

Cindy Bernard: Security Envelope Grid

|                           |                                  |  |                |  |                    |   |                                      |  |   |                                   |   |  |   |   |   |  |                            |  |                       |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|--|----------------|--|--------------------|---|--------------------------------------|--|---|-----------------------------------|---|--|---|---|---|--|----------------------------|--|-----------------------|
| Ericson/Ziegler           | Call Nina                        | Merrill Lynch #1                       | Unocal         | Merrill Lynch #2                         | Christie's, London | Department of the Treasury, Bureau of the Public Debt | Untitled #8                          | Mrs. Prina                             | Glendale Federal                        | Prentice Hall Information Service | Shell Oil Company                                     | Citicorp Savings                               | Warner Cable Communications Inc.            | CIGNA Healthplans of California                                       | MIC/GM                                  | Mit Luftpost; Par Avion; By Airmail #2 | Parkett                    | Mit Luftpost; Par Avion; By Airmail #3                   | Untitled #11          |
| Museum of Modern Art      | Internal Revenue Service         | San Jose Mercury News                  | Untitled #2    | First Interstate Bank #2                 | Untitled #4        | Untitled (Safeguard)                                  | Via Air Mail; Correo Aero; Par Avion | Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia   | Margo Leavin Gallery                    | 20th Century Insurance Co.        | Tema Celeste  | Apache Corporation                             | Untitled #9                                 | ARte COntemporaneo  | National Financial Services Corporation | Buffums Inc.                           | Peat Marwick               | AT&T   | Art Sales Japan       |
| By Air Mail; Par Avion #1 | Atlantic Financial               | First Interstate Bank #1               | Untitled #5    | Par Avion; Per Luchtpost; By Air Mail    | Untitled #1        | Stephen Prina   | Untitled #6                          | P.O. Box 272063 Concord, CA 94527-2063 | American Express Travel Related Service | Oceanic Cable                     | Gibraltar Savings; Real Estate Loan Office            | Walt Disney World Co.                          | Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company | Exxon Company, USA  | Prentice Hall                           | Encyclopedia Britannica USA            | CrownLife                  | E.I. DuPont De Nemours and Company                       | MetLife               |
| By Air Mail; Par Avion #2 | By Air Mail; Flugpost; Par Avion | Mit Luftpost; Par Avion; By Airmail #1 | Untitled #7    | E.F. Hutton #2                           | Bank of America    | Untitled #3   | Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers       | Morgan Guaranty Trust Co.              | Transamerica Life Companies             | Blue Shield of California         | Security Pacific National Bank                        | John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Inc. | Par Avion; Per Luchtpost; By Air Mail #2    | New Age Publishing Co.  | Hinckley & Schmitt Co. of California    | Federated Tax Service                  | Peoples Energy Corporation | First Class Mail; Important Tax Return Document Enclosed | Untitled #10          |
| First Banks: Visual Arts  | Merrill Lynch #3                 | Artscribe International                | E.F. Hutton #1 | "Important Tax Return Document Enclosed" | McDonnell Douglas  | Omaha Property and Casualty                           | Indianapolis Museum of Art           | Wells Fargo #1                         | Wells Fargo #2                          | Tele-communications Inc.          | P.O. Box 390 Grand Central Station New York, NY 10017 | Fidelity USA                                   | Stephenson and Stephenson                   | "IF UNABLE TO DELIVER WITHIN 5 DAYS DO NOT FORWARD, RETURN TO SENDER" | Dominguez Water Corporation             | Morgan Shareholder Services Trust Co.  | Allstate                   | Federal Express  | Emigrant Savings Bank |

Center for Creative Photography  
The University of Arizona

†1-50 Security Envelope Grid: Michael Kohn Gallery (April 1988);  
1-75 Security Envelope Grid: Whitney Museum of American Art (April 1989);  
1-100 Security Envelope Grid: Center for Creative Photography (May 1993)  
1987-1993  
Black-and-white photographs with painted wood frames  
100 parts: 12 x 14 inches each; 8½ x 35 feet overall  
  
The exhibition is supported by a grant from Lannan Foundation, Los Angeles



Installation view at the Center for Creative Photography, 1993



*Security Envelope: "IF UNABLE TO  
DELIVER WITHIN 5 DAYS DO NOT  
FORWARD, RETURN TO SENDER",  
1988*

