



INSTALLATION

Excerpted Chapter



The current situation in Art photography is nebulous. You see galleries and auctions bidding up the work of "masters" while some very influential people are still arguing over whether photography is an art form at all. What exactly Art is and why anyone would care one way or the other is a rather individual thing. You see people like Garry Winogrand lionized for tilting horizons and shooting out-of-focus. The time is ripe for a blind photographer to make an artistic statement. Or someone shooting blindfolded and at random. I could do it and get a show, sell some prints for \$500 apiece. And I'd be an artiste while some of the very finest craftsmen in the field are dismissed as "commercial", "decorative" or even as "pornographers". I guess the situation is the same in painting and sculpture, if not worse. I wonder if Ansel Adams or any of the old f 64 group would be well regarded if they were working today. Or if their work would be considered finer than the hundreds who currently imitate it.

Consider this print. Or whatever you'd want to call it. It's done by a process I discovered while hanging around blueprint shops and running off prints on their equipment. It's a sheet of gold anodized aluminum that was coated with a photosensitive material. Sandwiched under a litho positive and run through a blueprint machine, it yields an image on metal. They're used as plaques, awards and commemorative documents. It is a cheaper, quicker, cleaner version of the process they used to print newspapers; a zinc plate coated with photofixed resist, exposed to a negative, then etched in acid bath to reveal a raised image which would accept ink. I once knew a kid who worked for a paper with old fashioned zinc plate presses who would swipe plates, expose them with positives of rock star images, etch them as deep as possible, then flow the depressions full of black lacquer and let them dry. Framed, he could sell them for fifty dollars at street fairs and head shops.

This aluminum plate process is available in any blueprint shop catering to business. You can run any line art, half-toned photo, or other black and white image on a wide variety of colors--even have it etched into brass. I filed the process away, to use if I thought of a good subject for it. It came in handy.

My agent Malcolm Woodson got me into a three-man show, the opening for a new, ultra-sophisto gallery in New York. They featured a retrospective of Winograd, and current work by me and Mylos Kaplan. Kaplan is a leading "artiste" and a darling of the photographic culture-culture set. He, too, has reached the point where he can do anything he wants and make it pay. He would shoot a portfolio blindfolded in a minute, but evidently hasn't thought of it. Like most avant gardists, he has a very limited imagination. He pre-announced what he would hang in the show--selenium-toned studies of cigarette smoke patterns in dark places--and was scornful of my being in the show with "established" innovators like he and Winograd. He called me a fashion hack and a slave of the banality of technique. Such matters concern me very little since I do shows for the money, and to exhibit things I think would be interesting to the public. Mostly the money--it's hard to figure out who the public is, much less their interests.

Malcolm, however, became very ego-involved and as much as begged me to show Kaplan up, to do something to put him in a back seat in the little world of reviews and critics and salons which meant little to me, but everything to him. He hated Kaplan passionately, only partly owing to personal slights and financial misfeasance of the past. He let me know all this, then dismissed it all, asking me only that the show put me on my finest mettle. I owed this man a great deal. . . he was very instrumental in granting me my economic freedom. And I'll admit to a nasty streak towards poseurs, especially mouthy and boorish ones. I told him I'd do my best to rain on Kaplan's parade, a Westerner coming to the big Eastern city to shoot it out with the bully.

I conceived and rejected two dozen ideas for the show before hitting on these little metal images. I called Malcolm and promised him triumph but told him to locate a very special assistant for me in New York and to engage him for the night of the show. I got a description of the space allotted me--one fairly large and one very large wall inside and a glassed -in display window out front--and began shooting and making prints.

For the first time in my life the medium of what I was doing was more important than the substance, and I explored that feeling. One effect was a difficulty in choosing subjects for the pictures. When the medium is the message, does it matter what you say? I only knew that it had to be faces of people. I ran through my backlog of studies I'd thought of doing. . . Vietnamese immigrants, Pioneer Square vagrants, athletes over forty, mongoloid and macrocephalic children. Finally I settled on musicians. I drew a lot of negatives from my files; I have hundreds of shots of jazz musicians and a lot of rock concert shots I took for the paper.

