

LA MATERIAL

JAMES WELLING AND WALEAD BESHTY

Leaving Los Angeles, driving to Mojave.

JAMES: So, what were we talking about?

WALEAD: We were talking about *The Flintstones* and *Bedrock*.

JAMES: The San Fernando Valley reminds me of *Bedrock*.

WALEAD: I always wondered why the men in *Bedrock* all look like Ron Jeremy. Fred, Barney, Mr. Slate... they were all these tubby short guys. While Wilma and Betty were these Betty Page kind of women, all the men were tubby, and sleazy looking.

JAMES: Barbie meets *The Honeymooners*.

WALEAD: ...meets porn, isn't the Valley the porn capital?

JAMES: It's both the porn capital and the capital of ratings. To get your film rated you have to submit it to the MPAA up on Ventura Blvd. Do you know Kirby Dick?

WALEAD: No.

JAMES: Look at those earthmovers.

WALEAD: Are we still in the San Fernando Valley?

JAMES: No, we're in Santa Clarita, near CalArts. We passed Newhall in an instant. The "Via Princepessa" would be a great name for a novel. One of the things I wanted to ask you about the show were the portraits. When you were making them I thought it would be the subject of the show. Talk more about those.

WALEAD: They really happened organically, intuitively, unlike any of the other pieces in the show or anything else I've done except for the "Shopping" pictures or the "Hands" pictures which both happened in that way. I wanted to make something different from the way I had

been making things. You were there when I did that Ayn Rand thing which didn't work out. That was almost painful. The whole endeavor was becoming such a frustrating loss, a complete waste of time, so much so that I thought "why don't we draw eyes on my eyes" and see what that looks like. I think it was an association with Cocteau, and a series of images published in Bataille's journal *Documents*. The adolescent provocation felt appropriate to the frustration of making those pictures. For me, it was a campy way to address the portrait or an adolescent way to address the emptiness in a picture of somebody. I feel portraits to be are always this sort of dead end.

JAMES: You're addressing the whole pictorial mode: make-up, fiction. This is like going so headlong into impersonation, fiction, acting, but also very visible. You have a seamless kind of thing. I was thinking of those Sugimoto wax photographs. There's no way that your work has that uncanny quality. It's clear that it's you. You have your face off. The face transplant doesn't work very well. With the Ayn Rand images failure was built into it in an interesting way. How else could you talk about... I'm not exactly sure what to do with them. You're turning yourself into her. Weren't you doing Louis Kahn too?

WALEAD: Yes, I saw a heroic failure in all the people that I tried to use. I chose people who have become reduced to a kind of character in abstenia, a kind of pure drive, through their works, portraits turn them into icons, you can fill in any pathos you like. When individuals are reverse engineered from objects and actions, they are almost like zombies, pure drive, garish and perfect. Ayn Rand is quite disturbing. Her ideas are really disturbing. This hero worship of Wright is one of the most disquieting aspects. It's so clear that she is the main female protagonist in the *Fountainhead*... just from the way Ayn Rand talks about herself, how she writes into that character. Have you ever read it?

JAMES: No. It's ludicrous, isn't it?

WALEAD: Yes, and it's directly borrowed from parts of Frank Lloyd Wright's life. Wright didn't like it at all. He was disturbed by this woman who was obsessed with him. They had a correspondence but it was very one-sided. Her desire was very interesting to me, that she needed this figure to complete her plan, to use his story as a kind of morality tale. I think it's telling that she then wrote herself into his story, through the female heroine in the novel. It's not unlike Wilhelm Reich's fixation on Einstein later in life, he needed Einstein to feel connected to something, to complete himself somehow. He was lost in Maine, disconnected, jet-

tisoned from the high powered intellectual life he had when he was part of Freud's circle. His attempt to connect was even less successful than Rand's fixation on Wright.

What I think is interesting was that Rand was trying to assert a worldview through her narrative, but instead created an image of her pathology, her fixation on Wright, her insecurity. It makes me think of the *Beaver Trilogy*, the filmmaker, Trent Harris, is trying to tell the story of a man he ran into in the parking lot of a TV station. He made a short documentary about him under false pretenses, the guy was very trusting, he wanted to be on TV, wanted to be famous. The documentary, the first part of the *Trilogy* is very condescending, we're encouraged to laugh at this guy, but what's insane, and very interesting is that Harris tries to retell the story, to try to do it justice, to fix the ethical problems, and make the guy more human, someone the audience can relate to. The filmmaker needed the guy, the Beaver Kid, to complete what he had to say, he couldn't say it straight out, he needed him to be a symbol of something. He restaged it two times, adding things, making the story have larger implications, making its message more overt, trying to humanize the guy, but in the end, the movies are a failure, completely clichéd, ham fisted. Instead they become about the filmmaker himself, his own failure, his own desire to tell the story, and his inability to do so. He, like Rand, in the retelling of the story included himself in the portrait, inserting a lecherous and condescending filmmaker into the film. The repeating elements, the things that are directly retold from the original version disappear, what you're left with are his additions, and these tell you about this struggle he's having, an ethical and artistic struggle. The final film ends up being about the hubris of telling stories, of making art, and the failure imbedded in it. It's a balance between narcissism and cultural efficacy, of allowing something to function in a larger world, but having this hang up of having the artist be the center of the work. Harris wanted to talk about repressive gender roles, about latent homophobia in America, but what he made was a caricature, a thinly veiled moralist proclamation. Herzog is a bit like this. His films, his subjects, his process, are all about a kind of hubris gone wrong, but the interesting thing is he embodies it. There's this moment in the *Fountainhead* where Rand fantasizes a sex scene with Howard Roarke, who is the stand in for Wright. He forces himself upon her and she's a kind of negative caricature of the modern woman, smart strong, but in need of a man to give her direction, she's self destructive without him. She is violently fucked by Howard Roarke, he throws her against the wall, it really reads like a rape. The only thing that justifies it is the narrator assuring us that she "wants it." Rand telling us that the Rand stand-in wants it. She turned her imagination of Wright, derived from his

buildings, into a sex partner, a violent one. It's similar to the suicide scene that Trent Harris inserts into the narrative of the Beaver Kid. It's just so disturbing. Architecture is so often infused with this heroic narrative of the maker, more so than other disciplines. I don't know any other medium where these ideas are so persistent, except maybe in film..

