

1960s. In reading through the notes on subjects familiar to me, I was impressed by the brevity and accuracy of summary and commentary: on the Stephen Radich flag-desecration case, for example, the status of the case as the Feldman-Weil book went to print was succinctly described, and the eventual outcome (reversal of the dealer's conviction) was accurately predicted.

It is hard to select any particular texts from *Art Works* . . . for special recommendation, but it can be said that both the high ideals of free artistic creativity and the sometimes disillusioning and infuriating realities of actual practice are graphically conveyed by such readings as Georges Rouault's 1952 speech to UNESCO on the artist's "moral right"; the case involving the Franz Kline estate, in which Sidney Janis was found by the court to have presented unsubstantiated invoices in order to sell or take possession of two important paintings which Charles Egan, Kline's previous dealer, was entitled to select from the estate following the artist's death (the case is little known, since it was not, according to Weil's recollection, published in the regular reports [state-published bound volumes of court cases] and is reprinted from *New York Law Journal*, March 31, 1964); *People v. Radich*, which is valuable as social history and notable, especially with the benefit of hindsight, for the dissenting opinion of Chief Judge Fuld [see Letters, p. 136, for a further note on this case]; the copious documentation, under the heading of "Disposition by Museums," of the issues raised by the Met's de-accessioning practices; *Tobey v. Commissioner*, an important tax case in which the artist's income from the sale of paintings in Switzerland was (fortunately for the artist) found to be "earned income" rather than income from the "sale of personal property."

In our present critical and art-historical context, in which vague generalizations about art law have outlived their usefulness and specificity is of the essence, *Art Works: Law, Policy, Practice* provides a valuable, even monumental, documentation.

—Carl R. Baldwin

## CRITICISM

*Art Chronicles 1954-1966*, by Frank O'Hara, New York, Braziller, 1975; 165 pp., \$12.50.

Poets who write criticism are a special case. A poet will already have cultivated many of the abilities a critic needs: a radarlike ability to pay acute attention at will; an idea of what is involved in bridging the gap between ravishing materials or ideas and a work of art; a respect for the implacable chanciness of creative work. Frank O'Hara had all that. Still, his essays in *Art Chronicles 1954-1966* made me uneasy. Somebody familiar seems to be dressed up in a critic's suit to perform unnatural acts. Even the prose sometimes hints that something funny is going on. While O'Hara's poetry is reckless, intimate and volatile, the criticism in this collection is earnest and sometimes lumpy, and it stays relentlessly high-minded. There is one article each for a mixed bag of sculptors—Nakian, Spaventa, David Smith—and Katz, Rivers and Frankenthaler are discussed among the painters. O'Hara doesn't allow any of them any carelessness, shallowness or mere clever-

ness—even as a starting point. Moreover, they all seem to elicit the same intensity and quality of seriousness. True, there are two playful essays in the collection, but they are written in collaboration with artists as if O'Hara had to wait for a dues-paying painter before striking an impudent note.

Solemnity isn't right for O'Hara. More in his own style is the interview with Rivers where he writes for himself the part of a rather *dumb* interviewer. The apparent rigidity is also misleading. In part, this impression of O'Hara's critical stance is false and reflects the bad judgment of the unidentified editors who drew up this collection. They were probably hoping that the artists' names would draw readers unfamiliar with O'Hara's, and they neglected his less worshipful pieces. They could have done better. The very issue of *It Is* from which they reprint "5 Participants in a Hearsay Panel" has a brisker, more stimulating piece—but it doesn't fit this collection's Great-Artist piety.

In content and tone, these essays are more typical of their period than they are of O'Hara. Twenty years ago the relationship between the informal art world and the public was very different from what it is today. Before the canonization of the Action Painters the struggling artist was a stock comic figure, and a cheerful Philistine contempt for unfolksy art was normal and pervasive. "Modern" artists and critics addressing the public in those days weren't representatives of culture; they were an embattled minority, and they sounded as thunderous and humorless as any consciousness-raising group you could name. In public, artists and critics defended the mysteries they tried to unravel in private. As a public figure O'Hara was a critic, a curator for the Museum of Modern Art and an editorial associate of *Art News*. From those positions, in those days, you could not address your readers as friends and peers. As the middlemen of culture, officials were exiled from the action and forced to speak in alien tongues. Exhortation and oversimplification were appropriate, and neither suited O'Hara.