I spent a month doing portraits of street musicians and symphony performers. Each was a focus on the face, but included the instrument. I had Gary Burton and Sam Rivers concentrating, a drunken Leon Russell slumping at the keyboard, Leontyne Price soaring, a long-bearded local old-timer called Baby Gramps splendid with steel dobro, an all-black steel drum band, a fierce-looking gypsy who plays hammered dulcimer in Pike Place, a timpanist with the youth symphony, a naked woman cellist posed in the classic manner. And this one--Miles Davis driven and hostile behind dark glasses. I printed over a hundred of them on pieces of gold aluminum; some as large as eleven by fourteen, but most only four by five.

I also prepared a few special shots on brass plates, and a very special assemblage to be used in the brochure. I insisted that my show be hung the night before the opening, or I wouldn't be there. I got it my way, the only time I've ever forced any such concession from an exhibitor or publisher. I flew to New York to supervise the hanging and avoid interviews with journalists. I did grant one with "American Photo", a personal piece to run in conjunction with their one page piece on the show. I don't do press things, but they are old friends over there at Imagenation Corporation.

I brought the metal plates with me, plus a box of blank plates already cut to size. And a collector's oddity--a huge old roll film Polaroid 110A with bellows, full exposure control and a high-quality Rodenstock lens. It shoots four by five instant prints and I used it for years for getting concert shots to the paper in time to beat deadlines. But they discontinued the 3000 ASA film I'd used. Polaroid had long since quit making color roll film. They'd discontinued the film I brought to New York, too, but I had several cases in storage. It was a high contrast black and white emulsion on clear mylar, made to yield positive transparencies of medical instrument readings. It cost twenty dollars for eight shots when available. I planned on using up almost all my remaining supply, after which the camera would be useless because there would be no film for it anywhere.

I met Malcolm and interviewed my "special assistant", a quick, curly-headed Jew in his late twenties named Eric Blum. He was better than I'd hoped for. I'd brought along one of my models from Seattle, both as my "gofer" and to introduce her around New York. And to help me enjoy my expensive hotel suite. I also brought along Joe Camacho with a small nylon pack of clothes and his big black sax case. Joe promptly disappeared in ecstasy into the New York jazz underbrush, promising only to show up punctually for the opening.

I toured the gallery and got through the kudos and nonsense from its owners and backers, dutifully did the parties that Malcolm tried hard not to persuade me too plaintively to attend. Mostly I went to show off Jada, my model friend--both to advance her career and for her personal delight. Eric inspected the gallery walls and found the white-painted sheetrock to be free of obstructions and perfectly suitable. He was a character, so I took him to some of the parties, too. He was obviously knocked out by Jada, but found other distractions in the epicenter of New York photosociety. I underwrote some blindingly expensive clothes-shopping sprees for her and she located a blueprint shop close to the gallery, arranged for them to do a late job on opening night and lined up a taxi to stand by for us. When we hung the show there was nobody inside but myself, Malcolm, Jada, Eric, and the principal owner of the gallery, who poured wine for us and grew steadily more excited as we lounged around and watched Eric hang the show.

I had asked for a knife thrower, but Eric was much better. He was a professional card sharp, a mechanic and performer of close-up card tricks. He also did stage magic, including the throwing of playing cards. He could throw an entire deck into a hat, card by card. Then he could cut the hat to ribbons by sharply scaling cards at it. He mentioned a book to me, "Playing Cards as Deadly Weapons", as though he thought everyone had read it and showed me shots from a bit he'd done in Las Vegas, popping balloons off showgirls' naked bodies by skimming cards with deadly speed and accuracy. Malcolm glowed under my compliments at finding him.