JAMES: Both are collaborative endeavors that need a big name at the top.

WALEAD: Yes, and the big name becomes an emblem. All the work that goes into these projects dissolves into that one figure. Everything about the building becomes an emblem of Corbusier or Louis Khan or Wright. It becomes instantly psychologized. There is this total distance of the maker in architecture, which ends up being read completely personally, it's as though it's because they are more obscured by the process (because of the many subjectivities that went into making the thing) that we imagine them even more present in the material. They are like ghosts. There's this one way of talking about Rudolph where his use of ornamentation was created out of an impersonation of hypermasculinity. Turning the latent brutalism of international style architecture into an ornament, into a facade, a faux figure. It is like he was performing. There's this tradition of superimposing the architects photo onto the façade of the building, Rudolph did it, Gropius too. This is very telling to me.

JAMES: So you became Rudolph?

WALEAD: Yes. But none of them are very strict appropriations.

JAMES: And who were the other figures?

WALEAD: The critic was a combination of Tom Wolfe... the picture that was in the press materials *From Bauhaus to Our House*. I stole a couple things from Sadiakichi Hartmann, Steglitz's house critic.

JAMES: Samuel Beckett was trying to figure out which was a dirtier name to call somebody in the 1930's, critic or architect? He decided architect was the worst... and there was a third personage?

WALEAD: Yes, the apprentice. The apprentice characters are drawn from an image of Wright when he was working with Sullivan... But like I said, they're loose. I didn't want to turn them into totems, or homages, though I respect the figures they were based on.

JAMES: They're almost non-persons. I mean the critic and the apprentice.

WALEAD: I wanted to emphasize how photographs become iconic, how portraits become iconic. I wanted to create images that rode a line of presence and absence. I still don't know how I feel about them, my presence in them. I often use myself in my work, while also making it not me. I'm kind of hesitant to expand on this. Those pictures are about being in that kind of position, being present and absent, which I think happens in all art. I mean, on an even more general level, you assume certain artists are certain types of people, you can't help it, you use the objects as stand-ins. In some way, I've tried to resist becoming a persona through the work, to resist the forces that turn artists into characters, fetishizes them, makes them products instead of the work being the center.

JAMES: The accelerated aging comes out of that impulse.

WALEAD: I think so. It was an early manifestation of that concern. As much as that age progression work contained images of me, they are equally not me, they are simulated figures. I wanted to make doubles, or copies, but to also allow a viewer to project into the images, to imagine an interiority. I was really interested in trying to deal with the way photographs create copies, or doubles, but to have this confront the way they are normally viewed, or used. Age Progressions are, in their use, quite idealistic. They come from a faith in technology to simulate a person, to fill a loss, they are hopeful. It also seemed to underscore this disjunction in the portrait, the sense of absence, of loss, which isn't simply a cold procedure, it's about the empathic quality of photographs, the desire, or need to project a presence into them. The need to have faith in pictures. This is not some sort of unmasking of ideology, or a critique of this hope. I don't think photographs allow for something that simple, and more importantly, it seems silly to try to reject this desire, or condemn it... This desire to defeat time, or recoup a loss... the way the expert created a simulation of the passage of time in the pictures was also important. I was really interested in this, because he used technology, digital effects, to create the years of my adolescence in the pictures, the time when one becomes a fully functioning adult, both psychically and physically. I suppose this is also what really interests me in your work, this negotiation with time, say the early Jack Goldstein photograph with the cigarette, but also the new works you showed me... the "Hexachromes." This emphasis seems to persist in your work. I was wondering if you might talk about how the "Hexachromes" ended up happening.

JAMES: I find it hard to say much about it. I'm trying to figure out what color is. When I started out taking photographs color was big. I remember trying to do it myself before. I realized I couldn't do it with tanks and thermometers and so I stopped. Stan Brackage said something when he was railing against naturalism. He was telling filmmakers that they should put they're unexposed film stock in the oven, crank it up to 300 degrees, bake it first, and then shoot it. For many, many years I thought about how to do something else with color and what that might mean. It's forced me to think about Warhol's use of silkscreens. Apart from the fact that Warhol wasn't really a photographer using painterly means, when you think about a silkscreen as a black-and-white screen that you can force any color through I began to think about how I could do that in photography. I began thinking about other ways to process film. These new photographs are very process-oriented. I hardly imagine that it would be contemporary. One of the things that always bothered me about that work is that it seemed so retrograde. It's also a skepticism about the codes of photography today. There's so much pure representation now. The one note that I keep coming back to is the constructed reality of photography and trying to somehow peel it apart.

WALEAD: It seems like what you're talking about is a kind of materialist photography, how a practice can confront, and make clear the parameters and constraints of the medium, like color, or emulsion, and so on. Your work makes me think of a turn of the century photography, not in quotation, but in the way that so many people were trying to figure out how photography worked, trying to sort out what a photographic episteme was. The "Hexachromes" make me think of Muybridge and Jules Marey, and their attempts at rendering time on a flat surface. There's a way that time get's registered in a photograph, the photograph is made over a span of time (the time the shutter is open). There's a potential in the way that time accumulates in a photograph, which is usually not acknowledged or when it is acknowledged it seems stylistic. But in these images, the time shift occurs through the color, it's registered in the process. There are these incremental points marked by color, each color represents a time, and all of these moments are compressed, in a legible way, onto a single surface.