*Security Envelope: Untitled #6, 1988*

*Security Envelope: Untitled #10, 1992*

## DOCUMENT ENCLOSED

Trudy Wilner Stack, Curator

Since the late nineteenth century, the technical capability of photography to accurately describe and convincingly distort the visual world has exponentially increased. It is only now, with widespread media literacy, that the distortion side of the photographic equation has gained popular acceptance. However, the art of photography has long played against the public's deep-seated documentary expectation, converting the truth of appearances to the insight of expression: a unique intermingling of reality's aspect and its interpretation. Cindy Bernard's watershed work, *Security Envelope Grid*<sup>†</sup>, is about the nature of proof, that is, what we take for granted as being true or necessary, and on what grounds. She uses a compelling trident of belief systems: photography, art, and commerce, brought together through the use of a most unexpected source. The designs that line security envelopes to protect their financial or confidential contents from inspection are recast into 8 x 10-inch black-and-white photographic enlargements hung in a 9 x 35-foot grid of one hundred images. This installation work interferes with assumptions of truth, depicting the financial sub-strata of society and culture as a standardized net of abstract patterns and familiar signs. Sophisticated and convincingly simple, *Security Envelope Grid* is an inescapable but never culpable arrangement that holds its secrets with the perfunctory formality of the envelopes from which it evolved.

When postwar materialism took over the United States at mid-century, many artists responded by turning their attention to commercially driven, mass media imagery. They borrowed liberally from the vocabulary of communication strategies they sought to address, creatively quoting from the pervasive realms of Hollywood and Madison Avenue. These artists created a Pop lexicon that shrewdly addressed the seductions of an always new and improved sell and the popular culture it defined. What happened to these artists, like so many

before them, was that the promotion and canonization of their vision and their styles led to an art as comfortable in the marketplace as any product: paintings of soup cans took their place on the shelf with the soup cans themselves. In the late seventies, as much of this work entered the pantheon of the masterpiece, art as commodity became an important subject for a new generation of artists. They took up a compelling critique of the terms and practices of the art world in which they themselves simultaneously and gainfully participated.

With computer imaging in fast pursuit, the camera remains the principal tool of commercial media: it makes images that, regardless of manipulation, exude a sense of what things "really" look like. Capitalizing on the medium's ability to assiduously catalog and recapitulate the visual components of society, many twentieth-century print-makers, painters, sculptors, and conceptual artists, took up photography. Most recently, the use of photography and other means of image and object quotation allowed savvy and revisionist artists of the seventies and eighties to abandon the glorified artistic realms of cast bronze, paint on canvas, the artist's mark, the original — and simply appropriate through reproduction and pastiche. They unpacked motives and beliefs within art and culture through works of intellectual polish and rigorous formalism.

Schooled by some of this art's most influential practitioners, Cindy Bernard follows them as an original. The *Security Envelope Grid*, her most widely exhibited work (shown here for the first time in its final form), exemplifies this artist's innovative and ambitious conceptual photographic projects. Highly sensitized to the ferment of contemporary art practice, Bernard completed art school in 1985 and began a series of fabric studies that would set the tone for the rest of her mature work. She was particularly influenced by historical and contemporary German photographers who, driven by notions of categorization and typology, obsessively collected images with the camera. Karl Blossfeldt, August Sander, and Bernd and Hilla Becher are precedents for Bernard's location of meaning in other-



wise unnoticed or commonplace subjects, what she calls "material not already encoded with the weight of culture."\* Unlike the media imagery so often the subject of contemporary art, the visual information Bernard attends to is striking for its seeming inconsequence, its mundane, unremarkable presence. Sorting through her grandmother's old clothes, she found mass-produced fifties fabric designs that surprisingly "incorporated a painterly design that was not only gestural but seemed to refer to specific modes of abstraction." She photographed these textile patterns as close-up details, in black and white, reducing them further to an idealized abstraction far removed from their actual origins. "I am intimating that there is a certain degree of calculation behind any gesture and that the degree of meaning attached to the artist's hand is overemphasized in terms of its emotional significance."

Important to understanding Bernard's work, as well as that of her contemporaries, is recognizing that motivating associations often hinge on the nature of art and its historical canons. She not only takes advantage of the seeming open-endedness of modernist abstraction, but more cynically and radically, she questions its purity of expression — identifying the genre of abstraction as itself an aesthetic strategy that seductively asserts the primacy of artistic autonomy. She uses it as a metaphor for concealment, what Bernard calls "abstraction as camouflage."

Enter the security envelope. Working as a bookkeeper for a Los Angeles gallery, Bernard found the financial underpinnings of the art world a crucial, but often covert factor in determining creative practice. The dollar-driven chain of influence was far-reaching and bore a surprising parallel to the organization of even larger social orders. The interior patterns of the security envelope, a pedestrian piece of stationery designed for discreet monetary transactions, related to her earlier exploration of abstraction. Symbolically, the crudely printed tiny patterns on the insides of these plain, undistinguished envelopes disguise a high stakes framework for artistic success. After enlarg-

ing them as details on a photocopier, she photographed them in black and white, relying, in a now established postmodern tradition, on the subverted understanding of the medium as documentary. The resulting prints were then matted, framed, and ordered in a massive grid, configured in rows of five-by-twenty works. The systematic arrangement becomes an embodiment of the fiscal infrastructure upon which contemporary society depends. The involving, characteristic markings of the individual envelope patterns succumb to the entirety of the *Security Envelope Grid*. Like the corporate logos that appear within it, authenticity is erased by repetition and the elegant, repressively hermetic design.

