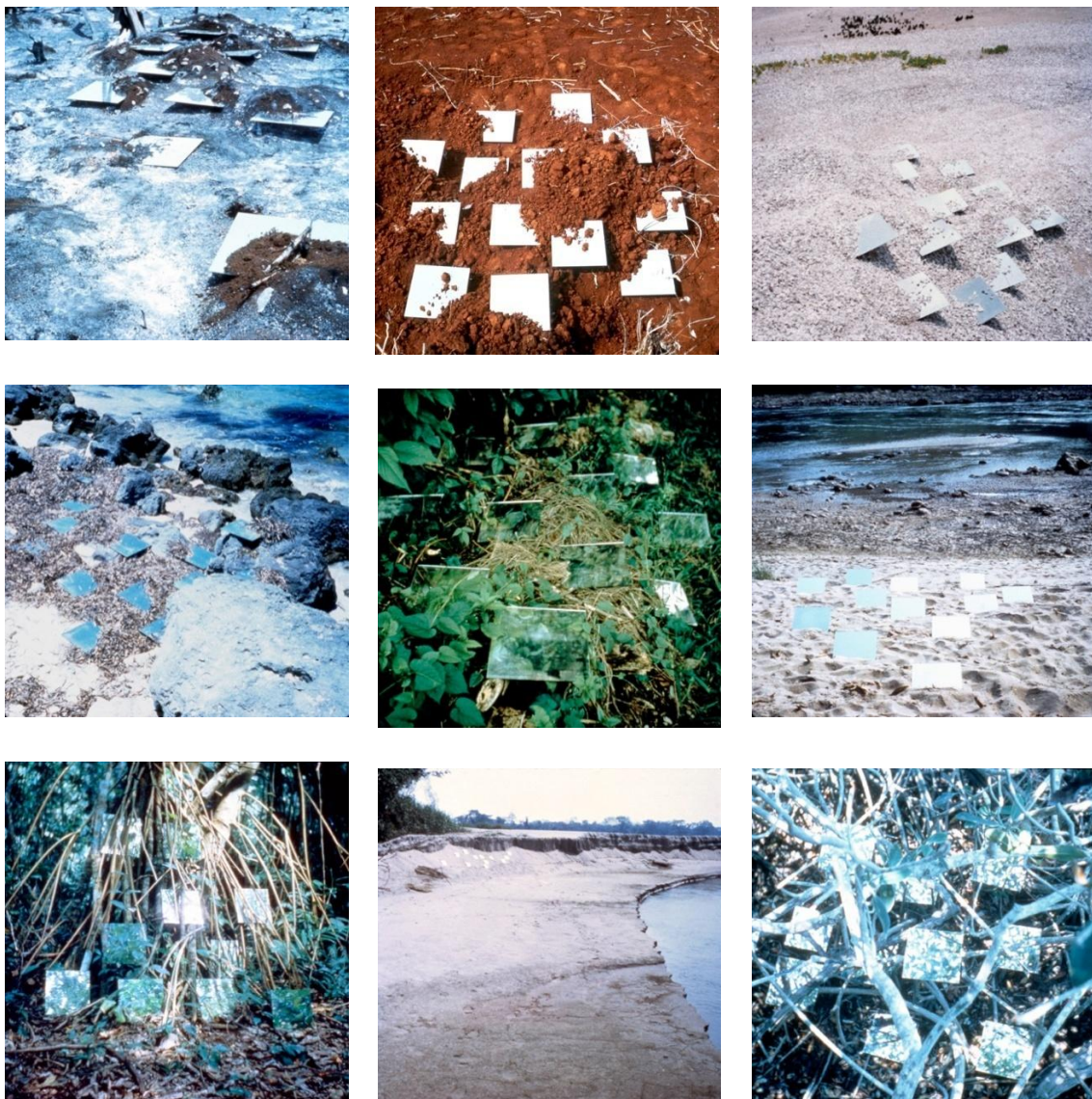


Fig. 2: Robert Smithson, *Yucatan Mirror Displacements (1-9)*, 1969. Nine cibachrome prints from chromogenic 35mm slides. © Estate of Robert Smithson/DACS, London/VAGA, New York 2010. Image courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York.

If you visit the sites (a doubtful probability) you find nothing but memory-traces, for the mirror displacements were dismantled right after they were photographed. The mirrors are somewhere in New York. The reflected light has been erased. ... Yucatan is elsewhere.⁸

Through the combination of photographs and text, the viewer is presented with a scene that plays with a teasingly impossible closeness, a relationship to a performance that can never be more than an imagined encounter. Here, as in Acconci's work, the photograph's potential for documentation is played with as being not simply 'a window', but as a site of fantasy that requires the viewer's complicity in believing and constructing the scene being viewed, apart from any notion of factual completeness. This construction of a scene can also be found in Eleanor Antin's marauding boots, which are photographed by Philip Steinmetz, with the accuracy of the titles – for example *100 Boots in the Market*, Solana Beach, Calif., May 17, 1971, 9.30am – ironically attempting to tie down these fantasised scenes which appear more like film stills than a documented reality (fig. 3).⁹ In these examples, the performance space of the photograph is emphasised for the viewer, as both a scene that we can take part in, a particular moment in time, and a staged scene for the camera.