Eric took a stack of my metal pictures, bowed deeply to the rest of us as we hoisted our goblets of Washington State Malvasia Bianca and Pinot Noir (the affair called for black and white wines, evidently), and started throwing, spiking the metal sheets into the larger of the show's two walls. He studied the entire wall with the little prints while Malcolm and the gallery man stared openmouthed and exchanged glances that chimed like cash registers. Almost all of the pictures struck and stuck at angles that permitted viewing the images. The few that didn't, he merely walked over and bent to proper angles. He moved closer and took a more elaborate windup with the larger pieces, thinking them into the wall like the others.

Finally the entire wall was pincushioned with pictures of musicians. Then, stalking majestically to the entryway where parchment bios of Winogrand and Kaplan were on display, he produced an eight by eleven sheet of brass, etched with my picture, the gallery logo, and a few dates and quotes. This he slung at the wall with the motion of a major league pitcher. The gallery owner was on his feet in a cloud of white wine as the brass sheet slugged into the wall between Winogrand and Kaplan. He calmed down as he examined it, smiling softly at the inclusion of his logo on the brass "poster".

Eric bowed to the floor, tossing an eye at Jada, who set down her glass and started an applause that we all took up. He then threw open the door and strode into the street. The rest of us followed him out, still holding our wineglasses. Only he and I were not surprised to be captured on video tape as we stepped out on the sidewalk, and to see a paparazzo lurking, firing two motordriven Nikons. My able assistant, with a magician's flourish, produced another brass sheet, dramatically squeezed a tube of powerful adhesive onto one corner of it, then spun with a move from a martial arts film to send the brass announcement smashing through the glass to stab quivering into the back wall of the display window, glued corner first. Again he bowed like a star tenor to our applause, then grabbed a wine glass and smashed it to the sidewalk among the other shards of glass. We all followed suit, including the dumfounded owner.

All of this was captured for posterity by the independent video outfit I'd hired (some footage even made the news on a few local channels) and by the two-fisted Nikon shooter, who'd been dispatched by American Photo. Back inside, our host handed out copies of the announcements, my portion featuring a photo of a metal Bruce Springsteen that I'd had rolled into a cylinder and soldered to the top and bottom of a beer can. Then we left, with the owner staring, somewhat nonplussed, at the still-blank smaller wall.

The opening reception was absolutely as stunning and ridiculous as you would expect; with the finery of the women and pomp of the men and sumptuousness of the catering playing out smaller subplots to a larger drama being enacted by Kaplan and I; stalking around, always with the entire gallery separating us, our respective camps surrounding us, withscouts drifting from one to another. For once Winogrand was not even noticed or mentioned, and I suspect the event was a sort of sunset for his reputation. I spent the first hour standing by the door with my rollfilm Polaroid, shooting shot after shot of the people as they stepped into the light inside the gallery. I wasn't even bothering to separate the shots, just gathering the rolls into paper bags as they slid from the camera, developing themselves in seconds. Meanwhile Malcolm strode meaningfully around in triumph, shrugging off any questions about the glaringly empty wall. Eric circulated like a sleek tomcat among exotic birds. Jada was in heaven, sliding through admiration and a glow of future success served on little silver trays.

As I finished with my filming, she slinked over and took the bags from me. She turned to scan the party, swinging her New York hairstyle, her professionally painted eyes glowing. She tried to tell me something, but suddenly leaned over to give me, on my cheekbone, the sweetest kiss she'd ever done me. Then she was shrugging her new fur coat over the shamelessly priced gown that left no doubt that it and the rented diamonds were all she wore, and ran out to the waiting cab. I walked over to an old friend who collects antiquated cameras and handed him the Polaroid 110A. He thanked me, said he had two of them, but appreciated the provenance of this one. I told him he'd been in New York too long the day he even learned the word "provenance".

I milled around, noshing and woofing, until I saw the fur coat bound back in the door. She held a cardboard box up just high enough for me to see it. I found Joe Camacho, flying on opiates and pinioning some young social butterfly to the wall, practically drooling into her artlessly flung cleavage. He whispered to her, lowered heavy hypnotic lids, and started opening the beat-up black case.