JAMES: I love that. I also am trying to think of what other people are using. Just trying to expand the photographic moment. Have you seen those Gary Schneider photographs where he has the subject lie on their back and he lights their face with a flashlight. He moves the camera a

little bit. So there's this moment that lasts thirty minutes. He's putting their face back together. Or Michael Wesely who did the one year long exposures of the new MoMA. It turns out he's Vera Luter's teacher. Luter did those three month long exposures.

WALEAD: I don't totally understand what you were saying about them being retrograde.

JAMES: There's much more process than subject. When you look back to '70s photography, there's a lot more photographers fiddling around with similar issues and it's a little embarrassing. I think generally the work is extremely uninteresting: quasi-nudes, ridiculous landscapes,... psychedelic work. It makes me a little uncomfortable.

WALEAD: But the difference is that the process of your work isn't going through all these movements just to create a seductive, final image. One contemporary example would be Thomas Ruff. On a superficial level your work and his share some interests, vernacular photography, abstraction, antiquated technologies, yet Ruff seems to me to be going through processes to create a very spectacular image, in his work, the image is about being a conclusion, being a totalized moment. In many ways, his images are completely imposing; it puts the viewer in a passive place, as a receiver. The process, how he is thinking materially, is kept mostly out of view, it's something only people who are also involved in photography can begin to understand, and even then, it is often obscured. It's high production. What has always struck me in your work, in the Degrades, or the New Abstractions, is that they have this enticing seductive quality, but there's always a generosity within the way your process comes through. The process is always worn on its surface and not concealed or held back. That opens up a realm outside of it simply being a spectacle that you confront, but makes it a thing that a viewer can be more intimate with. This is rare in photography, I can't think of many who use the medium in this way, perhaps Boris Mikhailov or Wolfgang Tillmans does this to some extent.

JAMES: That's great, I like the sound of that.

WALEAD: That's what I'm always taken with. There's a pleasure in the image that one is allowed with looking at your work. There's also an availability in how it was done, a way to think through what that process means. In contrast, most photography leaves you with an either/or, either it's a very seductive, complete thing, or it doesn't work. And that question of if the spectacle works or doesn't is not an issue when I see your pieces. It's more about offering

a way the viewer can think through what they see visually, how the history is active, how it forms our contemporary understanding of photographs. History isn't a symbol or quote, but an active thought process within the work itself, within viewing.

JAMES: I always think of myself as catching up in photography. For a long time I worked normatively because I felt defensive about never studying photography. But generosity doesn't sell.

WALEAD: I was thinking about this feeling that photography is sort of like turn of the century salon painting. Especially it's claim for transparency, when I look at staged work, or the new landscape work, all I can think of is the pre-Raphaelites, or Hudson River School, or Sublime Landscape painting...

Outside Staples, one hour north of LA, Mojave, CA

JAMES: So what were we talking about?

WALEAD: We started talking about this term, new conceptualism that I questioned. I was thinking that it seemed to start with Bas Jan Ader with what I think is a creative misreading of his work. I'm thinking about what you get when you talk about it in purely emotional, spiritual terms.

JAMES: I hadn't really been thinking about it until a friend was complaining about Conceptual art. This friend is middle generation like me, not really from the conceptual generation. There's this period from the mid-'60s to now of conceptual activity. I think one of the things that it's not is that it's not Duchampian based and what you were saying that Buren was complaining about is that it's not anti-illusion. It's Conceptual art with the mainstays pulled out so how does it hold together? That could be one sort of question.

WALEAD: Conceptual art seems to be about trying to create a transparency of taste or aesthetics, to present as clearly as possible the terms of an artist working as opposed to working by pure intuition, or inspiration. They lay out all the choices so you have this clear mechanism that is set up to explain why a certain set of aesthetic choices were made... and then there's borrowing. Seemingly transparent discourses like scientific discourse or mathematical discourse. But I think this is misinterpreted as being esoteric, or academic, when I believe the impulse was the exact opposite, they were trying to be accessible, to open up an artistic process to clear investigation by the viewer. It's really quite utopian, and populist, to a fault.

JAMES: I think that's part of it. The other thing that I've been thinking about is one of the key defining things of Conceptual art after taking from Weiner is that you don't have to build the piece, the piece may not be built, or could be remade. The lack of preciousness... you just remake it. It's not the object, it's the idea. There are objects but they can always be remade. One of the things that I've been trying to think about with this talk I want to do with the Getty is a very narrow focus: what does it mean to reprint photographs? Certain people including me, are reprinting their work bigger with digital technology. How can this be accepted as the same work? I was thinking that this is one of the things that defines conceptual practice. It all really comes out of photography. The idea that it's not the print on the wall, it's the idea standing behind it. What you were saying is part of it too, a kind of interrogation. Not every photograph is a work of conceptualism but it draws from a new situation where multiple prints and photographs...

WALEAD: Right, a problem that comes up in terms of generalized experience of mass production in general, or, a larger...

JAMES: Various people have made work using the techniques of industry, you know, phoning it in. El Lissitzky, or was it Maholy-Nagy, or Tony Smith, picked up the phone and ordered three monochrome paintings.

WALEAD: Right, the telephone pieces by Maholy-Nagy.

JAMES: Much stronger point of origin than say Duchamp's readymades. Duchamp goes to a flea market. In Maholy-Nagy's case this is someone taking real initiative. It's not passive.