Frank O'Hara was a poet, and, while he had great respect for his art-world positions, they were not the source of his power. His vitality sprang from his personal relationships, the fine-grained trivial intimacies as well as the deeper friendships. Privately, he knew everybody—artists, poets, musicians, theater people—and he collaborated widely. Supported by his establishment responsibilities, he could turn his generous and enthusiastic temperament into a public asset. In relation to painting, however, he felt more than he saw. This was useful for his poetry but not good for criticism. Perhaps awe came too easily to him, or perhaps its authenticity made him overly susceptible to the highly flavored rhetoric of Hess and Rosenberg, the critics who set the tone of the period. He was younger than they, and having learned the words along with the tune, his criticism adds little to theirs. He adopted their heroic central image of the painter as the key to painting, the man whose artistic acts wrench us all free of the past and future, and lock us into the Existential present. It is an edgy heroism that says art must be passion or nothing. That view undoubtedly attracted O'Hara deeply, but it constricted his own more passive, less

ferocious sensibility. To understand what painting meant to O'Hara one must go to his poems. Criticism is not the only tribute literature can pay to painting, and O'Hara's own talent made him a paradigm of the flowering bridge between life and art.

—Amy Goldin

## PHOTOGRAPHY

*The New West*, by Robert Adams, Colorado Associated Univ. Press, 1974; 121 pp., \$15.

There is something paradoxical in the way that documentary photographs interact with our notions of reality. To function as documents at all they must first persuade us that they describe their subject accurately and objectively; in fact, their initial task is to convince their audience that they are truly documents, that the photographer has fully exercised his powers of observation and description and has set aside his imaginings and prejudices. The ideal photographic document would appear to be without author or art. Yet of course photographs, despite their verisimilitude, are abstractions; their information is selective and incomplete. The power of the documentary photograph is linked to its capacity to inform as well as to reflect our perception of the external world. In view of this it becomes possible, for example, to marvel at the striking resemblance the rural South still bears to Walker Evans' '30s photos.

Few photographers have demonstrated as sophisticated an understanding of this as Robert Adams, whose recent book, *The New West*, is a model of excellence in documentary photography. His subject is the suburban-strip development that has proliferated along the eastern slope of the Colorado Rocky Mountains, all the way from Wyoming to New Mexico, in the past 20 years. Adams has infused his vision of Colorado—the relation of its inhabited parts to its prairies and mountains—with the authority of absolute fact, yet his somewhat reductive style of picture-making provides as well a complex moral understanding of the subject. Adams' antecedents might be the pioneer photographers Timothy O'Sullivan and William Henry Jackson, who worked in the same region a century earlier. Recent photography offers few parallels to Adams' work, although the use of photographic documentation in certain works of Conceptual art, such as Ed Ruscha's earlier books or the industrial typologies of Bernhard and Hilla Becher, suggests a similar belief in the primacy of the photographic information.

What distinguishes Adams from most of his photographer contemporaries is the distance, both emotional and intellectual, that he maintains from his subjects. This distance is essential to Adams' work, for he is presenting a record of man's attempts to live on—and occasionally with—the land, a debased theme generally left to the dubious mercies of sentimentalists and homespun metaphysicians. It is a subject requiring not only distance but honesty as well—also present in Adams' book to an extraordinary degree. These qualities permit him to direct our attention to the most meretricious examples of exploitative "development" without infecting his photographs with their vulgarity. More important, Adams' rigorous detachment, while re-

straining the temptation to moralize, allows him, nevertheless, to take a humane stance.

The new suburban areas of America pose an array of novel problems for society. Conceived in expedience for the sole purpose of maximum profit, pathetically dependent on the automobile, these new cities have disposed themselves formlessly along the frontage roads of every interstate highway. Posing an ecological threat which we are only now beginning to grasp, this new human sprawl is also ultimately as alien to urbanism as it is to the land it consumes. Adams' awareness of this contributes to the sense of ambivalence in many of his photographs. For as much as the landscape is altered and diminished by the growth of suburbs, the traditional virtues of city living, with its diversity and community, are dissipated as habitation is spread too thinly across the prairie. Adams shows us how ephemeral man-made structures look on the high plains of Colorado; the scattered mobile-home parks and tract houses offer no bulwark against the arid and inhospitable lands they occupy so uneasily. It is difficult to think of them as homes or even as shelters; they resemble the test structures built at ground zero.

The sheer pervasiveness of this type of land use has engaged architects, planners, environmentalists, social critics of all persuasions and, of course, photographers. Each has emphasized a different aspect of suburbia's virtues or shortcomings. Recent publications on the subject would form a small library, with Robert Venturi's iconoclastic celebration of Las Vegas at one end of the shelf and Bill Owens' *Suburbia*, a grim little indictment of middle America, at the other. *The New West* is a unique and

valuable contribution to this library; no other book has demonstrated so clearly the mutuality of intrusion between the landscape and its inhabitants. Adams' understanding transcends partisanship; his introduction to *The New West* echoes the complex understanding of his eye: "... why open our eyes anywhere but in undamaged places like national parks? ... we also need to see the whole geography, natural and man-made. ..."