Fig . 3: Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots in the Market*, Solana Beach, California. May 17, 1971, 9:30 am (mailed: June 7, 1971). Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

The Directorial Mode

To consider the ways in which the photographs in Foote's article are using photographic forms that extend beyond documentation, I will now turn to AD Coleman's article 'The Directorial Mode: Notes Toward a Definition'. There are key terms that cross over with Foote's article, although at first glance, the illustrations may seem to point to a very different set of concerns, with images ranging from OG Rejlander and Julia Margaret Cameron to Duane Michals and Ralph Eugene Meatyard. Yet, as Coleman explains, his essay was intended to focus on contemporary photography, including conceptual uses of photography, but has ended up tracing a history due to what he calls a lack of awareness about the directorial tradition. His coining of the phrase, 'the directorial mode' has been reprised in the 1990s in relation to a new generation of artists using photography, and therefore it is useful to consider his argument in some detail. Although it has sometimes been conflated with the cinematic, as in the director of a film, Coleman's use of the term has to do with photography, its histories and concerns.

Like Foote, Coleman begins by discussing Stieglitz's support of photography as a High Art, from pictorialism to modernism. He describes how the qualities of 'sharpness of focus and realism' (55) were used to define the medium's inherent characteristics, rather than what he calls photography's 'almost infinite adaptability to any style of expression' (55). With this focus on realism, Coleman then describes three approaches to photography, with the quest for realism being posed as a religious endeavour, whether this is in 'documentary' photography or 'straight/pure' photography. This first mode, a quest for purity or realism, is termed 'theistic' (56), and is then contrasted with an 'agnostic' approach, in which 'the image-maker openly interprets the objects, beings, and events in front of the lens' (examples of artists being Robert Frank, Brassai, Henri Cartier-Bresson) (56). The third approach, the 'atheistic branch of photography' (56) is Coleman's directorial mode. 'Here the photographer consciously and intentionally *creates* events for the express purpose of making images thereof.'(56) Coleman continues:

Here the “authenticity” of the original event is not an issue, nor the photographer’s fidelity to it, and the viewer would be expected to raise those questions only ironically. Such images use photography’s overt veracity against the viewer, exploiting that initial assumption of credibility by evoking it for events and relationships generated by the photographer’s deliberate structuring of what takes place in front of the lens as well as in the resulting image. (56)

Coleman describes these directorial photographs as ‘falsified “documents”’, with his definition being broad: ‘Such falsified “documents” may at first glance evoke the same act of faith as those at the opposite end of this scale, but they don’t require the permanent sustaining of it; all they ask for is the suspension of disbelief.’(56). Coleman’s use of religious metaphor points to the importance of veracity in the definitions of photography, and the difficulty of assessing photography that plays with photography’s documentary capacity. For Coleman, the directorial mode runs through the history of photography, but the emphasis on realism has meant that its importance has been missed, with the moralism of purism and realism in photography concealing the thread of the directorial that runs through the spectrum of photography: with documentary at one end and the directorial at the other. To support his argument, Coleman uses as examples Alexander Gardner moving the body of a Confederate soldier, Arthur Rothstein’s FSA portrait of a father and son, in which he asked the son to drop back to create a better composition, and Edward Weston’s *Shell and Rock (Arrangement)*, 1931. Coleman then focuses on the tradition of directorial photography, which he sees as appearing with the stereoscopic photographs of fictitious scenes around 1850, and developing through explicitly directorial genres of photography, including erotic, advertising and fashion photography. The compulsion to endorse photography’s purity of realism can be seen in Coleman’s own difficulty in wholeheartedly supporting his directorial photographers, with the description of Julia Margaret Cameron’s work as ‘sentimental’, with its ‘blend[ing], for better or worse, current literary themes and

attitudes with the visual conventions of Pre-Raphaelite painting.’ (58), revealing an unease in completely endorsing this mode. After running through examples of photographers working in the directorial mode from the nineteenth century upto the 1960s, Coleman concludes his article by discussing photographers who work within an art context, focusing on Duane Michals and Les Krimms. Michals is also discussed by Foote in her article, and forms a bridge across the two pieces, with Ed Ruscha also being mentioned by both authors.

