SPEAKER

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Kunsthalle Basel

MOYRA DAVEY

Sternberg Press

RECEIVER

ACCIDENTS AMONG THE SLOW THINGS: ADAM SZYMCZYK INTERVIEWS MOYRA DAVEY

ADAM SZYMCZYK. For your show at Kunsthalle Basel, you chose the title "Speaker Receiver"—no comma, no dash. It evokes some familiar objects represented in your photographs: speakers and tube amplifiers, vinyl records and turntables. But it also points to a two-way transmission or exchangeability of roles between sender and receiver, a question you dealt with in your essay, "The Problem of Reading." Does your exhibition title address psychoanalysis as well, along with the production and consumption of images, two important themes in your work?

MOYRA DAVEY *Speaker* and *Receiver* are the titles of two of my photographs [both from 2003], but, in fact, they are reversed in terms of the literal meanings of these words. The speaker is mute—it's just the disconnected woofer sitting on a tabletop in sunlight—and the receiver is alive and glowing from a dark corner· a machine with a soul. In choosing these titles for the show I was definitely thinking of the writer-reader analogy, especially as Roland Barthes conceives of it: a reader who is actively producing or "writing" something in the act of reading. To be honest, though, I did not think of psychoanalysis. But you are absolutely right in making this connection. speaker/receiver is the dominant theme of my video *Fifty Minutes* [2006], and, to a large extent, of *My Necropolis* [2009] as well, in which Walter Benjamin "speaks" and a group of readers interpret or "receive" his letter.

AS: As in any transaction between the sender and the receiver, the source and the addressee decoding the message, there is also noise, the accident. It occurred to me while looking at your photographs of

dust and coins that the motifs in your images seem so casual, both in their choice and treatment—and their settings are almost serene—but, at the same time, the notion of accident in photography that you frequently invoke speaks of something inherently out of the ordinary. What kinds of accidents happen among the slow things?

MD: With the "Copperheads," which are photographed in the most forensic, controlled method available—i.e., using a copy stand and turning the camera into a microscope—the only "accident" is the luck of the find. coming across the pennies in my change or on the street, or occasionally, in the Surrealist mode, buying them from dealers at flea markets.

The video *Fifty Minutes* would be unbearable except that I deliberately chose the takes that contained slips and fumbles, everything I imagined I'd cut until I started editing and realized this was a way to inject spontaneity into an otherwise rehearsed and turgid delivery. *My Necropolis* was a shapeless sprawl for almost a year. Then, out of the blue, I remembered Peter Hujar's elegiac book *Portraits in Life and Death* [1976], and realized I could borrow its two-part structure—in my case, portraits of cemeteries and portraits of friends interpreting Walter Benjamin—to make sense of my material. This sounds very matter of fact, but I remember the feeling: it was like I'd been anointed by some kind of rapturous illumination. One last instance of "accident"· I have a button phobia—the psychoanalytic understanding is that buttons, because they are close to the skin, have a scatological association—and then one day I happened to come across a storefront in a very unlikely place, a little marina island in the Bronx called City Island, that was filled with boxes of hundreds of thousands of old, dirty buttons. I photographed them out of a morbid fascination.

AS: You seem to prefer objects of almost no value as photographic subjects. While many contemporary photographers prey on distant views of awesome global spectacles—stock exchanges, sporting events, museums, and public crowds—or ensure distance from their subjects by turning images of commodities, sex, and political disasters "found" on the internet into monumental high-art photographs, you stay close to singular material objects, those lowest currency units like buttons, household items, and copper coins. Such cheap things perfectly dem onstrate shifts in value: for example, as of April 29, 2010, melt value for one copper Lincoln-embossed American cent was $0.021, a bit more than two cents.

MD: All these things—buttons, pennies, dust, with their scatological associations that lead us to the body—are clearly memento mori. It's a known paradox that the camera loves to enact its transformation on the abject—like Irving Penn's cigarette butts—but I don't think that's why I gravitate to these subjects. I'm interested in what close looking reveals about the world. I've been doing this macro-looking for a long time: at toes and women's faces on 19th-century tintypes in the 1980s,


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Adam Szymczyk
Kunsthalle Basel
Steinenberg 7
CH-4051 Basel
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at money in the 1990s; at names and titles on record spines, the dregs in coffee cups, and Métro tickets with handwritten notes to the dead more recently. My approach to the photograph is essentially Barthesian, in that it's about mortality.

