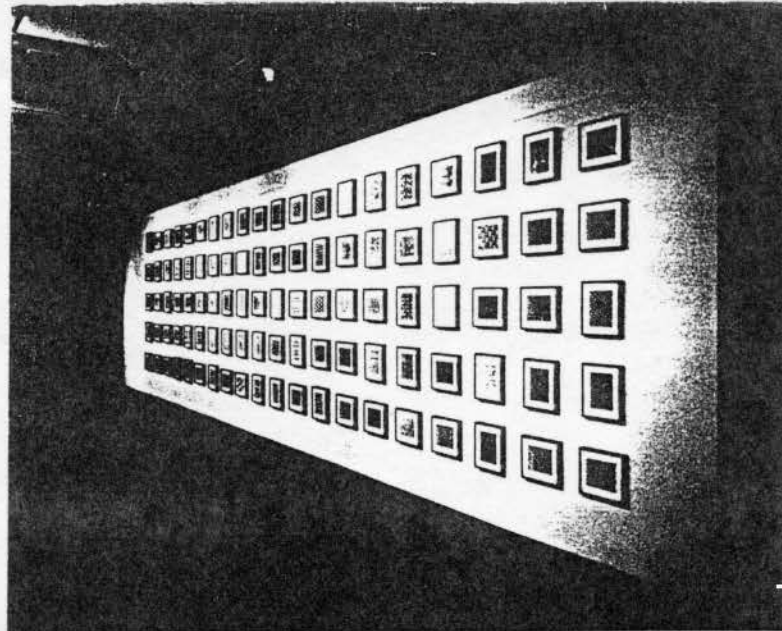


Cindy Bernard,
Security Envelope
Grid



REVIEW

LOGIC OF CONCEALMENT CINDY BERNARD IN TUCSON

The challenge of making compelling images with solid theoretical underpinnings becomes ever more difficult due to the fashion for using ornate semiologies to disguise the shallowness of so many current projects. This is especially true of photography.

Security Envelope Grid, Cindy Bernard's installation at the Center for Creative Photography, is a convincing answer to such a challenge, for it invites a multivalence of readings. The complex metonymy at work in these enlarged artefacts concerns notions of theft and collection, raising provocative questions – issues made no less relevant by the resonances and dissonances between *Grid* and its neighbouring exhibition, *Witnesses of Time* by Flor Garduño. As disparate examples of cultural encoding, that play on photography's indexical capacity – one atemporal, one anachronistic – each, with disciplined economy, calls attention to the act of observing and to the nature of scrutiny. Passing from the elegance of Garduño's vignettes, one is drawn forcibly back to Bernard's vortex: a thematic and optical conundrum of deceptive simplicity. Intentionally or not, the pairing underlines the concept of reality as construction, and photography's role within that model.

The *Security Envelope Grid* is a set of one hundred black and white prints arrayed in a 9ft x 35ft matrix: each image is an enlarged portion of a minute pattern taken from the inside of a security postal

envelope. The image is scaled up using a Xerox machine, from which a copy negative is then made. The mediation of the electrostat suppresses tactility, tonal range, creases, fibres and spatiality, allowing only the neutral geometry of the inking to translate to the silver print. The frames are arranged in five latitudinal rows of 20, vertically and horizontally, creating a tension between the inherent, unnatural order of a grid and the fluidity of its arrangement. Across the wall is an alternation of random and regulated motifs, odd breaks that disturb the visual plane. From different angles and proximities the installation resembles an extended waveform, an implied current of layered icons, signs, broken mazes, abscissas and ordinates, moire lines, stamps and smears. The relentless linearity of mark-making becomes a plain veneer which Bernard uses as a base for mapping out a logic of concealment.

The interweaving of strategies emphasises ironies about visual and verbal communication. Her approach takes printed matter as an object to exploit, and repetition is used to isolate individual details emphasised by photography. Bernard does not search the contents of letters for meaning, but rather their containers, problematising how this society constructs its messages by enshrouding and packaging them. How and why we cloak our words speaks volumes about ourselves. While the *Grid* reveals little or nothing about sender or recipient, it provides numerous subtexts about the dynamic between the two, moving within the realm of protected data.

Scrutiny is the key theme, although

the direction of the gaze and the quality of attention are different. The need for lining an envelope lies in the subjective value of what it carries, which the lining provisionally guarantees. Familiarity masks danger. For Bernard, the main concern is inversion of the obvious/obscure dichotomy, turning the object of scrutiny literally inside out. She announces what has been before our eyes all along by examining the structures of secrecy.

The *Grid* outlines a tenuous network that doubles the actual path a letter takes from point A to point B. It also plays heavily on the presumed intermediaries, faceless couriers in the postal limbo. Any message is affected by its means of transport, and so contextualised by the manner of delivery. This occurs in a way too tangled for most correspondents to reflect upon comfortably. The route: dense, circuitous, hesitant, passing through countless dirty hands, hopefully reliable. The contents: subpoena, greeting card, cheque, love note or home-made bomb. On the one hand the recipient reads a certain confidentiality that is illusory. On the other the original possession of the document is never wholly relinquished. The patterned lexis ensures that Omaha Property and Casualty keeps advancing, holding sway over the reader's attentions and asserting the sender's primacy. The one constant is the banal interior design of the envelope, or 'product packaging.'

The security envelope, then, brings ancillary signals with it. Bernard sees the material of the envelope as an embodiment of the letter's multiple meanings. She sets up a field of mechanised gestures where associations

fly in like uninvited company, replete with doublings and visual puns. The silly interlocking of Disney emblems, the clichéd peak of Gibraltar Savings repeated to form a financial chart, or the ocean of Dominguez Water become literal power plays. The envelope logo of Shell Oil is particularly laden with ironies of closure, concealment and permanence. Pattern repetition and the arbitrary boundaries of the prints are suggestive of infinite (corporate) expansion, and of fragile barriers. As these images taunt viewers with what was not intended for their eyes, the distance closes: the insulation frays. Accordingly, these scattered samples announce their presence in the marketplace, and commodification in its purest form, as substitutions and proxies increasingly removed from their source.

In their vertiginous flatness, such photographs are sparse abstractions. But just as much 'of the world' as the Louis Bernals and Ansel Adams in the adjoining plaza. Like much of Bernard's work of the previous decade, *Security Envelope Grid* falls within an accepted framework of monumentalising the commonplace. The studied dryness of the work proves more of a hazard (as example of former teacher, John Baldessari amply demonstrates), edging close to the 'art about art' discourse which is severely limiting and politically suspect. The *Grid*'s picture is incomplete, which is a strength. For the gaps are what hold interest, beyond art or economics. Ultimately it is the interaction of these cultural factors that merits attention, enabling one to inspect the web more closely.

Gary Higgins