Coleman, however, is scathing about the new generation of conceptual artists that use photography, as he sees it, in the directorial mode. He counts Krimms and Michals as pioneers, who are ‘reference points for the current generation of younger photographers and are obvious sources for much of the mediocre directorial photography which passes for “conceptual art” nowadays.’(59) Whilst I wouldn’t agree with Coleman here about the ‘mediocre’ nature of conceptual art, his article does position the work of the conceptual artists shown by Foote in a rather different historical light. Whilst Foote poses the anti-photographers as having ‘little *photographic* self-consciousness’, in the light of Coleman’s article, it becomes clear that these conceptual artists are anti documentary and high modernist (as in Stieglitz) photography, not the photographic in general. The fact that a number of Foote’s anti-photographers haven’t taken the photographs themselves does not mean that they are not engaging with the language of photography, although this is a key difference with many of Coleman’s examples. Coleman concludes his article by trying to draw together the contemporary split between ‘art photographers’ and ‘artists who use photography’:

whether or not they consider themselves ‘photographers’ or ‘artists’ or whatever, these individuals and many others are exploring the same field of ideas. That field of ideas is built into and springs from the medium of photography itself; it has a history and tradition of its own which is operative on many levels of our culture. There is no direct equation between ignorance of history and originality.... The time would seem to be ripe for them to

acknowledge their common sources and mutual concerns; their real differences will make themselves apparent in due time. (60-61)

The images illustrating Coleman's article present performances for the camera – like the artists I've discussed in relation to Foote's piece – but with more emphasis on the fantasy of a scene, rather than a documented reality, however fictional that documentation might be. An example of this can be seen in Duane Michals 'Things are Queer', which seems to support Foote's description of Michal's work (fig. 4):

Duane Michals reverses photography's usual method of showing an overall view and details of varying closeness, gradually dispensing additional information about his subject by moving farther and farther away. Tableaux which at first appear to contain bizarre discrepancies in scale reveal their true identities as the camera recedes, clarifying by degrees the structure of the scene. (52)



Fig. 4: Duane Michals, *Things Are Queer*, 1973.
© Duane Michals. Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.

In Michals's work, an engagement with photography's 'documentary' character is used in a more narrative style, so its inherent malleability is assumed, rather than interrogated, as in many of the conceptual artists' play with realism. Michals' photographs are obviously staged in a way that is presented differently in the documentation of performances in work by Acconci and Long, with their focus on indexicality. By considering this directorial work alongside that of conceptual artists, what comes into view is the use of different styles and genres of photography, which can be forgotten in the focus on the use of photography as a 'window'. Whilst the anti-photographers often use these styles as 'ready-mades' in a way that isn't seen in the work of photographers such as Michals, the differences between the anti-photographers and the directorial mode is one which blurs in the middle. While I do not want to simply collapse the two sets of artworks together, the mutual interests in the 'falsified' document and the performance space of the photograph create a lineage that is instructional in relation to work made in the 1990s.

Sightings

After the re-evaluation of photography's relation to art in the 1970s, the presence of photography in the museum was discussed by many commentators in relation to photography's importance to postmodernism and to its newly acquired status as hot art commodity. To discuss the narrative photography seen in exhibitions such as the ICA's *Sightings: New Photographic Art* requires an understanding of this radical shift in photography's status. Whilst the strategies of the conceptual artists and directorial mode are seen in this new art photography, the scale and presence of this work is very different: with large-scale, glossy colour prints dominating the art world. Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson are already wary of photography's new commodity status in the art world in the special issue on Photography in *October*, Summer 1978:

Earthworks, performance, cinema, video, all pose problems to the dealer insofar as they infinitely expand and thereby revise the

spatio-temporal données of commerce. Performance and video have now invaded Soho and the galleries of Western Europe as lively forms of enterprise, difficult to assimilate to the market structure. The solution seems to lie in the small, flat surface of the photograph, with its equivocal and ambiguous temporal aspect, inflatable, of course, to painterly dimensions.¹⁰

Krauss and Michelson point to the paradox in the use of photograph by conceptual artists. By dematerialising the art object, the materiality and marketability of the photograph comes to the fore. In Douglas Crimp's seminal essay 'The Museum's Old, the Library's New Subject', he explores the incorporation of photography into the museum. He argues that photography is made into a modernist art form in the 1960s and 70s, using curator John Szarkowski as his example: 'For if photography was invented in 1839, it was only *discovered* in the 1960s and 1970s – photography, that is, as an essence, photography *itself*.'¹¹ Discussing how photography from across the New York Public Library was collected and recatalogued so that images that might have been previously filed under 'Egypt' were now under the photographers' names, such as 'Auguste Salzmann', he says, dramatically:

Thus ghettoised, it will no longer primarily be *useful* within other discursive practices, it will no longer serve the purposes of information, documentation, evidence, illustration, reportage. The formerly plural field of photography will henceforth be reduced to the single, all-encompassing *aesthetic*.¹²

This idea of photography's *use* being supplanted by an *aesthetic* is one that polarises the practice of photography in art that I have been discussing in relation to Foote and Coleman's article. Here the pictorial and the conceptual seem to be on different sides of a divide that cleaves the history of photography. Crimp's argument, in simplified form, acts to minimise the history of art photography, to simply see photography as a non-art that became an art in the 1960s, to start with its integration into the history of art, and ignore the

experiments that took place since photography began in the potential for photography as an art form, a performance space that could be utilised for fantasy as well as documentation.¹³ Whilst Crimp's argument is more subtle than my summary, there is a way in which this version of the history of photography has become accepted within the history of art, so that photography is born as a postmodern art at the moment of its acceptance as modernist.¹⁴ By returning to the history presented in 'The Directorial Mode', with Coleman's focus on the malleability and hybridity of photography as a medium, I suggest that it is possible to point beyond this moment of photography's petrification in the museum. With the development of postmodern uses of photography in contemporary art, from the late 1970s onwards, an understanding of photography's different genres with their different histories and conceptions that don't simply fall under the category of documentation, or usefulness, is necessary.