WALEAD: I wonder if this new conceptualism becomes a claim against objects, that objects are only facades, behind which universal ideals are present. In this way, it's naively phenomenological. Maybe it's a reading of Conceptual art that says objects aren't unique but the ideas and beliefs behind them are. Therefore the gap or the break that happens in Conceptual art, a kind of disjunction, or absence, is filled in by a kind of symbolism, a kind of spiritual element, a preciousness.... The gap in instrumental meaning is narrativized. What I think was most compelling about Conceptual art was that the transparency produces the outcome that a work of art can be totally beautiful but you know exactly how it was made, like with a Sol Lewitt wall drawing. You can go home and make one if you want to. The materials are not mythologized. It seems this transparency is lost when objects become symbolic,

it's almost like Kandinsky with shapes equaling different sensations or feelings. And the gallerist steps forward and explains the meanings to you... if you're someone they will talk to... if you ask. It becomes a question of privileged information, and this seems to run in direct opposition to what Conceptual art was trying to do.

Stopping at the Train location

JAMES: We were talking about conceptualism and the definitions of it. Maybe new conceptualism is a kind of work in between film, photography, and text.

WALEAD: My feeling is that it's about taking that gap that happens with objects, of meanings being unstable. This is what happens in a commodity space, the objects stand in for ideas, the iPod means you're a certain type of person, you buy it partially for its use, but the aesthetic of it sells you a lifestyle, and you find this out by gleaning information from the "right" places. It seems the Symbolists were up to the same thing. You talked about the Symbolists. I don't know if was directly in relation to your work.

JAMES: In the '70s there was a lot of interest in Mallarmé's influence on Duchamp at the time. It seemed worthy to take a look at Mallarmé. The "Pound Era" by Hugh Kenner had just come out. It seemed to me that Conceptual art came out of poetry. Dan Graham and Acconci thought of themselves as poets in the mid-'60s. There's a wonderful poem by John Donne about a flea biting both the poet and his lover. The poet crushes the flea and he sees the blood and realizes their blood is comingled in this flea. There's a lot going on with poetry that Conceptual art bears some sort of relationship to. Poetic principles. I remember when John Knight saw some student work at CalArts. He said, "Emily Dickinson." I thought that's great, Emily Dickinson, wonderful. Of course, it was a total put down then....

Look... helper units. Heading back towards Bakersfield. That's called a light engine move. We're going to take a picture up here if you don't mind. This is the answer to the oil crisis.

WALEAD: Mercedes symbols.

JAMES: Ok, where were we?

WALEAD: What's most odd to me is that while much of the work is aesthetically indebted to a history of self-reflexive, politically engaged, materialist tactics, it often favors personal cosmologies, and monumental studio nar-

ratives; invisible justifications for making Conceptual art, which seems to work against the idealism and hopefulness embodied in the attempted transparency and utopian egalitarianism of Conceptual art, or the early avant gardes. Much of this “new” work seems to internalize the negative caricature that Conceptual art was academic and esoteric navel gazing... the current trend seems completely regressive, and ultimately exceedingly commodity friendly. An artist friend, Karl Haendel made T-shirts that said “Compassionate Conceptualism,” which makes me think that the most appropriate term is “Neo Con.” Seems like a complete reversal and retreat from the idea that art can conceptualize a more ethical form of communicating, and this movement appears to be almost analogous to the Neo Conservative movement that was borne from the Democrat anticommunist european immigrant hawks that felt that the tradition of the Democratic party was being threatened by cultural relativism, who slowly morphed into today’s Neo-Cons (read Wolfowitz).

James photographs the bluff with wind power generators, Walead records the automated train voice that comes over the CB.

WALEAD: We were talking about Symbolists. I was wondering if making those kinds of connections was a decisive break, if it was differentiating your position from what was going on?

JAMES: With my generation, that was a break. The first generation Conceptual artists seemed so uptight. It seemed to me that poetry had a lot to do with Conceptual art. Like Robert Barry’s piece, *All the things that I am aware of but not thinking while driving to Baltimore, May 1967* was a good example of someone who embraced poetics. Or Weiner, you look at his work and it’s a kind of poetry. It seemed to me at the time that Conceptual art was coming out of poetry as well as analytic philosophy. In a way, Conceptual art never left the poetic dimension.

WALEAD: I think that is really interesting, and something I’ve never heard before. Do you think that reading has been repressed?

JAMES: Not many people or historians put together poetry, fiction, and Conceptual art. Richard Kostelanetz edited a book called *Breakthrough Fictioneers* that had a painful mixture of Smithson, Baldessari, Kathy Acker, in the ‘80s... people like Lynne Tillman, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger.... There’s definitely a relationship to fiction and text and what we call Conceptual art.

WALEAD: Maybe that plays into that narrativity question.

JAMES: Narrative is a big term for fiction. You go from Dan Graham where he’s filming his body. Dan took a camera and put it against his body and took all these photographs. A few years later you have Nan Goldin looking at herself and her friends with something of that focus. So photoconceptualism, poetics, autobiography, fiction, poetics, they all get mushed together and come out with different strengths... there’s that glider again. You can see it landing.

WALEAD: And that’s how I got interested in Conceptual art. It reminded me of airports and malls. It was the initial thing that got me excited about Conceptual art. It spoke about the dominant structure of a contemporary culture to me, about how to think through this condition that I felt was quite alienating, it spoke to me about where I grew up, right by Levittown, a relic of post war ideology, a community built from a masterplan. I became disillusioned with most staged work, or the images associated with the Düsseldorf school, they seemed to participate in the structures I found alienating, instead of giving me a way out. They felt like they were part of contemporary culture in the sense that they were subordinate to it... they complacently circulated through it, they didn’t seem to contain the whole situation within themselves. The work made me personally feel powerless as a producer, it seemed almost cynical. I felt that conceptual work did offer a way out. Someone like Sol Lewitt, or Dan Graham, or Ed Ruscha especially, seemed about something much larger, trying to deal with much bigger questions. Ruscha’s repetition and what Dan Graham was depicting was all the spaces that I grew up in that I found alienating. I feel Stan Douglas continues this for me, he takes narration and seduction, and turns it on its head, historicizes it.