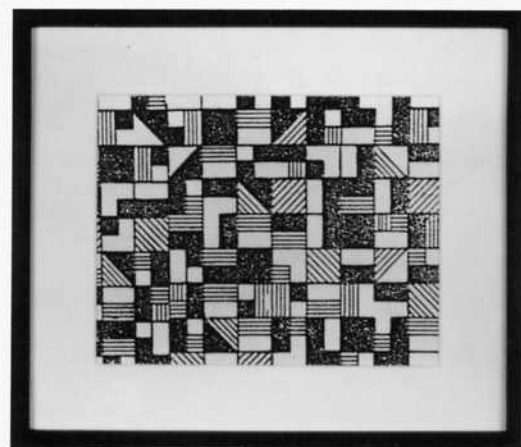
"I almost render the relationship of the photograph to what is real an irrelevant question," says Bernard. But despite intense mediation, she does create pictures of real things. In some ways her works are consummate straight photographs, yet her imagery is dramatically removed from assumptions of the photographic. Bernard produces a statement of the general from virtual minutiae, exposing the underside of art and society through the transfiguration of an almost unnoticed everyday object. The security envelope, ordinarily an opaque and acquiescent carrier, becomes the document enclosed.

\*All quotes from the artist are taken from a published interview with Marc Selwyn, *Flash Art* (Summer 1988, p.111).

► *Security Envelope: Department of the Treasury, Bureau of the Public Debt, 1987*

*Security Envelope: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1988*

*Security Envelope: Untitled #11, 1992*





## BIOGRAPHY

Born 1959, San Pedro, California.

## EDUCATION

1985 Master of Fine Arts, California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). 1981 Bachelor of Arts, California State University, Long Beach.

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1992 Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery, Santa Monica. 1991 Air de Paris, Nice, France. 1990 Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery, Santa Monica. 1988 Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles.

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1992 *Exhibit A: Eight Artists from Europe and America*, The Serpentine Gallery, London. *Still*, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. *Vers Une Attitude Photographique*, Caisse de Depots, Paris. *Hollywood, Hollywood: Identity Under the Guise of Celebrity*, Alyce de Roulet Williamson Gallery, Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, California. 1991 *John Baldessari, Cindy Bernard, Fischli-Weiss, Hirsch Perlman*, Monika Sprüth Galerie, Köln, Germany. 1990 *The Köln Show*, Monika Sprüth Galerie, Köln, Germany. *Spiel der Spur: The Poetry of Chance*, Shedhalle, Zurich, Switzerland. *Biennial I*, California Museum of Photography, Riverside, California. 1989 *Biennial*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. *The Photography of Invention: American Pictures of the Eighties*, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; traveled to Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. *Abstraction in Contemporary Photography*, Fred L. Emerson Gallery, Hamilton College, Virginia; traveled to Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University. 1988 *CalArts: Skeptical Belief(s)*, Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach,

California. *Recent Art from Los Angeles*, Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, Cleveland, Ohio. *Contention*, New Langton Arts, San Francisco, California. *Information as Ornament*, Feature, Chicago. *After Abstract*, Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, California. 1987 *The Hallucination of Truth*, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, P.S. 1, New York. *Spiral of Artificiality*, Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York. *New Photography*, Feature, Chicago. *Breaking Through the Looking Glass: West*, Fahey/Klein Gallery, Los Angeles. *Breaking Through the Looking Glass: East*, Holly Solomon Gallery, New York. *CalArts: Skeptical Belief(s)*, Renaissance Society, Chicago. *Room 9*, Tropicana Motel, Los Angeles. 1986 *T.V. Generations*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (L.A.C.E.), Los Angeles. 1984 *The Cotton Exchange Show*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (L.A.C.E.), Los Angeles.

ENCOUNTERS, an exhibition series devoted to innovative contemporary photography, is organized by the Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona. *Cindy Bernard: Security Envelope Grid*, a traveling exhibition supported by the Lannan Foundation, Los Angeles, premiered in Tucson between May 9 and September 12, 1993.

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BACK PANEL: *Security Envelope: Margo Leavin Gallery*, 1987

► *Security Envelope: Shell Oil Company*, 1988

*Security Envelope: Untitled #3*, 1987

*Security Envelope: Gibraltar Savings; Real Estate Loan Office*, 1989