Returning to Crimp's quote in relation to *Sightings: New Photographic Art*, I want to suggest that one way to read the trend for large-scale, colour prints, confidently taking up the space of the gallery, is as an ironic enactment of his pronouncement of the photograph's flattening and aestheticisation. In *Sightings* the various photographic genres of documentary, portraiture and tableaux, now joined by the new category of photography in conceptual art, or performance documentation; all used as various styles which are re-enacted by this new generation in a way that constantly acknowledges the weight of photography's history; felt in the elaborate, static nature of many of the images. From Sharon Lockhart's *Goshogaoka*, 1996, to Rineke Dijkstra's *Buzz Club* portraits, 1995, here the performance space of the photograph is one that is also a ready-made, to be re-inhabited with the clear acknowledgement of the previous performances that each photograph references.¹⁵ In reviews of the exhibition, the focus was on the merging of fact and fiction in the photographs on display, with Mark Durden splitting the exhibition into two types: 'Contemporary photographic practice is marked by two distinct characteristics: on one hand are those artists who variously stage, construct and manipulate their photographic images; on the other hand are those continuing in a more classic tradition of

portraiture and documentary. *Sightings: New Photographic Art* mixes both uses of photography.¹⁶ As I have been arguing here, I would see that there is more blending than Durden suggests, with a focus on an event is staged for a camera – the performance space of the photograph – being articulated in very different styles. Even with apparently ‘straight’ portraiture projects, such as Dijkstra’s photographs of teenagers in a Liverpool nightclub, the emphasis is on the capturing of this encounter in a photograph, foregrounded by her use of a white studio space, detaching her subjects from their noisy, crowded surroundings.

This tendency to divide photographic practice is not new, and was enacted contemporaneously to Foote and Coleman’s articles by John Szarkowski’s exhibition *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960*, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1978. In the exhibition catalogue Szarkowski unites photography ranging from the screenprints of Andy Warhol to the documentary snapshots of Garry Winogrand by defining two trends: photography as self-expression (mirrors) and as exploration (windows). Whilst it might be tempting to ascribe the anti-photographers as approaching photography as a window (as Foote does), and the directorial mode approaching photography as a mirror, as I hope to have already shown, a focus on the performance space of the photograph dissolves this opposition. Abigail Solomon-Godeau opens her essay ‘Photography After Art Photography’ with a discussion of Szarkowski’s exhibition, noting how many commentators saw that there was much cross-over between the two categories.¹⁷ Solomon-Godeau’s essay is an influential account of the centrality of the photographic to postmodernism, in counter-narrative to Szarkowski. This exhibition, staged in 1978, two year after the issue of *Artforum* I’ve been discussing here, created a divide in approaches to photography that still barely acknowledges the work discussed by Foote and Coleman. The few artists and photographers to cross this museum-endorsed photographic canon and the two articles are Ed Ruscha, Duane Michals and Ralph Gibson. As Solomon-Godeau discusses, the inclusion of artists such as Ruscha who are associated now with postmodernism, challenged the version of photographic modernism that had been promoted by MOMA. In *Sightings* there are examples which also appear

to ironically enact this divide: as in Elisa Sighicelli's work, *Las Vegas Curtain*, 1997, the 'window' of Foote's article and Szarkowski's documentary style is veiled, with the image mounted on a lightbox which illuminates the concealed window, so that the curtain becomes the screen of fantasy, a refusal to see photography as transparent recorder (fig. 5). Like Smithson's mirrors, Sighicelli's work plays with the clichés of photographic styles, making an image about the expectation of what a photograph can show us.

Equally, in Annika von Hausswolff's *Attempting to Deal with Time and Space*, 1997, the use of photography as either a mirror or a window is thwarted (fig. 6). In this series of photographs the artist grapples with a large balloon, so that the space between her and camera is literalised by this amorphous, obtrusive



Fig. 5: Elisa Sighicelli, *Las Vegas Curtain*, 1997, partially backlit photograph mounted on purpose-built light box, 80 x 80 x 10 cm. © Elisa Sighicelli. Courtesy of Gagolian Gallery.