JAMES: Where did you grow up?

WALEAD: Mostly in Pennsylvania. High school was in Pennsylvania, lower Bucks County.

JAMES: Is it near Chadds Ford? Near Delaware?

WALEAD: Five minutes from Trenton. Trenton has this great bridge, the “Trenton Makes the World Takes” Bridge. It is a train bridge, a relic of Trenton’s former prominence as an industrial center. Now the bridge is as macabre as the city, a corpse of a former age. That it was a train bridge seems so appropriate. What initially interested you about the trains?

JAMES: I've always been interested in them from childhood. I took a train trip to Chicago to do my first show at Feature Gallery in 1986. I took the train and I was making paintings at the time. I was making these Neo Geo paintings and I wanted to get back into photography. One of the things that I couldn't do with painting was to activate a kind of historical sense or the way that technology of photography is built into the camera or the history of looking with the camera obscura is built into the mechanics of making photographs. Whereas, with painting, I didn't have that built-in sense. It was just materials. I thought I was a lot better at making art by using the technology of the camera. The thing that got me excited about photography initially is that you're using this really ancient device that I didn't realize at the time that goes back to the Renaissance. So, I took a train trip to Chicago, a sleeper, and I was just so excited about producing new work. Photographing 19th century architecture and doing something with railroads.

WALEAD: When was this?

JAMES: 1986. The train photographs started in 1989.

WALEAD: Were you thinking about architectural photography when you were making them?

JAMES: Yes, I've always been interested in architectural photography. I worked at MoMA in the architecture department as a preparator. I was able to take a look at their archives and see lots of their anonymous photographs of buildings. That would be a show to curate out of the architectural archives. Forget about Julius Schulman.

WALEAD: What was going on in New York then? You said that was your first show at Feature?

JAMES: I think it was my first. I did two shows at Feature. A lot was happening.

WALEAD: The market crashed in 1987, right?

JAMES: Right. I had then gone back to photography. When were you at Bard?

WALEAD: 96 to 99.

JAMES: So you were going down to New York then?

WALEAD: Yes, I was going down to NY a lot. I did an internship at Paul Kasmin. I was making very straight forward black-

and-white street pictures. Mainly for me it was figuring out that form. I was shooting a little in NY. I was mostly photographing upstate. I started photographing a series of baby pagents but in a street photography kind of way. They're kind of gruesome pictures. I look at them and they seem very angry, I think I was channeling Winogrand, his anger. Then I started using an 8x10 to photograph architecture, sort of black-and-white Stephen Shore pictures, intersections, store fronts. I really liked William Klein and Paul Strand. I found them in the library. The socialist humanism appealed to me, as did the anger about the current condition... especially Klein's anger. It really did create this situation where I was completely in the dark about most of what was going on. I think I spent a lot of time reinventing the wheel. I started making these staged pictures towards the end because I really liked this other student's work who was at Bard who graduated a year before me. I liked the control, and the ability to create meanings. I wasn't interested in contingency anymore, catching something, making a form out of it. It seemed very restrictive, and moreover, completely unnecessary. People had done it amazingly well, and at the right time. I realized that making art wasn't about making things that looked like the things I liked, this is when I think I first started to think through the process, instead of trying to simulate an outcome.

Turning to staging at that time made a lot of sense to me, I had always been really intrigued with Dante, the Comedia and ideas of allegory. Of making ideas, or concepts interact in an imaginary space. I also conceived of pictures as dioramas, as little stages where things could be acted out, but shallow ones. That sort of spatiality was interesting to me. But I realized that what one struggled for in street pictures, a kind of evocative narrative shown through form, was moot in staging. It just didn't matter, it was too easy. To me it made street photography and staged photography pointless to pursue. It also made me think of where narratives come from, where people get the narratives that they put onto pictures, it wasn't in the pictures themselves, you had to be supplied the narrative before hand. That seemed like a problem, it seemed like it made that sort of work a retelling of restrictive narratives from pop culture, that I was perpetuating something I fundamentally disagreed with.

JAMES: And a lot of your continuing concerns.

WALEAD: How do you mean?

JAMES: I don't think people change very much. Dioramas and shallow space for these kinds of actions are kind of what department stores are.

WALEAD: That's really true.

JAMES: I mean, you were photographing beauty queens in malls and you still went back to the mall recently.

WALEAD: I suppose that's the reason I went back to the malls, because what attracted me was the way the storefronts were like proscenium arches. I think it's also true of the stereographs, you know, the day for night. They all have a very shallow space... I wanted them to have an unreal shallowness, like a bas relief.

PART II In Jim's Kitchen

JAMES: What were we talking about?

WALEAD: I thought it was interesting what you were saying about Bedrock, and was curious how you felt about being in Southern California.

JAMES: When I first arrived to California I had hitchhiked across country. I had spent the previous night in Big Sur sleeping on the beach. I hitchhiked all the way down. Maybe I stayed in a hotel between Big Sur and LA I remember coming off the 101 up to the 405 and being amazed at Van Nuys. The word Van Nuys seemed like it was in Vietnam. Also, the geography of the Valley reminded me of Bedrock. Everyone has this realization that the geography of TV and movies is Southern California. When you finally see it it's a kind of veil being pulled off your eyes. Thom Anderson's *LA Plays Itself*: you have that moment of LA playing itself. For me, it was seeing the Valley as Bedrock.

WALEAD: That was the late '70s?

JAMES: The early '70s.

WALEAD: That really fits the zeitgeist of what starts to happen in the late '70s. The idea of photographs or images becoming self-sustaining, like pure simulations. Not to bring Baudrillard into it but that kind of artifice, this confusion between a place and the image of the place and having those two things inextricably tied. That informs the actual physical location instead of it being something placed on top with a "real" behind it. Did the conversation at CalArts reflect those concerns?