AS: Your photographs include a lot of secondary visual material: they are made of images—texts, documents, photographs, and other inanimate things that are shown on working desks, shelves, tables, or on top of the fridge—as if the world were a kind of frame installed to uphold the images and signs. People are very seldom represented—never more often than your dog—and if so, then mostly through a fragment or close-up of a body. It is as if things are to stand in for people, metonymically. Could you talk a bit about this absence of people, and also about any conventional idea of landscape or nature that might be found in your photographs?

MD: I've often said that the photographs I love to look at, notably street photographs, are not the ones I can make myself. I also love *verité* cinema. The last work I did that might be considered "the street" was the "Newsstands" series in 1994, a project that was exhilarating but also a little troubling: I did not like being conspicuous with my tripod and flash, and I was always a little uneasy about the act of *taking* something, bringing something home, like a trophy. That was just post-Whitney Studio Program, when the critique of documentary photography was at its height. More and more I gravitated to private spaces, where I could be alone and have the control I wanted. It occurs to me now that the dichotomy I'm setting up between the risk and vitality of *verité* capture, and the slowness and deliberation of the still-life composition, is a little like models of writing I've been thinking about. I composed a text called "Index Cards" that is made up largely of a year's worth of diaries, my own and others'. The whole time I was working on it I had the uneasy sensation that I was cannibalizing myself, and I kept thinking of the opposite model of writing proposed by Marguerite Duras, where she says: "To be without a subject for a book [...] without any idea of a book [...] is to find yourself in front of a book. An immense void. An eventual book. In front of writing, live and naked."

To answer the final part of your question, I'd say "landscape" and "nature" are conspicuously absent from my photographs—though I sometimes refer to *Floor* [2003] as a "desert landscape under a bed"—but less so from the videos, especially *My Necropolis*, where the garden landscape of the 19th-century cemetery is much in evidence.

AS: For the show in Basel, you mailed more than thirty folded photographs to the Kunsthalle. Is it important for you to have the prints travel in the mail, leaving them open to all kinds of accidents? Or is it, for you, about addressing a photograph to one specific person, and changing an image into a letter?

MD: Folding and mailing the photographs originated in a collaboration I did with John Goodwin at Goodwater, my gallery in Toronto, in 2007. I loved the process so much—treating the photograph as a piece