Fig. 6: Annika von Hausswolff, *Attempting to Deal with Time and Space II*, 1997, laminated c-print mounted on Dibond, 110 x 80 cm. From a series of seven. Courtesy the artist and Collection Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall.

object. Here a portrait (of the artist) becomes a performance, with any attempt to see around the balloon frustrated, the artist's body held away from the camera's gaze. The title of this series points to photographic concerns – the capturing of time and space – and humorously enacts this futile endeavour. Rather than a mirror or a window, this series leaves the viewer with the space of the photograph as paradoxically full and empty, with an anticipation of the balloon's puncture and the 'revelation' of the scene implied by the artist's manipulations of its unwieldy mass. Hausswolff's work beyond what was exhibited in *Sightings* also blurs any neat categories of anti-photographer versus directorial mode, as her work includes both images that stylistically borrow from conceptual art, as in *Attempting to Deal with Time and Space*, as well as obviously staged photographs that are more theatrical, in the directorial mode, such as the series *Back to Nature*, 1993.¹⁸ In *Back to Nature* large colour images of landscapes are punctuated by nude female bodies which appear corpse-like, ironically reworking the tradition of the nude in the landscape. Here

the lushness of the large-colour print references both the traditions of painting as well as photographic genres such as crime scene photography, again playing with the ability of the photograph to document a performance which cannot be easily pinned down.

A recurring anxiety about this narrative photography is its difference in scale and technique from the conceptual practices of the 1960s and 1970s, moving from the books of Ruscha and the postcards of Antin to the glossy prints that dominate the gallery space. Whilst I don't want to ignore the commodification of the photograph that occurs in these gallery-size prints, to see this shift as simply an effect of the market is to put aside conversations about the photographic generated by this work, to make this new generation of artists using photography as 'unphotographic' as their conceptual art forebears. In the exhibition catalogue, Simon Morrissey discusses this work as being made within the context of an image-culture in which fact and fiction blur. His essay opens with a girl reading the disclaimer at the beginning of a novel: 'This work is wholly fictional. Any resemblance to the objective present or past is gratuitous, and similarly resemblance to any actual event or character is accidental and not intended.'¹⁹ His protagonist then goes on to watch TV, with both media giving rise to a contemplation of the blurring of fact and fiction. Here the photographs in the exhibition are linked to simulacral nature of popular culture. This focus on the everyday uses of photography conceals the conversations that take place in this work with the history of photography and art, a history that I would argue is more illuminating than a focus on television, cinema or literature. The reviews of the exhibition in the art press reference the influence of artists such as Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall, seeing the work as a new generation of postmodern photographic practice, again focusing on the photograph as a space for the dissolution of boundaries between fact and fiction, photography and cinema, art and popular culture.²⁰

In the light of Coleman and Foote's articles, I would argue that what is shown in the exhibition is work that is heavily dependent on the histories of photography in art, coming from both conceptual art and art photography: the anti-

photographers and the directorial mode. Key to this new generation of artists using photography is an acceptance of the debates around the photographic and postmodernism, so photography becomes of interest because of its fallen status as a medium of realism and as an agent of dematerialisation, but rather than embracing the simulacrum as many earlier postmodern artists, this new generation explores the remnants of the belief in photography's veracity, as described through Coleman's religious metaphor. Whilst I don't have space to consider the entire range of photography in the exhibition, this sense of decayed or reanimated photographic concerns and genres is taken up across the range of photographs: from landscape, to documentary, to staged scenes. What unites the disparate work in this exhibition, and is used here to stand in for a more general trend in art photography at this moment, is a heightened sense of the photographic, with all of its references and borrowings from other media and specific genres, rather than 'the photographic' conceived in a modernist sense. In these large, serial images the performance space of the photograph is emphasised by the re-enactment of 'useful' photographic categories in a way that unravels their 'documentary' quality and reveals the fantasy, from Jörg Sasse's digitally manipulated found photographs, to Rut Blees Luxemburg's long exposures, to the staged scenes by Anna Gaskell and Hannah Starkey.

The performance space of the photograph

In the double portraits of Jennifer Bornstein, the strategy of the anti-photographers is replayed in a post-identity politics setting, as Bornstein poses with members of the public, a recurring presence which initially doesn't register as she seems to blend with the scenes and characters (figs. 7-10). Acknowledging the influence of artists such as Douglas Huebler, as well as August Sander and TV sitcoms, Bornstein's work explicitly engages with the performance space of the photograph, with the depiction of identity turned into an unstable performance.²¹ Discussing the series, Bornstein says: 'I made these photographs in the early nineties, at time when identity politics and gender theory were the dominant forms of discourse. I chose people of all races



Fig. 7: Jennifer Bornstein, *Self-Portrait with Kid (Poinsettia Recreation Center)* (from *Projector Stand #3* series), 1996, colour photograph. Image courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles.



Fig. 8: Jennifer Bornstein, *Self-Portrait with Kid (Poinsettia Recreation Center)* (from *Projector Stand #3* series), 1996, colour photograph. Image courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles.



Fig. 9: Jennifer Bornstein, *Self Portrait with Mail Man* (from *Projector Stand #3* series), 1996, colour photograph. Image courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles.