JAMES: Baudrillard was a little later. In the early '70s, Jack Burnham's *The Structure of Art* was the big theory book introducing structuralism. Everyone was looking at

grids from this book. There wasn't a lot of theory being read and when it was it was often phenomenology. I was relieved when structuralism came along because I couldn't understand phenomenology. Structuralism was a little bit easier.

WALEAD: Like Merleau-Ponty?

JAMES: I could never get what Merleau-Ponty was talking about. When he talked about Cezanne I could get that. I never really knew what phenomenology was. Whereas Levi-Strauss was much easier to see, the idea of cultural anthropology. It was a lot simpler to look at the world through that structuralist gaze. Of course, it also rhymed with structuralist film. Rosalind Krauss with grids, all this stuff in the mid-'70s of ordering the world, Buren's stripes, those sorts of things. There was a moment when you could actually see theory. Maybe that's when Baudrillard comes along later. The idea of theory as visual in the landscape as you're suggesting.

WALEAD: Who did you study with at CalArts?

JAMES: Baldessari was away the first semester I was there. I studied with Wolfgang Storerchle who was a performance artist and he did video. He was my main teacher. Storerchle and Harold Budd, the composer, were around. Then Baldessari came in the next semester.

WALEAD: And you were working with video?

JAMES: I started doing video. Charlemagne Palenstine and Simone Forte were in residence. There were a lot of people coming through but those were the people who were there.

WALEAD: What were you making before you were making video?

JAMES: I came from making more sculpture and monochrome painting. I made grey monochrome paintings in Pittsburgh and impermanent sculptures with nylon fishing wire. I was interested in Smithsonian entropy and Robert Barry's radio waves. My first year at CalArts I remember meeting Robert Barry and it was very embarrassing, kind of being a fan, calling up an artist that I liked and saying that "I wanted to meet you." So we met at Paula Cooper Gallery and I had nothing to say to him. It was total humiliation. He was shrugging his shoulders and said "well, if you don't have any questions I have two appointments." It was very embarrassing.

WALEAD: Was it the ephemerality of video that was interesting to you? In how it followed from the logic of those kind of sculptures that you were making?

JAMES: I was also really struck by structuralist film. Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton was who interested me at the time. I was making sculptures with cinder blocks in proportion to my body. It was all pretty vague. I did some work with the *I Ching* too.

WALEAD: After CalArts you moved to New York?

JAMES: A bit later. I stayed in LA for four or five years writing reviews for this little magazine called *ArtWeek* and going to performances and participating in the LA performance scene. It was post-Chris Burden. People like Nancy Buchanan, John Duncan, and Barbara Smith were doing performances. LA names from the '70s. Wolfgang Storerchle did a performance. Paul McCarthy was around. Mike Kelly too. Right before I left I saw Mike Kelly's "Monkey Island," an early performance. So in the '70s, the most interesting going on in LA was performances. And Oingo Boingo and different punk bands. The Avengers. Some of my friends from CalArts were in a band called The Weirdos. So, punk and performance.

WALEAD: What made you move to New York?

JAMES: I figured it was easier to be poor in New York than it was in LA.

WALEAD: Were you making objects when you left LA?

JAMES: I was making photographs. I started in '76 to make photographs.

WALEAD: Those were the polaroids?

JAMES: The early polaroids and my first black-and-white pictures too. I totaled my car, I got \$600 from the insurance, and I bought a camera. That's how I transitioned into photography.

WALEAD: Was New York particularly different?

JAMES: It comes as no surprise that painting was going on in New York. The idea of bad painting had taken hold in the mid-'70s. People like Neil Jenny and Nicholas Africano. The idea that somehow this was a receptive territory for what I was doing or what my friends were doing seems kind of weird. They gravitated toward NY

because that's where things were happening. Also there was a hole. Not a lot was going on in New York. Bad painting wasn't very interesting. My friends like David Salle and Jack Goldstein had moved to New York to get things going in their work around performance and film. David was just starting to paint then. Of course there was a lot going on, it seemed a lot more interesting for many people than what was going on in Los Angeles, which was sort of anemic.

WALEAD: What is striking to me is the early abstraction pictures, the tin foil pictures, the filo dough. Those happened at a time when people were investing a lot in the artificiality of photographs and the artificiality of pictures. You mentioned this before that you were interested in how to peel apart this process and the fictiveness of images but you chose a very different strategy. I wonder if there's a way to talk about why abstraction felt like the best way to deal with that problem in pictures, that sort of fictive quality of images? It seemed like a lot of the other work operated by parody, by accentuating the false illusion of them or the artificiality or the cultural construction of photographs. You chose a very different route in that you weren't quoting popular culture. You mentioned to me before where there was a reading of your work as being a kind of parody in that context. You said that you didn't relate to that reading.

JAMES: It was more of a critique rather than a parody. A pastiche of abstraction and overblown sentiment in Minor White's work.

WALEAD: How did you see that work approaching that question of the artificiality of images?