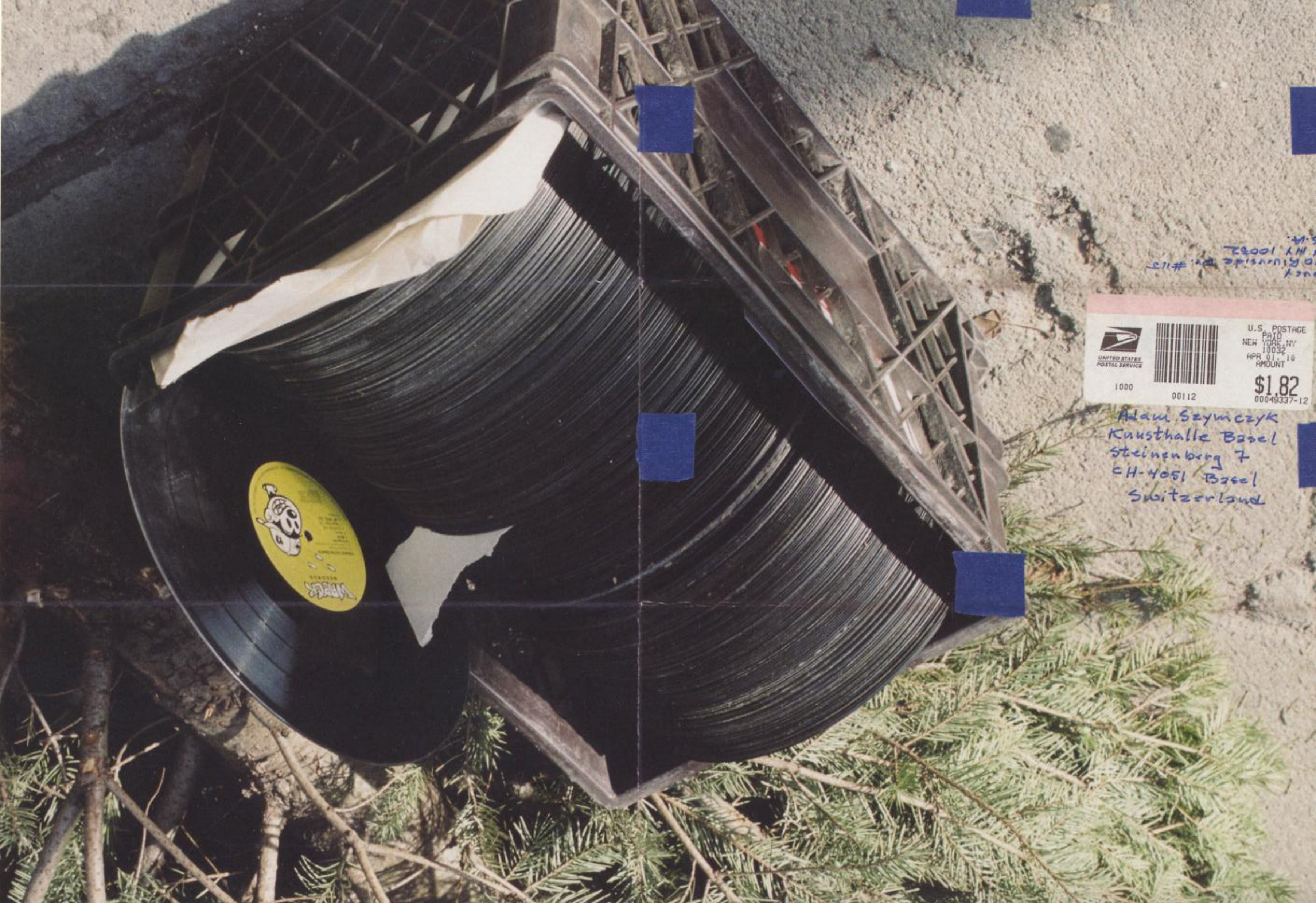
of paper to be folded, written on, and taped, as opposed to the kid-gloves approach to the fine print that must at all costs remain unblemished and end up in a frame—that I decided to repeat it, first when I was in Paris in 2008 and 2009, and mailing photographs to shows in New York and Winnipeg, and now in Basel. The process is about all the things you mention: the accretion of time and wear on the object, returning the photograph to its status as paper, the liberation of leaving some things up to chance, and the idea of an exchange with a specific person.

AS: When exhibiting your photographs and films, do you place much importance on the form of presentation? Or do you see exhibitions simply as one of the many ways of communicating your work? It seems to me that your work often operates at a close distance, as a conversation or exchange with friends, and that you care less about making it available to everyone.

MD: In truth I don't concern myself enough with the exhibition space: I see my work contained principally within the frame of the image, the frame of the screen, the frame of the text, the book. I think you're right in pointing out that close distance; it's a kind of intimacy I imagine for the work, which is also why I like to have a couch in the viewing room. I was reticent about distributing *Fifty Minutes* out of an undoubtedly deluded concern that my shrink might see the video and be hurt by it. But I'd have no problem seeing *My Necropolis* in wider distribution.

AS: In 2001, you edited *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood.* Could you talk about your motivation for this project and the readers you imagined it would reach?