More enduring than man's structures is light; in Adams' Colorado, it is always too bright and glaring, offering little shade. Adams shows this light in its full measure: the relentless light of perpetual noon, which magnifies every flaw of the desiccated landscape. Lévi-Strauss observed that the cities of the Americas suffered from "a chronic illness ... a high temperature ... which prevents them, for all their everlasting youthfulness, from ever being entirely well." Citizens of our new cities sense this and arrange their lives to provide themselves the maximum possible insulation from the public areas of the city and from each other. Aware of this, Adams views the city more as a collection of artifacts than of personalities. His subjects are the fences, the one-way windows, the vacant lots and all the rest behind which we stand. His style emphasizes how little moves when we insulate ourselves in this way. Adams is rare among landscape photographers in his reliance on a square format. This, together with his tendency toward a centralized image within the frame, results in unusually static pictures, appropriate to an urbanized geography in which little is animate.

People are usually conspicuous by their absence in the book. When he does include

them, they are engaged in activities so banal as to dispel any tendency on our part to particularize any individual. Clearly, the few persons populating *The New West* are conceived as representatives of a larger category of equally anonymous individuals. The tasks they perform—shopping, driving, hanging out the wash—are so routine as to suggest that the photograph could be made, or remade, at any time. Thus Adams exchanges one of photography's most dramatic attributes, the power to isolate highly specific fragments from the flux of time, for the less theatrical but no less powerful attribute of scientific experiment—i.e., repeatability and verifiability.

Adams' insistence on the ordinary and the typical, as well as on the verifiable function of picture-taking, is a prophylactic strategy against our culture's increasing suspicion that photography, if not an outright lie, is at best a willful distortion of the world. By confining his attentions to the most commonplace objects and events, and by using his camera in the most direct and uninflected manner, Adams builds a series of points of correspondence between the viewer's experience of the world and his own. Through this means he prepares the viewer for the one aspect of his work which falls outside the bounds of logical language; the strange and glacial beauty that, in spite of everything, still resides in the land.

—Lewis Baltz

#### Book Review Contributors

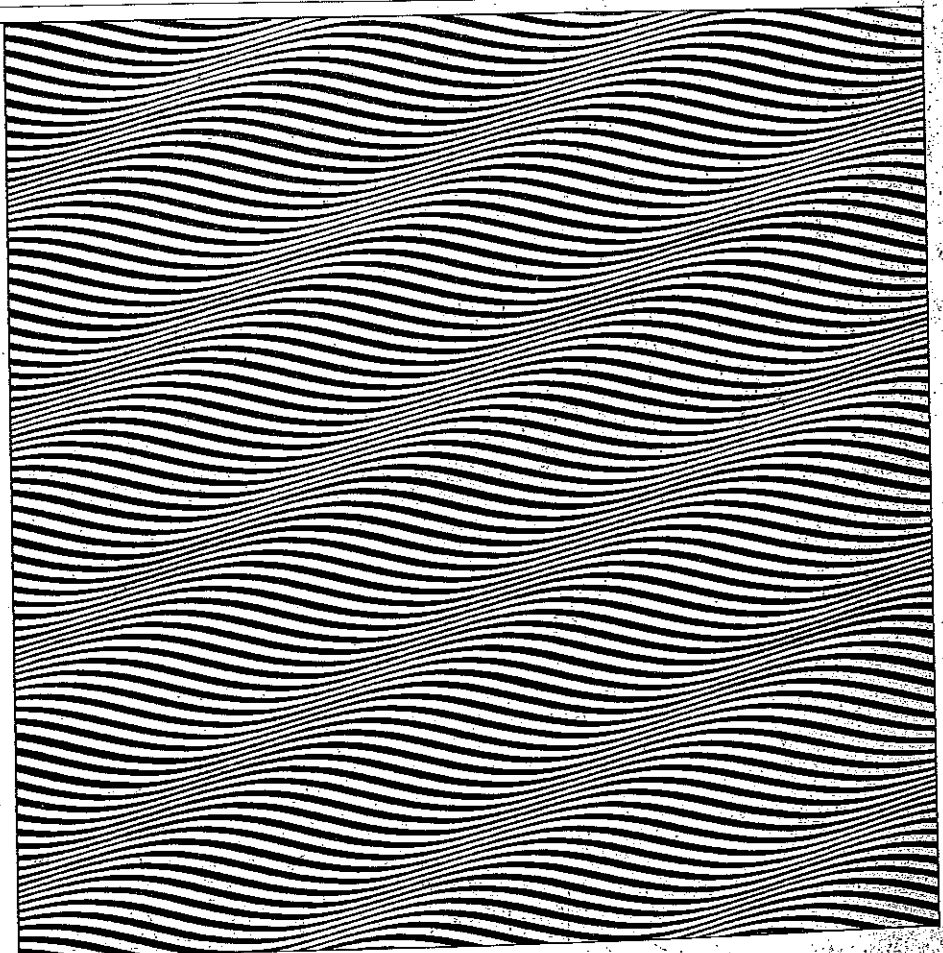
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PHOTOGRAPHY