JAMES: A lot of the artificial work or parody or pastiche hadn't even happened. It all happened at the same time. My abstract photographs from the early '80s were happening while people were working with fictitious narratives. Cindy's movie still pictures for instance. If you look closely at the work that was developing in the '80s, they come out of '70s "narrative art." People like Bill Beckley and Baldessari. Other artists like Mac Adams were doing narrative photographs, multi-paneled pieces. You have to look closely at was going on in photography. Even Huebler and his works. John Welch. Wegman in the late '70s using photography and joke-y narratives. All of this stuff was going on. People knew about it, it was being shown, and written about in *The New York Times*. It wasn't like it was hidden or anything. The Pictures Generation: those people are really coming out of this

slightly more unrefined narrative which is almost like cartoon art where you have multiple paneled pictures. There's this kind of wash in the late '70s of this photo narrative work then it becomes more single picture work in my generation. And a pulling out of the more artificial elements, the spectacular images like Jack Goldstein's movies or Troy Brauntuch's work even though he doesn't work in photography he was known for his drawings. Even Barbara Kruger. The early text pieces were much more self-contained. I think people were responding to pressures of the market. They were making things that were more like paintings than they were like photo narratives or photoconceptualism. My solution to this anxiety about photo narrative was to make things that were not narrative at all. A lot of us either unconsciously or consciously were reacting to what had just come before photo narrative. Are you familiar with photo narrative work?

WALEAD: Like Duane Michals?

JAMES: Duane Michals is in that ballpark. He was huge. A lot of people were looking at the sort of work. There began to be work in color: Bill Beckley or John Le Gac. Sonnabend was showing a lot of this work. Narrative that was obviously about narrative. At the time I was not that keen on the work. Now I look back at it with affection because it was combining conceptualism and things that were happening in photography.

WALEAD: The narrative work, say Cindy Sherman or Jack Goldstein's films, seemed to work against the functioning of a narrative, although it invoked key aspects of it. The MGM lion or a way that Cindy Sherman takes this image and creates all the cues for you to project an entire film upon it or think you know where the characters are situated. But it's very clear that this is a total fabrication that this wasn't taken out of a continuous narrative situation but that it's artificial. So, all the things that you attach to it are cultural associations that aren't inherent in the photograph itself. It seems that from the early work until now, there is a commitment to a materialism in your approach to picture making. The way that, in say Sherman, the process elements aren't really present. Like you said about the spectacle and competing on the level of painting, there's a sense of autonomy and there's a way that those pictures justify autonomy because there's no real narrative that they come out of. They are apparitions, ephemeral, fleeting, like Prince's advertising, or Sherman's fabricated films. They're not subservient to a story because the story isn't really there, like a journalistic image. How do you feel about a term like "material-

ism"? It seems like something you were proposing but wasn't an issue for your contemporaries.

JAMES: Yes but all the while being aware of the highly artificial nature of art making. How to approach, or break through the artificial nature of the imagination to the material aspects of it. So the aluminum foil photographs reference the silver in the photographs, but in an extremely poetic way. The filo dough pictures are more about this idea of randomness and break up, perceptual mechanisms. It alternates between what perception is—is it just synapses in the brain or is there some other kind of thing you can point to? This whole metaphysics of perception and intelligence making. Those are questions I blundered into without specifically knowing where I was headed. The aluminum foil photographs came out of thinking about some images that Mallarmé talked about. That's where the imagery comes from but they also connect to questions about perception, intelligence and sense-making. These go back to a lot of the things I was reading a few years before. The whole idea of language, the physicality of language, and the reading we had done in the '70s of de Saussure, Barthes on language, the Russian Formalists, and all the stuff that was in the air sort of coalesced in these photographs for me. It was a condensing of a lot of the things I had been reading. I was also just blundering along, like a magpie looking at shiny surfaces.

WALEAD: Were you looking at early modernist photographers?

JAMES: I heavily digested that. I was very aware of that but I wasn't really looking at it at the time. It was more like a send-up. That was the period aspect. Yes, of course I was aware of Minor White who was beginning his steady eclipse. He died in 1976. His reputation had just fallen. That was an interesting phenomenon: to see someone so big in the early '70s become just a meaningless blip.

WALEAD: I was also thinking of Maholy-Nagy in how he did the photograms where he crumpled the piece of photo paper, exposed it, and then un-crumpled it which created these irregular, geometric patterns. I think the title of the piece was *An Abstraction My Hand Made With The Assistance of Light*.

JAMES: I don't know that work.

WALEAD: I was wondering about that era.

JAMES: I read Maholy-Nagy's biography in '76 and I liked what he said about cities at night. He has this great quote about how beautiful the city at night is. That kind of quote. There was a show at Pomona College of his work curated by Leland Rice, which I either saw or saw the catalogue for. It was always present at least in my understanding of photography. There was one good photography gallery in LA called G. Ray Hawkins which showed modernist photography. Then the New Topographics came to LA in '77 so it was a mixture of creating a history of photography from what was being exhibited. Evans was still alive and showing. Modernist photography was being exhibited.

WALEAD: We talked before about Ruscha and Dan Graham. Were they important to you when you were in New York?

JAMES: People knew Ruscha's books like the swimming pools and *Every Building On the Sunset Strip*. The books were so available that you could buy them for five dollars. They weren't the collector items they are now. Since I knew Dan I knew his photographic work. I remember we took a walk around Manhattan and he pointed out these places where he photographed the steps of City Hall to make them look like Minimalist sculpture. I knew Dan pretty well then. The idea to photograph buildings to look like Minimalist sculpture was an interesting idea.

WALEAD: That stair picture looks a lot like a Kertész image. There's one that's almost spot on.

JAMES: Except the intentions are very different. It's like making a picture to look like a Sol Lewitt.