I helped Malcolm clear the floor in a long triangle whose base was the blank wall and warned him not to miss a second of what was coming. I met Eric at the apex of the triangle and introduced him, Malcolm and Jada to the company. All bowed, but Jada's was best. Then she opened the cardboard box and I reached in my pocket to pull out a plastic gun like those used to affix price tags in supermarkets. She handed me a metal print like this one, still smelling faintly of the ammonia developer. I swatted a price sticker on it and handed to Eric, who scaled it into the wall with a thwack punctuated by an unearthly shriek from Joe Camacho's tenor saxophone.

Ignoring the bounding bosoms and cascading cocktails that this produced, he reached for the next price-tagged print and chucked it into the wall with the élan of a Marseille apache cut-throat. I kept sticking on prices, each tag for \$275, each one bearing the pre-printed legend, "Red Tag Special". Joe Camacho kept wailing--a tortured shriek by Cato Barbieri out of Luis Gasca, by way of the free jazz extravaganza at it's most aloof and arrogant. A pulsing, ululating night animal sound, broken by reed-shredding screeches at the impact of each image into the wall. The people stared, transfixed by all of this until it sunk in that all the prints on the second wall were pictures of themselves. A buzz ran around the room, there were some very excited titters, and Malcolm shot me a look in which the register bell was drowned in wild, pure love.

Finally the wall was covered except a frisbee throw before chunking into that space--a picture of Kaplan, blinking warily into the light of the gallery. As it hit, Camacho stopped in mid-shriek--as sharp a stopper as his opening bleat. Eric stepped over to Kaplan and handed him an eight by ten brass engraving. He just had time to read the words "The World's Most Established Innovator" before Eric's hand flashed in to paste a "Red Tag Special" on his forehead.

Spinning on his heels, the star pitcher spread his hands aloft in victory, then bobbed over double to a very lively applause, smeared by wicked laughter. I saw Jada fretting over Malcolm, who seemed to be suffering some sort of seizure. Camacho strode over to the forward-looking starlet, jerked his head towards the door, spun around and strode out so fast she had trouble keeping up with him. Eric cleared off a canapés table and sat behind it surrounded by an arc of gorgeous women. Pulling a deck from his pocket, he shot a flashing rainbow of cards from hand to hand, then dealt a dazzling pattern on the white tablecloth. Jada reigned supreme among agents and photographers in another corner. The owner was finding that all the people frantically buying up their portraits sprinkled with fame and glitter understood perfectly that the images would have to remain where they were for the rest of the show, and wouldn't have had it any other way. I walked over to Kaplan and said I'd buy him a drink. He asked me what had happened to the traditional last meal, then looked around and agreed that we should get the hell out of there.

We ended up sipping from a fifth of gin on the Staten Island Ferry, arguing about the quality of Leitz lenses since they started making them in Singapore. I saw the prospectus on his next show. . . a series of graceful, gentle nudes that brought comparisons to "the great interpreters of the female form"; Cunningham, Weston, Newton--and myself. Reviewers posed questions about this extreme reversal of style and conjectured whether it heralded a return to photographic classicism. Two years later I heard he did a huge show of out-of-focus cityscapes, the color negatives printed as slides so the prints would be in "negative" colors. We only met the one time. He was a New Yorker and bit of a jerk, but essentially just another pro.

The show, which American Photo called "the display of the decade", was also mentioned in "Time", but it was hard to tell why. Jada moved to New York immediately and did some pretty nice covers, but was eventually dismissed as a mere groupie. I heard through Malcolm that this didn't really bother her, since she didn't like modeling as much as partying and meeting interesting men. What I noticed was that from the moment I decided to devote the show to one-upping Kaplan, it moved along inexorably towards the tour-de-ego it became and that I took glee in it. I could easily imagine such devotions stoking entire careers. As for me, I now have the world's most loyal and devoted agent, which in itself made the whole thing worthwhile.