MD: *Mother Reader* was the direct result of having a baby and finding it pretty tough to be both a mother and an artist. I began to read memoirs and essays by artists, writers, and poets—notably people like Jane Lazarre, Adrienne Rich, Annie Ernaux, and Alice Walker—who'd addressed this situation in brutally stark language. It was literature that sustained me through a difficult time. The idea for the book emerged from a conversation with the late Barbara Seaman, a longtime advocate of women's health in the US. She pitched the idea to me of assembling a collection of similar writings, and I was lucky to have a publisher in the family, Seven Stories Press, who agreed to publish it. I spent about two years reading and thinking about the shape of the book. There were a few premises: all the writing had to be from the point of view of the mother, and should address the intersection of motherhood and creative life. There is one non-biological mother in the collection, [fiction writer] Mary Gaitskill, who writes about her capacity, every woman's capacity, to be "mother," regardless of biology. It's a very profound and astonishing essay, and Gaitskill has gone on to write stories that extend this theme. I've loved following this development in her work. I imagined the collection for people like me: artists, writers, and performers whose lives have been changed by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Kunsthalle Basel
Steinenberg 7
CH-4051 Basel
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Adam Szymczyk
Kunsthalle Basel
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motherhood, and who might gain sustenance from knowing how others have coped in a similar situation.

AS: In 2003, Jason Simon and you initiated the One Minute Film & Video Festival, a one-day screening of one-minute films in the barn you own in upstate New York, followed by dancing. How did this idea originate, and why the limit of one minute?

MD: Jason Simon and Mark Dion had the idea for the One Minute Festival in our barn. We had this big space, and we'd built large, white panels for a show of paintings by Brian Purcell, and the question became what to do next. So we stacked the panels and made a big screen. The duration is limited to one minute because otherwise the screenings would go on all night; we often have close to a hundred entries. Mark dropped out of the organization except to host a martini bar at every event. It's basically Jason's project now; I cohost, but it's his brainchild and now he's producing an exquisite corpse version that will screen at the final One Minute in 2012 at MASS MoCA. Like Orchard, he put a cap on the duration of the project: ten years.

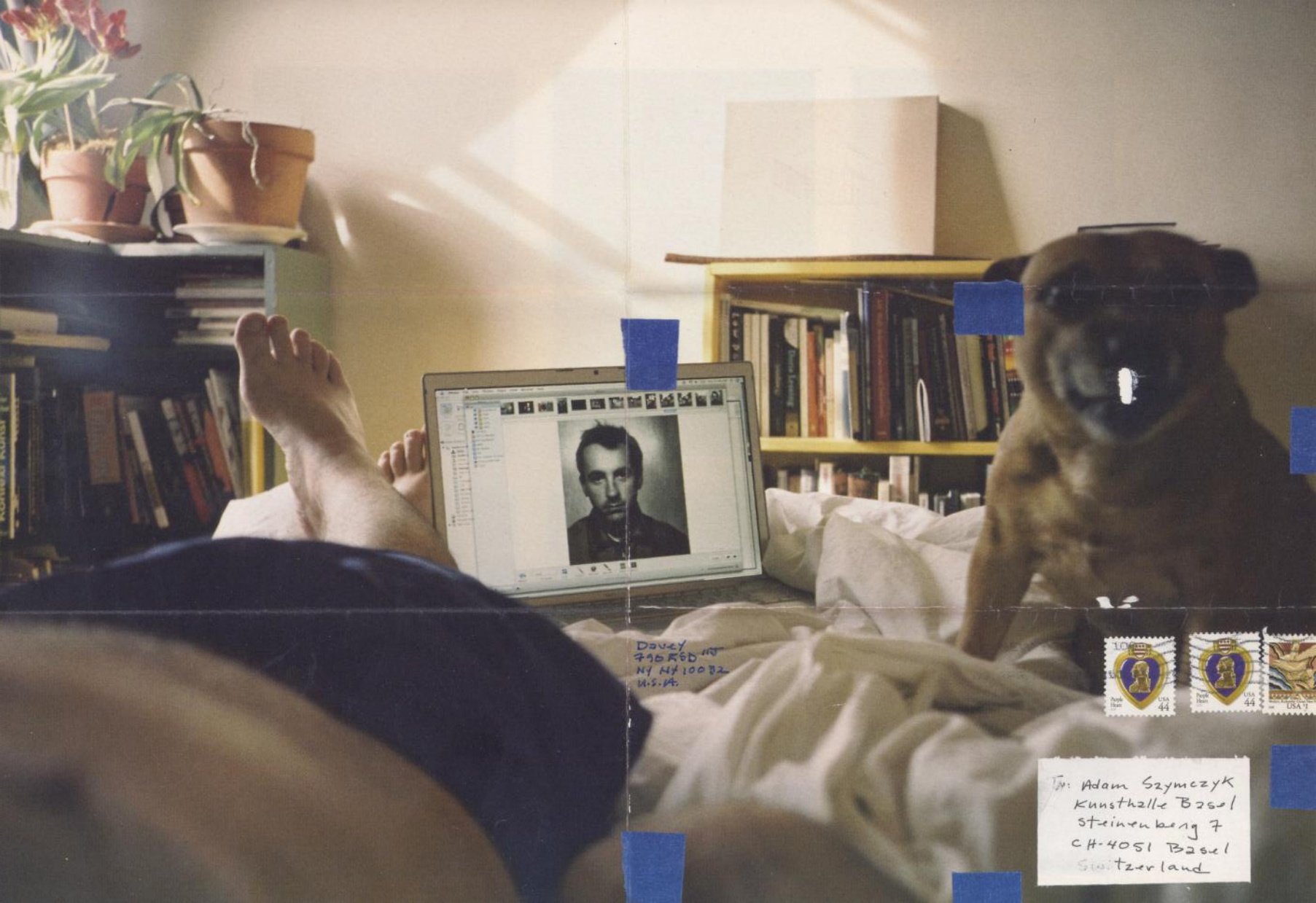
AS: Could you talk a bit about your involvement with Orchard, the cooperative-run exhibition space in New York that you helped set up in 2005? You seem to prefer self-organization—doing things on your own terms—to waiting to be included in others' scenarios.