Fig. 10: Jennifer Bornstein, *Self Portrait with Senior Citizen, Farmer's Market, 3rd Street and Fairfax Avenue, Los Angeles* (from *Projector Stand #3* series), 1996, colour photograph. Image courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles.

and classes because I wanted to confuse the politics – to turn things on their head – albeit respectfully.²² Like von Hausswolff's series *Attempting to Deal With Time and Space*, Bornstein enacts scenes that cannot hold readings as either portraits or documentary images in Szarkoski's mirrors and windows schema, but instead focuses all attention onto the performance space of the photograph, with its potential to be read in many different ways. As Bornstein is shown posed with a mailman, a senior citizen and a couple of kids, her presence in each image stalls any straightforward narrative, requiring a double take from the viewer to catch her presence as she often blends with the characters she poses with. In its original incarnation, the portraits are part of an installation that includes two 16mm films which are played at the viewer's request by a union projectionist, and a bench on which the viewer must sit (fig. 11).²³ Here the photographs are one register in a work that focuses almost entirely on the experience of watching and being watched, the physical and psychic impact of human interaction. When asked by *Creative Camera* 'In your still photography are we seeing portrait of Jennifer Bornstein or something else?' she replied 'That's exactly what I'm interested in.'²⁴ The snapshot style



Fig. 11: Jennifer Bornstein, installation shot from *Projector Stand #3* series, 1996. Image courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles.

and serial format of the anti-photographers is redeployed to bring the performance of the artist *and* the viewer into focus. As I've discussed in relation to Foote's article, here photographic documentation undoes its own supposed transparency, turning what appears to be a window into an uncertain fantasy space. As Bornstein herself puts it: 'I would say that what I am doing is staging random interventions into people's daily lives and documenting the resulting performances, the brief interventions. The photographs are the residue of these small, forgettable interactions.'²⁵

The scale of Bornstein's prints are that of a magazine page, or a small TV screen: 35.5 x 28 cm. When seen on the gallery wall, the viewer is encouraged to look between the images, to find the narrative linking the scenes. The narrative that emerges is that of the artist's presence, and implicitly, the presence of the camera, with the series following *Projector Stand #3* placing the artist alongside young boys, her own small stature and boyish appearance emphasising her strange disappearance within the scene she has staged (some commentators note that at first they thought Bornstein was a boy).²⁶ Rather than telling us anything about Bornstein the artist, or the characters she photographs herself alongside, her work instead focuses on the expectations of the documentary photograph and the portrait, with her repetitive appearance acting like the obstructing balloon in von Hauswolff's series. Here the conventions of the portrait snapshot or documentary image are the subject of her work, with the expectation of certain information to be generated by such photographs disrupted by her continual reappearance.

The performance space of the photograph is staged rather differently in the portraits by Sharon Lockhart in her series *Goshogaoka Girls Basketball Team* (fig. 12). Taken in a Japanese high school, the photographs re-enact action shots from sports magazines, replaying the performance of particular photographs, rather than the performance of playing basketball. If Bornstein borrows from the vernacular image world explored by the anti-photographers, Lockhart's images sit more easily alongside the obvious staging of the directorial mode, but as I have explored in relation to Bornstein's series,



Fig. 12: Sharon Lockhart, *Goshogaoka Girls Basketball Team: Kumi Nanjo and Marie Komuro, Rie Ouchi, Atsuko Shinkai, Eri Kobayashi and Naomi Hasegawa*, 1997. Three framed chromogenic prints from a series of twelve. 32 5/16 x 27 3/8 inches each, installed dimensions variable. Images courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles.

Lockhart is also taking as her subject the conventions of portrait and documentary photography. Like Coleman's 'falsified documents' Lockhart's models re-stage photographs, literally re-performing images of basketball players that inspire and mould their own identities as athletes. Once again, the window of the documentary photography is replayed as the mirror of fantasy, channelling images from popular culture through these schoolgirls' performances. Neither portraits nor documentary shots of action, here the scenes played out are as fictional as Eleanor Antin's *100 Boots* progressing across the American landscape or Duane Michals' tableaux.

The photographs are one part of a project that also includes a film, designed to be seen in a cinema setting. Like Bornstein's installation, at *Sightings* Lockhart's photographs were exhibited separately, with her film shown in the ICA's cinema. Both artists are interested in the specificity of photography and film, with their use of 16mm film referring primarily not cinema but to artist and home-made movies.²⁷ More cinematic are the size of Lockhart's images, which are approximately one meter by three meters, dominating the gallery space and focusing attention on their choreographed elegance. However, cinema here acts as a pointer to the staged notion of action played out here, using the frozen time of the photograph to bring out the artifice of the scene. The scale of these photographs make the viewer pay attention to their large, glossy surfaces,

surfaces that do not reveal truths about their models, but instead reflect back the coding of the performance played out for the camera. Like Bornstein, Lockhart plays with conventions of photographic documentation: these are photographs of girls who *do* play basketball, we are told each of their names in the photographs titles, as if they are documentary images, but the images are not believable as documents of action. The creation of movement through a stilled image creates a paradoxical effect, as the stylisation of the photograph embalms the moment, heightened by the otherness of Lockhart's Japanese subjects, so cultural vocabularies stutter for the Western viewer: are we meant to understand something about Japaneseness, or adolescent girls, or basketball, or is the subject of the photographs irrelevant to the construction of a particular type of image? All these questions can be pursued, but only with the feeling that each is short-circuited.