WALEAD: Or Ruscha's parking lots... in the way that you're using the photogram and materials that are close at hand, they tie into these moments in photographic history. If it's Maholy-Nagy, or Man Ray, or the "rayograph," the origins of photograms were just materials they had lying around. What we were talking about before about the spectacle that was also going on in a lot of that work in the '70s, it's in opposition to that tradition of modernist photography, which, although they were looking for a seductive effect, had a hand made quality about it. I was wondering if in looking at that work and recovering a certain kind of idea about a photograph—about a materialist or essentialist hand-made quality or approachability to it, that it wasn't all high spectacle advertising, or quotations, or simulations of that kind of address—put you at odds with your contemporaries? It seems like that there's a struggle

to recover an approachability, of a kind of access that a viewer can have about a participatory thing, a way that the process is worn on its surface and none of it is completely out of reach. I said this about Sol Lewitt that you can say that it's beautiful and you also know exactly how it was made. It doesn't get delivered to you as if it was delivered to you from some specialized and obscured process. It also made me think of Allan Sekula in a very different way in how he is recovering social documentary photography. In the '70s, at least in retrospect, it looked like one of the most embattled disciplines in photography and art, not only from an aesthetic formalist position, but from the very group that he was deeply involved with. Working during a similar period he too turns back to an early modern idea, in his case, a progressive era idea of social justice, a kind of humanist intervention. In parallel, I saw an aspect of your work that seemed to mirror this operation, but sees early modernist photography as the thing to recover, these early investigations of materialism, it doesn't seem to be dismissive. It's not pure critique, because it can stand on its own, it doesn't need the referent to have meaning. There is something that you recover from it that is still viable even though Minor White is on the very fringe of modernist abstraction, I don't think of Minor White most though, I'm thinking more of the Avant Gardes. You return to a kind of form or employ a kind of method that is even more debased or embattled than social documentary. It seemed as if people were directly writing against social documentary whereas those formalist traditions were patently off limits.

JAMES: Our understanding of photography is now through the art world. The art world in the '70s was a big sieve. "What are we going to let through, what are we not going to let through?" For social documentary, Nan Goldin makes it through and Allan makes it through, whereas Susan Meiselas or other documentary photographers are not really embraced by the art world. There's huge problems with the art world's understanding of photography. There's a very restrictive re-writing of history. It's not clear exactly who it's serving. But still, there's this tremendous simplification which has always seemed to me more and more ludicrous and nutty. I suppose it's market forces or historicization of simplifying things and pulling out these strands and not being interested in other sorts of similar life endeavors. You can even look at it in institutional critique. Why are certain artists left off of the map like Maria Nordman whose work is extremely relevant to certain discussions. Or, other artists in the '70s who were doing extremely interesting work and were completely overlooked by art history or the histori-

cizing process. It's probably because these other sorts of practices are too messy or don't neatly fit.

WALEAD: It happened with Stephen Shore, it happened with Joel Sternfeld, and Robert Adams where it took the reception of the Düsseldorf work and then later Adams getting curated into *Documenta* for him to get picked up by a gallery like Matthew Marks.

JAMES: Thank you France.

WALEAD: France?

JAMES: Yes, through Jean François Chevrier. That show in Spain which was the first time Adams was included with Wall and Struth. I forget the name of the show. It was before "Documenta X." History is an unequal process but it seems really bizarre the way the history of photography gets cleaned up.

WALEAD: This continues to happen, the most recent example of which is *The Last Picture Show*. Those clean categories of art and photography don't really work, like Stephen Shore's "Amarillo Tall in Texas." That work really impacted me, this idea of postcards of Americana that are essentially nowhere's, they could be equally valid in any place. It has some of the same kind of implications as some of Ruscha's photographic bookwork, but it's framed differently. But it draws the photograph, and ideas of place, or cultural identity into this unstable signification. It operated as a vernacular commodity, it impersonated a simple postcard, it also made a compelling argument about our understanding of place and photography and at the same time, our cultural identity, our idea of where we came from as Americans, how photography was implicated. It did this all at once. *Uncommon Places* also has deep implications, about how pictures were responsible for creating a mythology of the west, about these imbedded narratives of apocalypse. To Shore, middle America was reimagined as a desolate evacuated place, turning O'Sullivan, and geological surveys on their heads. There was a total inability to accept that work (such as Robert Adams, Shore or Lewis Baltz) as functioning alongside someone like Dan Graham or Ed Ruscha. Either you were part of the old guard who saw photography as a minor art (to this day, photography is in the section of the Yale Art History slide library called minor arts), operating as a feeble cousin to other forms, or you championed conceptual practices, but defined this group as a social unit, not as an intellectual or topic-based grouping. To me, it seems like this was a fight over the avant garde which originated from a argument

with Greenberg, or the Greenbergian legacy, taken to the extreme. Greenberg was repelled by photography except for Evans, and Szarkowski, the main critic/curator, steward over photographic history in the '60s and the '70s, was this neo-Greenbergian. This put him directly at odds with the group that formed around *October* and critical theory. They saw Szarkowski as an impediment to the recovery of surrealism and avant garde into the canon of art history because Szarkowski was trying to turn photography into painting, he rejected many of the claims for contextual and social readings being made by these critics. It seemed as though anything he championed was off limits, and vice versa, with a few exceptions, like Ruscha, or the Bechers. Anything associated with him was labeled aesthetic formalism. It left a lot of these photographers that were working in the '70s, that were aligned with that American modernist tradition, out of the loop, even though they actually were doing things that were really contemporary and relevant and could be spoken about in some of the same terms. They even had an advantage, because they actively dealt with photographic history within their work. For many artists, photography's history was unimportant, or just simply didn't exist. They actually shared a lot of influences and were thinking similarly, yet they were completely ghettoized. It took twenty years for a lot of the things they were doing to be acknowledged, or more exactly, acknowledged in an art context.

JAMES: It just goes to prove that to be a successful artist in America you have to go to Europe. If you don't go to Europe your work has to go to Europe and be brought back. This is a hundred year old practice. Successful artists in America, except maybe Eakins, one or two of them, they all go to Europe and they come back. Steichen, Evans goes to Europe. Weston is an example who didn't. Most successful American artists are filtered through Europe. Baldessari was nowhere until he began to show in Europe. So, that is the case that Robert Adams had to be discovered by Europeans to be taken seriously in America. It's the historical model. It's one of the reasons why we love Benjamin Buchloh. ■■