MD: Orchard was a really exciting and intense project initiated by a group of artists who had either shown at American Fine Arts or Pat Hearn Gallery, in New York, and writers and art historians who were part of that orbit, all of us feeling acutely the loss of what Colin de Land and Pat Hearn had been doing. We wanted a project space where all kinds of things could take place: exhibitions, screenings, readings, book launches, benefit fundraisers, and discourse of all kinds. We were also big on doing intergenerational shows, featuring artists such as Dan Graham, Lawrence Weiner, and Dara Birnbaum; we showed many South American artists, and did exhibitions that were overtly political and antiwar. Orchard even functioned as a production studio for a film by Jeff Preiss and Andrea Fraser titled *May I Help You?* [1991/2005], and as a space for therapy—I think it was Wilhelm Reich–influenced. We all paid the rent on the space, and the painter R. H. Quaytman was the official gallerist and bookkeeper, though we each spent a great deal of time gallery-sitting the shows. I curated two shows and found the experience very close to that of making a piece, and I would always write something to go along it. Some of the most memorable shows for me were exhibitions by Sadie Benning, Jef Geys, and the Collective for Living Cinema; "September 11, 1973" [organized by Nicolás Guagnini] and Christian Philipp Müller's tour of the Lower East Side ["Around the Corner"], as well as the Bill Horrigan show ["Having Been Described in Words"]. The list goes on and on; everything is archived on the website. Some amazing energy came out of that group, but it was also very consuming and we all had other things we wanted to do, so we limited Orchard to a three-year time period.

AS: Finally, how did you get the idea of becoming an artist rather than a writer, and, more specifically, a photographer? What is the possibility of knowing the world that photography still offers at this moment, and that other disciplines cannot?

MD: I decided to become an artist when I was around twelve. I think I chose the visual because I was stunted verbally; I am still often at a loss for words. Later, that inarticulateness became the motivation for writing, a way to say the things I wanted to say in my own time. But getting back to being an artist and choosing photography: As a teenager I drew and painted and owned a camera. But when I entered college and art school, I lost confidence. I dropped out after two years and returned a year later as a photography major. I was ecstatic to be doing this and not painting, which had somehow atrophied for me.

What does photography offer now? It is the big question being debated everywhere, it seems, especially in California! I've reached various impasses and stalemates with photography over the years, but now I feel more at liberty than ever to do what I want. And I think that freedom has come about because of words: Writing has made photography viable for me again.


DOUCY
710 R5D
NY NY 10082
U.S.A.
To: Adam Szymczyk
Kunsthalle Basel
Steinenberg 7
CH-4051 Basel
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