By foregrounding the photograph as a performance space, the works of Bornstein, Lockhart and their contemporaries emphasise the encounter that takes place both in front of the camera and in front of the finished photograph. Whether their images are explicitly fictional, or play with realistic conventions of portraiture and documentary, this contemporary practice focuses on the weight of the histories that their photographs reference, and the expectations that these histories place on their images. Like von Hauswolff's balloon, in Bornstein and Lockhart's portraits we are left with only partial information about the scene in front of us, left to uncertainly fill in the gaps. In this way the viewer takes part in the performance space of the photograph as much as the artist and models, bringing her own weight of expectations to these ambiguous scenes. Lockhart's Japanese schoolgirls are not captured by our gaze anymore than Bornstein's slippery appearances, but the heaviness of Lockhart's photographic staging reminds the viewer of the history of the Western exoticising gaze that cannot be separated from her images. Similarly, the slippage between Bornstein's images deny the impaling of the documentary subject by the camera, as theorised in relation to images from the nineteenth century onwards by theorists from Allan Sekula to Roland Barthes. Rather than trying to construct alternative 'positive' representations, Lockhart and Bornstein

point to the gaps and fantasises within the project of photographic representation itself, whilst still engaging with the belief in photography to tell some kind of story, as described by Coleman. This is perhaps the reason many women artists have embraced narrative photography as a platform to question the politics of representation in relation to gender, race, age and nationality, as a performance space in which identity can be destabilised and interrogated; employing techniques learnt from both the conceptual play of the anti-photographers and the fictionalised scenes of the directorial mode.

In Joanna Lowry and David Green's essay on conceptual artists using photography, they consider the importance of the performative in these works, saying: 'The very act of photography as a kind of performative gesture which points to an event in the world is thus itself a form of indexicality.'²⁸ Whilst the focus on the performative illuminates many conceptual uses of photography, it does not always help to understand the static, heavy nature of the narrative photography in the 1990s. My focus on the performance space of the photograph includes elements of the performative, but the term performance is more apt here to describe the oscillation that occurs between performing the self or a scene, a self-conscious presentation of reality, and the psychic space of encounter that is performed both by the viewer and the photographer. Coleman's description of photographs taken in the directorial mode as being 'falsified documents' sums up this interest in both the ways in which the photograph remains believable as the presentation of an event, whilst the viewer and photographer is complicit in the suspension of disbelief that has to occur to enter this event. The seductive colour and scale of this contemporary work re-invests the photograph with its problematic history, pitched between usefulness and aestheticism, refusing to narrate the conceptual use of photography as straightforwardly anti-aesthetic. From the anti-photographers to the directorial mode, contemporary photographers exhibited in the *Sightings* exhibition play with the long histories of photography as a narrative form, one which takes photography's assimilation into the museum not as a fall from grace, but as an opportunity to reconsider the many different attempts to bring

photography into the realm of fine art, with all the attendant problems this brings.

¹ Other exhibitions include *Stills: Emerging Photography in the 1990s*, Walker Art Center, 1998; *Unheimlich: Uncanny*, at the Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland, 1999 and a couple of years later, two big photography shows in London – *Settings and Players*, White Cube and *I am a Camera*, Saatchi Gallery – which attempted to situate this ‘new photographic work’, but received a lukewarm critical reception.

² See Christopher Philips, ‘The Judgement Seat of Photography’, *October*, vol. 22, Autumn 1982: 27-63 for a discussion of the role of the MOMA’s Department of Photography in defining the roles for photography in the museum across the twentieth century.

³ Nancy Foote, ‘The Anti-Photographers’, *Artforum*, September 1976: 46-54, 46. Following references to this text are given as page numbers in the text.

⁴ Obviously, this use of the term modernist photography in relation to Stieglitz is different to the use of modernist photography by commentators such as Jeff Wall, and Douglas Crimp, who see the use of photography in conceptual art formulating photography as a self-reflexive medium – the real beginning of photography as a modernist art form.

⁵ For a survey of photographic debates taking place during the 1970s, see the exhibition catalogue *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960-1982*, Douglas Fogle (ed.) (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2003).

⁶ The title ‘Trademarks’ implies the reading of this performance as dematerialising the work of art, with the trace of the body becoming like a signature, a work of art.

⁷ The use of the photograph’s indexicality is explored in an American context in this essay. The focus on indexicality is explored differently by the various artists illustrated in Foote’s essay. I am not discussing the entire range of approaches posed by artists involved with conceptual uses of photography, with potential differences coming from cultural as well as personal investigations: i.e. the difference between the use of the photograph by the American artist discussed here and the British use of photograph in conceptual practices by artists such as Victor Burgin. Thanks to the anonymous peer reviewer for making these distinctions.

⁸ Robert Smithson, ‘Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan’ (1969), in *Robert Smithson, The Collected Writings*, Jack Flam (ed.) (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996): 119-133, 132-33.

⁹ Foote uses the example of Eleanor Antin employing a photographer to take the images in her *100 Boots* series as proof of this ‘nonchalance’.

¹⁰ The Editors, ‘Photography: a special issue’, *October*, vol. 5, Summer 1978: 3-5, 4.

¹¹ Douglas Crimp, ‘The Museum’s Old, The Library’s New Subject’, *On The Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993) 66-83, 74. Crimp explains how Szarkowski’s formulation of photographic modernism is different from Stieglitz: ‘it has taken Szarkowski and his followers to bestow retrospectively upon *photography itself* what Stieglitz had thought was achieved by only a very few photographs.’ 77. Jeff Wall makes a similar argument in ‘Marks of Indifference’, reprinted in *The Last Picture Show*.

¹² Crimp, ‘The Museum’s Old, The Library’s New Subject’, 75. Italics in the original.

¹³ Crimp’s essay also points to the paradox of photography’s status as a modernist art form precipitating the beginning of postmodernism (77), going on to discuss the ways in which photography has contaminated other media such as painting and sculpture, as well as categories of art and non-art.

¹⁴ See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, ‘Photography After Art Photography’ (1984), reprinted in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1991 for one of the best accounts of the importance of the photographic to postmodernism.

¹⁵ This approach to the photograph as a ‘ready-made’ is where the comparison between my examples from the 1970s with work from the 1990s gains a particular purchase on the contemporary use of narrative photography. Comparisons with photographic constructed imagery from the 1980s would allow for an emphasis on a more overtly theatrical staging of the photograph.

¹⁶ Mark Durden, ‘Sightings’, *Art Monthly*, no. 214, March 1998, 30-32; 30.

¹⁷ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Photography After Art Photography', 103.

¹⁸ This series was also shown at the ICA, in the exhibition *Belladonna*, 1997, a year before *Sightings*.

¹⁹ Simon Morrissey, "The End is the Beginning is the End", *Sightings: New Photographic Art* (London: ICA, 1998), np.

²⁰ As Chris Morgan stated in his review of the exhibition: '... the strength of the exhibition lies in the fact that the artists seem to have taken the older generation's arguments as read, and then set out towards an explanation of the whole range of new possibilities which have been facilitated by the demise of society's obsession with the indexical photograph.' '... this rather timely exhibition forces us to confront is, in the words of one critic "who gives a shit about the real and the fake, now that they are the same?"' Chris Morgan, 'Sightings: New Photographic Art', *Contemporary*, issue 18, 1998, 71.

²¹ 'My aims [in making *Projector Stand #3*] were multifaceted. They were populist (I wanted to give everyone a chance to be in a picture – reflected in the choice of hiring a union projectionist to inhabit the piece during its exhibition); revengeful (against the blossoming internet and the architecture of the city I live in – Los Angeles – which make chance, face-to-face interactions among people almost impossible); sociological (reflecting in form and content the photographs of August Sander, who was a huge influence on me); sculptural (I was aware of the fact that I am a small person, and wanted to make size-studies of people of different sizes standing next to one another); and documentary (I was interested in Huebler's work, and in the definition of a documentary photograph. The photos in this project are both documents of who happened to be in a location at a certain time, and choreographed – I was influenced by TV sit-coms at the time – that is to say, they are set up in the loosest, most spontaneous sense of the word.)' Jennifer Bornstein, email to the author, 28 March 2008.

²² Jennifer Bornstein, email to the author, 28 March 2008.

²³ '*Projector Stand #3* was a body of work that was made up of five photos, two 16mm films, a projectionist, and a large bench for the projectionist to sit on. It was originally shown at UCLA in 1996, in my student studio; then it was shown for three days at Blum and Poe in LA in 1996; and afterwards for a month at Studio Guenzani in Milan, in 1997.' Jennifer Bornstein, email to the author, 21 March 2008.

²⁴ 'Q+A Jennifer Bornstein', *Creative Camera*, February/March 1998, issue 350, 20-27; 26.

²⁵ Jennifer Bornstein, 'Q+A Jennifer Bornstein', 27.

²⁶ See for example, Simon Morrissey, 'What's in a Lie?', *Contemporary Visual Arts*, issue 22, 1998, 34-39; 36. Morrissey discusses Bornstein's series in relation to Christian Boltanski's *Ten Photographic Portraits of Christian Boltanski 1946-1964*.

²⁷ For a discussion of Lockhart's film see Bérénice Reynaud, 'Goshogaoka', in *Sharon Lockhart: Goshogaoka*, exh. cat. Los Angeles and Tokyo: Blum & Poe and Wako Works of Art, 1998.

²⁸ Joanna Lowry and David Green, 'From presence to the performative: rethinking photographic indexicality', in *Where is the Photograph?*, ed David Green, Brighton: Photoforum/Photoworks, 2003, 47 – 60; 48. This is quoted by Margaret Iversen, in her essay 'Following Pieces: On Performative Photography', in James Elkin ed., *Photography Theory*, New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2007, which also pursues the idea of performativity in relation to a number of conceptual artists' work.

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